

## THE CHURCH AS THE SERVANT OF GOD IN ACTS

The Acts of the Apostles, as it chronicles the activities of the first days of the Church, at the same time recounts the beliefs of the early Church. And even though Acts records the origins of the Church, both missionary and dogmatic, it also records the termination in the fledgling Church of certain theological concepts. But the termination of certain theological concepts should not seem remarkable, since the development of dogma, in as much as it is a growth, requires progress with a beginning and with some terminations.<sup>1</sup>

The concept of Jesus as the Servant of God seems to have come to perfect fruition in the teaching of the primitive Church, then gradually to have disappeared. But though the Church did not continue to employ such a concept, we can still examine the time when the Church did, in order to deepen our understanding of what the title 'Servant of God' meant with respect to Jesus, and especially with respect to the Church, and what it can mean for us today.

In the Old Testament 'Servant of God' is a title of honour.<sup>2</sup> The title is ambivalent, since it can signify an individual or a group. Moses (Num. 12:7ff.) and Job (1:8 ; 2:7 ; 42:7ff.), for example, are designated as Servants of God. But the title also has a communal significance. Servant of God can be used in the plural to mean pious men as a group (cf. Ps. 113:1 ; 134:1 ; 135:1, 14). Isaiah employs the name to characterise Israel itself (Is. 41:8ff. ; 44:1ff. ; 45:4 ; 48:20).

The most remarkable use of the title occurs in the celebrated Servant Songs of Isaiah where the Old Testament conception of the Servant reaches its apogee (Is. 42:1-4 ; 49:1-6 ; 50:4-9 ; 52:13 to 53:12). Jesus integrates this image of the Servant of God with the concept of the Messiah to form his own very original personage of the Suffering Messiah.<sup>3</sup>

A pivotal event in Jesus' life that manifests his character as the

<sup>1</sup> For a brief but excellent discussion of what the development of dogma is, see Frederick E. Crowe, S.J., 'Development of Doctrine and the Ecumenical Problem,' *Theological Studies* xxiii (1962), pp. 27-46.

<sup>2</sup> A thorough study of the Servant of God may be had in W. Zimmerli and J. Jeremias, *The Servant of God* (No. 20, *Studies in Biblical Theology* ; London 1957). Three other works on the subject are : Oscar Cullmann, *The Christology of the New Testament*, trans. Shirley C. Guthrie and Charles A. M. Hall (London 1959), pp. 51-82 ; David M. Stanley, S.J., 'The Theme of the Servant of Yahweh in Primitive Christian Soteriology, and Its Transposition by St Paul,' *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* xvi (1954), pp. 385-425 ; 'Le Serviteur de Dieu,' *Vocabulaire de Théologie Biblique*, ed. Xavier Léon-Dufour (Paris 1962).

<sup>3</sup> Cullmann, *op. cit.*, p. 58 ; pp. 68-9

Servant of God is his baptism in the Jordan.<sup>1</sup> This baptism is Jesus' Messianic anointing at which God the Father declares and inaugurates Jesus' mission.<sup>2</sup> The words recorded by Matthew (3:17) and Mark (1:11) which are addressed to Jesus as a beloved Son in whom the Father finds delight call to mind God speaking to His Servant in Is. 42:1: 'See, my servant whom I uphold; my chosen one, in whom I delight. I have put my spirit upon him. . . .'

Acts records the early Church continuing to teach the doctrine of the redemption as the work of Jesus the Suffering Servant. The concept of Jesus as the Servant enters not only the preaching of the apostolic Church but also its prayer vocabulary so that 'Jesus the Servant' becomes a special title designating Jesus.<sup>3</sup>

In his sermon in Solomon's colonnade Peter explicitly presents Jesus as the Suffering Servant: 'It was to you that God first sent his servant after he had raised him from the dead to bless you by making every one of you turn from his wickedness' (Ac. 3:26; see also 3:13). It is noteworthy that this sermon is the second sermon in Acts that preaches the *kerygma*. Peter and John, in a prayer with their fellow Christians after they have been released by the Sanhedrin, refer to Jesus as 'holy Servant' (Ac. 4:27, 30).

The tendency to view the work of Jesus in the image of the Suffering Servant seems to have originated with Peter. Cullmann has remarked that it was perhaps Peter's sad memory of his own inability to understand the passion and death of Jesus that influenced him to put at the centre of his *kerygma* the sufferings of Jesus, and consequently to designate Jesus as the Suffering Servant.<sup>4</sup> Whatever the personal experience that swayed him, Peter is portrayed in Acts as the one who gives currency to the doctrine both in preaching and in prayer.

Nowhere in Acts do we find a formulation of the doctrine that the Church is the Suffering Servant continuing Jesus' work among men. But there are incidents which seem to point to a consciousness among the first Christians that the Church itself is the Suffering Servant carrying on the mission of Jesus. And there is one event where the Christians formally refer to themselves as servants of God. It is the occasion after the Sanhedrin has released Peter and John, and they, together with other Christians in prayer, not only refer to Jesus as the Servant of God, but at the same time call themselves servants of God:

For indeed they have assembled here in this city against your holy servant (*παῖδα*) Jesus, whom you had consecrated. . . . And now, Lord, take note of their threats,

<sup>1</sup> Cullmann, op. cit., pp. 66-8; Stanley, op. cit., pp. 394-5

<sup>2</sup> David M. Stanley, S.J., 'Baptism in the New Testament,' *Scripture VIII* (1956), p. 47

<sup>3</sup> Cullmann, op. cit., p. 73

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 74-5

and give your servants (δούλους) the power to utter your message fearlessly, when you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are done by the power of your holy servant (παιδός) Jesus (Ac. 4:27, 29-30).<sup>1</sup>

The name 'Servant,' as applied to the Christians by themselves, would seem to indicate that they regard themselves as servants of God whose service consists in their missionary work to bring salvation to others. Further, the fact that these Christians, with Peter and James lending their apostolic prestige, in a prayer to God call themselves His servants would seem to reveal their realisation that the Church which must utter God's message fearlessly is the Servant of God carrying on the work of Jesus, the Servant *par excellence*.

A later incident which involves Peter and John again, namely their scourging as they attempt to utter God's message, appears to emphasise even more the work of the Christian as the work of the Servant of God, and a suffering Servant.

After Peter and John are again arrested and flogged, they are set at liberty, and they go out, joyful that they have been permitted to suffer because of Jesus (Ac. 5:40). They look upon their punishment as a share in Jesus work because in their own service of God they have been treated like Jesus himself. They have been most intimately bound into solidarity with Jesus, the Suffering Servant, since they have been allowed to suffer as he did.

What Luke recounts of Paul further underscores the communal concept of the Suffering Servant. When Paul meets Jesus on the road to Damascus, Jesus asks him: 'Saul, Saul! Why do you persecute me?' (9:4). And to Paul's query about his identity, Jesus says: 'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting' (9:5). The glorified Servant of God, Jesus, identifies himself with the Church that Paul is attacking. In short, the Church in its members which is still working and still suffering is somehow Jesus himself present in the world.

Although in his letters Paul frequently declares himself the Servant of God, only twice in Acts are there direct allusions to him as Servant of God.<sup>2</sup> The first reference occurs when Barnabas and he state their mission to the Gentiles by citing Is. 49:6, one of the Servant passages: 'I have made you a light for the heathen, to be the means of salvation to the very ends of the earth' (Ac. 13:47). The original passage in Isaiah presents 'Servant of God' as a collective notion since Israel is addressed as the Servant. But Paul and Barnabas see themselves

<sup>1</sup> Although the Christians call Jesus *παῖς* and refer to themselves as *δούλοι*, both terms mean a Servant of God. For the origin of the distinction, cf. Zimmerli and Jeremias, *op. cit.*, pp. 35-42.

<sup>2</sup> For an exposition of St Paul's concept of himself as the Servant of God, cf. Stanley, 'The Theme of the Servant of Yahweh in Primitive Christian Soteriology, and Its Transposition by St Paul,' *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* xvi (1954), pp. 412-20.

fulfilling the prophecy as Servants of God by their missionary preaching.

As Paul begins at Philippi his European apostolate, he is referred to as a servant of God for the second time. A slave-girl follows Paul and Luke, crying out that they are servants of the Most High God (Ac. 16:16).

But the event recorded in Acts which most sharply defines the meaning of the Church as the Servant of God is the coming of the Holy Ghost at Pentecost, an event that parallels the baptism of Jesus. Both the baptism of Jesus and the baptism of the Church stand at the beginning of the work of service. Jesus' baptism by John with the accompanying theophany in which the Father affirms Jesus' consecration as the Servant of God marks the inauguration of Jesus' service.<sup>1</sup> All four Evangelists record it as such. The Church's baptism by the Holy Ghost with its accompanying theophany and stupendous graces—the event with which Luke opens Acts (this should be noted)—marks the consecration of the Church as the Servant of God which will continue the work of Jesus. Just as the Spirit descended upon Jesus the Servant at his baptism, so the glorified Jesus now sends the Spirit upon the Church that through the Spirit he may be present with the Church for ever (Is. 42:1-4). The immediate effect of Pentecost, the charismatic preaching of the Apostles to all the people gathered in Jerusalem, calls to mind the Servant prophecies of Is. 49:6 and 52:1. These prophecies declare the mission of the Servant to all nations. And furthermore, since they concern Israel and Sion as servants rather than one individual person, they most appropriately describe the Church, the new Israel, as it begins its work of salvation for all men.

Philip's baptism of the vizier of Ethiopia serves to accentuate the significance of Jesus as the Suffering Servant and the relation that a baptised Christian has with Jesus the Servant. It has been thought that the early Church employed this episode as part of its baptismal instruction. If it did, then the Church would clearly have had in mind the identification of the baptised person with Jesus the Servant to whom he has been united by Baptism. But even if the episode has no reference to the baptismal liturgy, its significance still remains. The juxtaposition of the vizier reading Isaiah's prophecy of the Suffering Servant and then his baptism, the sign of his solidarity with Christ, cannot be regarded as fortuitous, especially in the light of the parallel baptisms of Jesus and his Church which formally and solemnly inaugurate each of their missions.

We can conclude that there is apparently no explicit formulation

<sup>1</sup> cf. note 1, p. 112

in Acts of the Church as the Suffering Servant. But explicit formulations are not the only indications of the Church's mind.<sup>1</sup> It would appear that there does exist in the consciousness of the early Church a realisation that it is the Servant of God. There certainly is a well-developed theology of the Suffering Servant, especially in the Palestinian Church, that would have influenced the thinking of other Christian communities which were founded by Palestinian Christians.<sup>2</sup>

The similarity between the Pentecostal baptism of the Church and the baptism of Jesus which the Church evidently perceived seems to be the basis for the fact that the early Christians conceived themselves as God's Servants. Oscar Cullmann has remarked: 'We cannot understand the New Testament's view of history beginning with creation itself without the thought of the representation of the many by a minority, progressing to the representation by the One.'<sup>3</sup> What Cullmann asserts does not exclude the Church from being conceived of as the Suffering Servant, although Jesus has pre-empted the title and the reality it signifies for himself. Such a conception of the Church as the Servant of God in fact bears out Cullmann's 'principle of representation in a progressive reduction,'<sup>4</sup> because it is valid only with reference to Jesus, the perfect Suffering Servant.

Even though the Servant theology does not survive in our own theological speculation, it has more than just archaeological interest.<sup>5</sup> Theological concepts which were once operative but which are no longer so can still contain the truth that made them valid and fruitful means of expressing God's revelation.<sup>6</sup> An understanding of the Servant-Church can even now afford us insights into the nature of the Church.

The Servant theology conceives the Church as a reality whose solidarity with Jesus is constituted by the Church's active presence in history. The Church as the Servant of God is involved in time, in the trivial and in the momentous events that make up time. The Church has been consecrated, as Jesus was, to serve God by its missionary work of redemption among men. This work is an extension of the work of Jesus. To the Church now belongs salvation-history, as it belonged to Jesus during his life. Through His Servant, the Church, God now controls and leads history. The Church is to produce the saving events for men. These events should be everything

<sup>1</sup> cf. Karl Rahner, S.J., *Theological Investigations*, vol. 1, trans. Cornelius Ernst, O.P. (Baltimore 1961), pp. 39-77; Crowe, op. cit., pp. 37-9

<sup>2</sup> cf. Stanley, op. cit., 410-12

<sup>3</sup> Cullmann, op. cit., p. 51

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*, p. 55

<sup>5</sup> Different reasons have been adduced to explain the demise of the Servant Theology. cf. Cullmann, op. cit., pp. 79-82; Stanley, op. cit., 418-20.

<sup>6</sup> cf. Crowe, op. cit.

men do and dream, the whole lives of men, inspired and blessed by the Church.

And finally, the Church displays the image of the ideal Servant Jesus in so far as its work in time means suffering. The proof that the Church is redeeming men is its suffering. Suffering binds the Church to the here and the now of saving men, for suffering is never something in the abstract. But the suffering of the Church not only indicates its involvement with the history of mankind ; it is also the earnest of the glory to come at the Parousia. It is the unique paradox of the Church that it can rejoice in its adversity, mindful, as Barnabas and Paul, ' that we have to undergo many hardships to get into the Kingdom of God ' (Ac. 14:22). The Church never forgets that the triumph of the Resurrection likewise belongs to the Suffering Servant.

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HUIOTHESIA: THE WORD AND THE  
INSTITUTION

The word *huiiothesia* (adoption) appears five times in the epistles of St Paul.<sup>1</sup> Since he is the only New Testament writer to use this particular term, in fact the only inspired author to do so, as the word does not occur in the Septuagint either,<sup>2</sup> the question naturally arises : where did St Paul get it ? Did he coin it as a suitable expression of his own idea ? Or did he find it ready-made for him in the language of the day ? And what about the institution itself ? What custom, if any, does St Paul have in mind ? Of what is he thinking as he formulates his doctrine on the Christine status ?

There is no doubt that throughout the Old Testament Israel as a whole is metaphorically called Yahweh's son.<sup>3</sup> Likewise the kings were often called sons by Yahweh.<sup>4</sup> In the later sapiential literature<sup>5</sup> even the individual is called ' son of God.'<sup>6</sup> The purpose of this essay,

<sup>1</sup> Rom. 8:15, 23 ; 9:4 ; Gal. 4:5 ; Eph. 1:5

<sup>2</sup> L. Cerfaux, *La Théologie de l'Eglise* (2nd ed., Paris 1948), p. 24. A quick glance through the various biblical lexica will show that all writers treating the word *huiiothesia* are agreed on this. The term is not listed in E. Hatch and A. Redpath, *A Concordance to the Septuagint and the other Greek Versions of the Old Testament* (Oxford 1897-1906).

<sup>3</sup> cf. Ex. 4:22f. ; Deut. 14:1 ; Ps. 73:15 ; Is. 1:2-4 ; 30:1-9 ; 43:6 ; 45:11 ; 63:8 ; Jer. 3:14 ; 31:9-20 ; Os. 2:1 ; 11:1

<sup>4</sup> cf. 2 Sam. 7:14 ; 1 Chron. 28:6 ; Ps. 2:7 ; 89:28

<sup>5</sup> cf. Sir. 4:10 ; Wis. 2:16ff.

<sup>6</sup> Further examples of this metaphorical usage and its development can be seen in H. Strack-P. Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrash* (Munich 1926), vol. III, pp. 15-20.