

The Ark of Salvation

I began after the manner of an old time sermon quoting a text. It is the one on which the Legion may be said to be built. It is the celebrated one from the Book of Genesis: 'I will set enmities between thee and the woman, between thy seed and her seed; she shall crush thy head.' Those words were addressed to Satan by God after the fall of man and they foretold the future Redemption. This reversal of the fall was to be accomplished by a woman and her child who would crush the head of the serpent. To emphasise its legionary importance, that text is placed in the border of the Tessera, on the cover of the handbook and stressed in various ways in the contents of the handbook. In a few words it indicates the mission of the Church. It points to an undying warfare between the woman and the serpent, between the forces of good and of evil, and it is attuned to the Legion's idea of itself as an army, the Legion of Mary, which some modern pacifists find displeasing. Thereby they seem to fly in the teeth of the recent Vatican Council which asserts this idea of a perpetual spiritual warfare. The following phrase from the Decree on the Church in the Modern World has been introduced on page 1 of the

new edition of the handbook: 'As a result of the Fall, all of human life, whether individual or collective shows itself to be a dramatic struggle between good and evil, between light and darkness.'

The idea is also stressed in that great document, De Montfort's *True Devotion to Mary*, which is not receiving its due recognition at the hands of the legionaries, because in actual fact it strikes the keynote of the legionary spirit. So much is this the case that the legionary who has never read that treatise lays himself wide open to the charge that he has failed to equip himself for his legionary role.

As the handbook styles him, St Louis Marie is our great tutor. It is for that reason that he is a Patron of the Legion. Thereby he is taken from among what might be called the ordinary saints and placed by us among the ultra-select few who were the contemporaries and immediate co-operators of Our Lord. This is an extraordinary context into which he is set by the Legion; it shows eloquently what the Legion thinks of him. He is accused of going to excess in his laudation of Our Lady. But if ever a charge is unjustified, it is that one. Remember that no approved book has ever sustained so much criticism as this treatise of his, the severest having no doubt been the scrutiny to which it was subjected by Rome in connection with his canonisation. Yet from all this fiery ordeal it has emerged triumphantly.

Personally I cannot think of any phrase where he thus errs by going too far; the book is irreproachably sound throughout from the theological point of view. Strange to say, I am audacious enough to find a little fault with him from the very opposite point of view. I think that a couple of his phrases err by defect. One of these is that God can and sometimes does bestow his graces other than through

Mary. I do not think that this is accurate. The mediation of Mary, subordinate of course to that of Christ, is operative in every grace given by God.

Another small blemish is where the saint uses the simile of a petitioner going to the mother of a king to ask her to get a favour from the king – as if the king himself were unapproachable and as if a little human wire pulling were necessary. Of course that sort of thing does apply in the human order but not in the Christian one. To rely on that example would leave us open to the telling Protestant retort that such would be all right for us who apparently know Mary better than we know Jesus, whereas their position is the opposite: they know Jesus and they do not know Mary. In passing let me say that their retort goes too far. It amounts to the sad confession that they do not belong to the generations who, scripture says, shall call her 'Blessed'.

But that is not our real position at all. We are obliged to seek Mary's intercession for a higher reason. So this simile of De Montfort is not applicable and in a way it is misleading. It would turn Mary's mediation into a worldly and partly sentimental transaction. Also it would suggest that Mary only comes on the scene when we specifically turn to her. Moreover, the comparison between the mother of an ordinary king and Mary the Mother of God would be unsubstantial. Mary's greatness does not depend immediately on her physical motherhood of Christ. It could have been, as Protestants allege, that Mary would only be the human avenue of his entry into human nature; that she gave him flesh and nursing which would indeed merit for her much veneration; but which would *not* constitute her a Mediatrix nor by itself entitle her to a religious cultus, that is a service of prayer and veneration.

Mary is no more optional in the Catholic system than is the mother in the human dispensation. God has arranged both orders on the principle of life been communicated through a mother. That Mary has been so included and built upon in the spiritual order is unquestionable, the Vatican Council having declared specifically to that effect. Accordingly, the action of those who have since that council set themselves to diminish her, is incomprehensible.

Mary is not alone the mother of the greatest man who ever lived; she is the greatest woman who ever lived. She is great in her own rights. More than that, she was made part of the plan of grace and of every individual grace. Not only did she conceive Jesus in her body, but simultaneously she conceived him in her mind by faith. Moreover it was this double conception that enabled him to undertake Redemption in the manner contemplated as necessary by the Holy Trinity. That plan required the human co-operation. It did not desire to be a forcing of Redemption on an inactive, un-cooperating, or unappreciative mankind. There had to be in mankind not only a response but a coming forth to meet the Redeemer. These responses from human nature were initially provided in their complete and perfect manner by Mary alone; she fulfilled this part on behalf of all human nature.

It is interesting to go back to Abraham who has been called the Father of the Faith and to seek to judge as to the extent to which he conformed to this requirement of human response. He must have been divinely helped to understand much of the symbolic drama in which he played his great part. He was ordered to take his son to a far off place where he had not been before and there he

was to sacrifice that son. If this extraordinary episode was to possess its due force in the redemptive chain, it would be necessary that Abraham would see it as a link in that chain. In other words he would have to understand that it was part of the restoration of the human race which had been promised by God immediately after the fall.

Abraham would know of that promise because it was the hope of the human race, borne off with them by the fissuring sections as they set out on their conquest of the virgin earth. That prophesy formed the basis of every belief which expanding mankind carried with it over the world. No matter what distortion the idea of the redeeming woman and her child would suffer as time went on and as mankind became more separated, still the outline remained there. A woman and her child would somehow reverse the original disaster and defeat the devil. That pattern is still discernible in the different more ancient forms of belief.

At the time of Abraham (about 2000 BC) the Bible had of course not yet begun to take shape. Its first beginnings would be the Book of Genesis accredited to Moses who was about sixteen hundred years before Christ. That book set down the common tradition of the world in regard to the creation of the world, to the fall of man, and to the dispersion of the human race.

Abraham would know all those details better even than Moses because he was nearer to the point of origin by about 450 years. It is not as if Moses had access to sources which were not available to Abraham. The suggestion that God directly revealed to Moses all the material for the narrative would not necessarily or probably hold. It is God's method not to reveal or otherwise intervene unnecessarily. Where human agencies exist, he uses them.

In this case he would surely expect Moses to work along historical lines, then intervening to produce correctness. Actually the composition is so human in its aspect as to make it evident to us that the author gave his own colouring to all the descriptions.

There was no line of descent through which such traditions or records could pass except through the Ark. When one proceeds to think it out, there is the probability that among the items of the precious cargo – out of which the future had to spring – gathered into that repository of safety and survival would be such records of past events as would be available. It is no new idea for man, when putting up some great edifice destined to have a futurity, to seal into it records of the present and past. That attitude has been at work all through history and we cannot doubt that it would represent an instinctive human inclination. Surely if ever it would assert itself, it would be in a situation such as that in which Noah found himself around the year 2350 BC.

I wonder if this theme has ever received attention from an artist. It is intriguing to imagine that family group engaged in its operation of magnitude, the carrying over of the old world into the new. It would seem to be unquestionable that as they thought in terms of listing the animals which were to be preserved, so they would catalogue other items. The world was going to be laid waste. Only what went into the Ark was likely to survive. As Noah was seeking to project into the future the living things of the time, would it not also be a principal thought to save from obliteration some evidence of the material world which was going to pass away? Especially this would apply to anything in the way of archives and specimens of literature or art.

Remember that there was no question of a sudden alarm with cries of 'Deluge'. Noah had been given long notice. By reason of its gigantic size and the fewness of those working on it - that is Noah and his own family - the construction of the Ark must have taken a great number of years. I judge from the chronology set down in some of the Bibles that it occupied one hundred years. We may be certain that the workers were the subject of much mockery from the neighbours who would have derided the prophecy of the coming Flood and would gather around in amazement and in amusement to survey the progress being made. Of course there would be a glib expression coined to designate the growing Ark - such as 'Noah's folly'.

To complete this picture I specify its dimensions: 525 feet long, 86 feet wide and 52 feet high. Strange to say, these proportions are stated by St Augustine to be the same as those of the perfect human body. May we not see in this a pointing to the Ark as a symbol of Mary bearing the Life of the world within her? The capacity of the Ark was nearly two and a half million cubic feet, or nearly ten times the size of Solomon's magnificent Temple.

One of the modern fads is to seek to reduce the necessity for faith to the smallest dimension, or in other words to put religion on a purely human level. So it is being contended that the Flood was only a local affair. This amendment of the biblical account is admirably dealt with by Cardinal Wiseman in his book on *Science and Revealed Religion*. But it seems to me that the simplest argument for the universality of the Flood would be:

First, water does not build itself up into a mountainous pimple at one spot on the Earth. It levels out. The Deluge increased in height for six and a half months (190 days)

and then began to lower. After seven and a half months the Ark rested on Mount Ararat. Going by this description, there could be no question of an explosive force throwing up a sort of monstrous waterspout for miles high. For in such a convulsion the Ark itself would perish. Nor could there be any question of the water remaining piled up in one locality for seven months. The laws of water would at once have asserted themselves and the Flood would quickly spread out evenly over the whole Earth. It is evident that if after seven months the water still covered Ararat, a universal deluge had been produced.

Secondly, birds were taken into the Ark. Why, if the inundation were of limited spread? For the birds, as well as many of the animals, would easily be able to find their way to the lands which were not submerged. In those circumstances one might as well take fish into the Ark as some of the birds.

Third, it would seem to be asserted in the Bible and to be necessary to the idea at stake, that all flesh perished in the Deluge except those who were to perpetuate the human race.

As an inevitable accompaniment of the work of building, there would be a compiling of the items which would eventually go into the Ark. It is not reasonable to suppose that only the animals were thought of. For instance there would have to be some seeds and plants, because it would not be certain that such essentials as wheat, the vine, the olive, the fig would arise of themselves from the devastated earth. Also into this category of preservation would, as I have suggested, enter the question of records. Among these would we expect some account of the beginnings of mankind, and the happenings in the Garden of Eden and the fatal sequel? I wonder if the Book of Enoch has

anything to say on these subjects. That book is the most celebrated of the Apocryphal Books of the Old Testament and is supposed to be of great antiquity. It discusses everything under the sun, including such events as the Deluge.

I have taken you off on a somewhat lengthy digression. Let us hope that it has not been unprofitable. It has led us into territory in regard to which the religious writers have been shy in exercising their imagination. Possibly they avoid it because the modern affectation is that anyone who believes what the Bible says about the Ark is manifestly a fool.

Now let us go back to Abraham and his realisation of his own mission in the sequence of salvation. Whatever the defects in his understanding, he played an immense part, one to which history must apply the term 'pivotal'. It is most likely that from the affair of Isaac he comprehended the general idea of Redemption; that is of a sacrificial death of some future great figure on behalf of the people of God.

Then how would he interpret the prophesied reference to the woman? Certainly not clearly. Would he see it in no higher sense than that the Redeemer would have a mother? This interpretation would not be adequate, for why specify the woman at all if her role is to be no more than that of generating a child? The pointed reference to that woman and the putting of her first in order, must indicate that she plays an essential part. Therefore she would have to figure in some prominent fashion in the thoughts of Abraham.

Abraham, who for all his faith saw as but through glass darkly, would not have formed in his mind the Jesus who we know, nor the woman who was to be his mother,

nor the true People of God – the Mystical Body. Still less would he have glimpsed the desire of God for a response from mankind, one which would enter wholeheartedly and lovingly into the plan of salvation; which would not merely co-operate fully with the plan when it was presented, but which would thoroughly understand all its ramifications and would plead for its implementation. And not only plead, but plead with an intensity and purity of faith which had to attain its end and thus provide the completeness of human co-operation which God intended to be the feature of the plan of Redemption. It was Mary who was destined to supply all those vital ingredients. That is the reason why the woman is so prominent and so insisted upon in the first prophecy of Redemption.

Thus Mary co-operated in the coming of the Messiah in the most responsible and comprehensive way. As it was part of the design of God, we may be sure that her part could not have been more complete. It did not fall short in any particular; nor could it. It was God's will that she should fill up what was lacking in the contribution of the rest of mankind. For that purpose was the extraordinary provision of the Immaculate Conception made. It gave her the potential for the fulfilment of her heroic part, and I repeat that in no way did her performance betray that potential.

As has been said, she was the only pure creature from whom God got all that he wanted, the only one in whom he was able to work the fullness of his will. Her role is incomparably superior to that of Abraham, the Father of the Chosen People. Her faith was vaster, purer and more comprehensive than his. In a degree utterly exceeding that of Abraham she merited to be the Mother of the Chosen People, the Mother of all men, the Mother of Faith.

The first part of her response was that she prayed the Redeemer down to Earth. Of course during the ages the more understanding and believing Jews, many of them very holy persons, had been sending up the same petition. But all that pleading was insufficient; there was not enough faith and purity of intention in it. But Mary's prayer was an irresistible one, because it was the prayer of the Immaculate Conception. She understood clearly the idea of Redemption even though she did not comprehend that she was going to be the woman. She pleaded for the coming of the Messiah, and that prayer, in which the Holy Spirit prayed, gained its end and Jesus came.

But that was only as the dawning. She was assigned the further and more intimate part of being the mother through whom he would enter the world. That entry would depend on her free consent, given in the fullness of a faith which not only said Fiat to the Incarnation of God in her, but which stretched out understandingly to include the Cross and the completeness of her motherhood of the Redeemer.

Some persons suggest that in the Annunciation Our Lady was not fully enlightened as to the saving Passion and Death; that she only acquired that knowledge as time went on. The decisive and briefest answer to this is that if Mary had not then known of the immolation of her son, she would truly have conceived the Redeemer in her body but not in her mind. This would offend against a first principle of the Incarnation.

All those elements were deemed by God to be necessary to the absolute integrity of his design. So the Christian life must take hold of it all both in understanding and by co-operating with it in thought and word and deed.

Mary is God's will and we must not substitute our own will. That is her place and her claim upon us. She is part of divine worship. It derogates from her position to think of her as being merely 'influential' with her son, or to talk of approaching her as one would go to a well-placed politician. Neither is there any sort of question as to our choosing whether we will go to her or not. In dependence on her divine son she is a primary part of the mechanism of salvation – as that original prophecy made plain: 'I will set enmities between thee and the woman.' She is that woman, the realisation of the Promise. Behold how the Promise has, like a tree out of its seed, extended in orderly fashion into its providential fullness! The Messiah has crushed the head of the Serpent, and Mary has co-operated with him so totally as to merit most worthily the lofty and diversified descriptions of her office which Vatican II has proclaimed about her. She is our Advocate. She is the helpmate of the new Adam. She has been instrumental with him in every phase of the Redemption and is the dispenser of all its fruits. She is the Mediatrix and Mother of all men, the Mother of the Church, the Mother of Apostleship, the Mother of Unity and the Mother of Faith.

We must never leave her out.