

Chapter 5

WEAKNESS ACCORDING TO THE GOSPEL

FOR the sake of convenience I have so far been using the term 'non-violence'; but this too is unbiblical, and another disadvantage is that the term is liable to be misunderstood, suggesting an interpretation of Christian charity as something soft and spineless. The Gospel, however, implies a certain violence, spiritual, certainly, never leading to brutal coercion and bloodshed, but nevertheless a kind of violence, a concentrated and active moral energy. It is illustrated by Jesus' attitude in driving the money-changers out of the Temple, and we find it again in his invectives against the Pharisees (Matt. 23). He was aware of having come to bring a fire upon the earth, not peace but a sword: the spiritual division, that is, between those who believe in Him and those who refuse to believe. He recommends his disciples to 'hate' their kin, and even their own life (Luke 14:26). It is clear that life according to the Gospel is a perpetual tension, a continual strife which is no less bitter for being fought out on the spiritual and not the material plane.⁵⁶

The apostle Paul, who often uses analogies with physical force (Gal. 1:8-9; 2:11), explains (Eph. 6:12): 'For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of this world of darkness, against spiritual wickedness in high places. Wherefore take unto you the whole armour of God. . . .' Yes, the Christian is a soldier who must fight the good fight of the faith (Timothy *passim*). And it is doubtless in this sense too that we must understand Jesus' words, obscure though they are, when He says that 'the violent' take the Kingdom of Heaven by force (Matt. 11:12). He is demanding of His hearers a true faith which He compares to spiritual 'violence': in Calvin's words (*Comm.*, 1, 277), 'ardent affection' and 'vehement impetuosity' with which believers take possession of the Kingdom and enter into it.

No, the non-violence of the Gospel certainly does not imply cowardice and abdication before evil; on the contrary, it demands great moral strength and full self-mastery, stubborn refusal to let sin

triumph in one's own heart: which is no small thing! For the non-violent man in this sense is one who, when his enemy's attitude fills him with indignation, suffers also from the access of sinful anger in his own heart; so he refuses to indulge his own longing to hit back and get his revenge, to justify himself by hurting his adversary (Matt. 15:18-19; 5:21-22; I John 3:15). For violence is a reaction from pride, whereas Jesus asked us to look first at our own faults before considering those of others (Matt. 7:3-5; John 8:7; Rom. 2:1; 12:3; Gal. 6:1-5; Phil. 2:3). The Christian who indulges in material violence forgets that he is a sinner who lives by grace. He seeks his justification in his own vengeance and not in God's pardon (Rom. 12:17-21). This is true for communities as for individuals.

We can see here, in fact, that the 'violence' and 'non-violence' of the Gospel have come together and bear a strange resemblance: far from excluding each other, they both signify the same refusal to make any compromise with sin. They often co-exist, and are indeed two complementary aspects of the Christian attitude.

Perhaps it would be better to speak of 'weakness' according to the Gospel, for this term is often used in the New Testament to designate Christ's deep-rooted attitude. 'For though he was crucified through weakness, yet he liveth by the power of God' (II Cor. 13:4). 'For . . . the weakness of God is stronger than men' (I Cor. 1:25). The cross is in the whole line of Jesus' teaching. There were not two different and alternating moral attitudes in His life, so that He was 'violent' in some cases and 'non-violent' in others; He always acted and lived looking towards the Cross, which He knew was the natural and logical end to his ministry (Mark 10:38, 45; Luke 12:50; Matt. 16:21)—and for which He had prepared from the first day in full awareness of what it meant (John 9:4; Luke 13:32).

What does it signify—this 'weakness' of Christ? First it reveals the infinite respect in which God holds His human creatures, whose conscience and heart He will not force or violate, and the humble hope He has of winning them to Himself nevertheless. In this sense violence and physical coercion, because they exclude respect and hope for the person on whom they are practised, are very much the opposite of the love incarnated in Christ and lived by Him. This courageous weakness is also the sign of God's forgiveness; for God is wounded by my sinning, and if He nevertheless loves me, the sinner, it implies that He is bearing the weight of the sin and Himself enduring its consequences. This is the only road which leads to reconciliation, and here again there is an absolute opposition between the forgiveness

expressed by this 'weakness' and murderous violence, because the latter shows you refuse to endure the injury, to bear the cost of your neighbour's ill-doing. Like God, man has no other choice between destroying the sinner and forgiving him freely. The weakness of Jesus is our wonderful proof that God has resolutely chosen the second method with us; but He also points us to the same path.

Finally, this weakness is Christ's best arm; for it is the spectacle of His love and His complete self-sacrifice which alone can break down in us the very roots of sin, and disgust us with evil. Gratitude towards Him who gave His life for us is the only force strong enough to overcome in our hearts the attractions of sin. This is where Christ's power and victory are seen, but it is again the opposite of violence, which always hardens the evil-doer's heart, which can only aggravate evil, not resolve or extinguish it. Violence breeds hatred, resentment, and more violence; never peace or love. Tragically, we reap what we have sown (Gal. 6:7), and grapes are not gathered from thorns (Matt. 7:16). In this sense the Cross is the only true victory over the power of evil.

Jesus expressly called His disciples to follow Him on this path of weakness or non-violence, of complete service to humanity. For to quote Macgregor again:⁵⁷ 'We err if we isolate the Cross, as if it were a unique divine transaction without any relevance to the morality Jesus taught or the sort of life to which He called His disciples after having first lived it Himself.' 'He that taketh not his cross, and followeth after me, is not worthy of me' (Matt. 10:38). 'If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross and follow me. For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it' (Matt. 16:24-25; Luke 9:23). 'Ye shall drink of the cup that I drink of; and with the baptism that I am baptised withal shall ye be baptised . . .' (Mark 10:39-45). 'Behold, I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves' (Matt. 10:16). One could go on indefinitely quoting similar texts where Jesus calls His disciples to humble and gentle service which excludes any use of sanguinary violence (John 10:15-16, *et al.*).

As the preceding pages should have proved clearly enough, this is certainly how the apostles understood their mission. They had the very definite feeling that Christ's non-violent weakness pledged them and obliged them to live themselves in the same spiritual attitude. 'And walk in love, as Christ also hath loved us, and hath given himself for us an offering and a sacrifice to God . . .' (Eph. 5:2; II Cor. 8:9). 'Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: who

made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant . . . and became obedient unto death . . . ' (Phil. 2:5-8). 'Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, that ye should follow his steps . . . who, when he was reviled, reviled not again; when he suffered, he threatened not . . . ' (I Peter 2:21-23).⁵⁸ On the other hand, not a single text can be quoted, in which either Christ or the apostles envisaged a reversal of this rule, any sort of dispensation, any authorisation however provisional or occasional, to employ violence. From one end to the other it is always the same note that is sounded.

With fine poetic power Paul has described the weakness to which he has held firm, in his life and his ministry, through faithfulness to the crucified Christ: 'God hath made of us the last of men, as it were condemned to death. . . . We are fools for Christ's sake . . . despised . . . buffeted . . . being reviled, we bless; being persecuted, we suffer it; being defamed, we entreat: we are made as the filth of the world, the off-scourings of all men . . . ' (I Cor. 4:9-13). 'We are troubled, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; cast down, but not destroyed; always bearing about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life also of Jesus might be made manifest in our body . . . ' (II Cor. 4:8-11; 9:13). Because of this perpetual miracle of grace Paul glorifies in *weakness* (II Cor. 11:30), for he has learnt that the power of God is fulfilled in the Christian's weakness: 'Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in persecutions, in calumnies, in distresses for Christ's sake; for when I am weak, then am I strong!' (II Cor. 12:9-10).

Imitation of Jesus Christ? Or the effort to live a life of obedience in harmony with the Gospel? It does not matter much; these two attitudes are doubtless both there at once. But the essential thing is that the Christian is a being called to follow Christ on the road of the Cross. 'In the Cross, where Christ's life found its most complete expression lies the secret of all Christian *action*.'⁵⁹ The weakness of the Christian means that he lays himself completely open to God's power, gives it free access to his heart for a witness which shall be truly to the glory of God alone.

It is often said that this is an unrealisable 'ideal.' But the New Testament's teaching on marriage can also be considered as unrealisable, yet the Church has never ceased to preach it faithfully. Moreover, the assertion that non-violence is unrealisable seems a little hasty, for surely the Church records countless lives of Christians

who have been truly non-violent—even if, of course, they were not saints who had reached moral perfection—and there are doubtless thousands of Christian martyrs whose very names are forgotten because they disappeared anonymously in the arenas, the prisons, the galleys, and who were none the less non-violent. Nor is it so easy to reject the witness of Gandhi; after him, who can say any longer that non-violence is impossible for political man?

God gives what He commands. This testimony of non-violence is not an 'ideal' which will appear at the end of our 'efforts.' Here, as everywhere else, the life of *obedience* to which we are *called* is given to us by *grace*. This weakness, which I called a demand implied in the Gospel, is really a magnificent promise made to anyone who believes in Jesus Christ. If the branch remains attached to the vine, it too will bear the rare and delicate fruit (John 15). Besides, to live in Christ and keep His commandments is surely one and the same thing. In other words, the triumphant life of Christ crucified and resurrected springs forth of its own accord in the heart of anyone who joins himself to Christ by faith. We are not asked to practise non-violence and imitate Christ's weakness, so much as to remain in His communion. But He has proclaimed to us that if we remain in it and keep His words, He gives us the grace to live by His example, because He comes Himself to live in our being and to obey for us. Then our daily existence is genuinely a witness, because it tells of His love and sings of His power.

But the man who can say 'Christ lives in me' is the man who 'has been crucified with Christ' (Gal. 2:20). To 'know Christ and the power of his resurrection,' one must first 'know the fellowship of his sufferings, being made conformable to his death' (Phil. 3:10). 'Now if we be dead with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with him' (Rom. 6:8). In other words our obedience as Christians, which is at once asked of us and promised to us, can be genuine obedience only if we live here and now in the communion of the crucified Saviour. Then it can be the fruit of the Holy Spirit. 'But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance' (Gal. 5:22). In short, the Christian faith expresses itself on the moral plane by non-violence. This is at once the demand and the grace of the Good News.

It is sometimes said that countless Christians have kept this *inner* spiritual attitude while taking part in war. But surely the Gospel demands harmony between our inner attitude and our outward behaviour? This is probably why Jesus, as if to preserve us in advance

from spiritual unawareness, uses equivalent expressions alternately: dwell in me, keep my words, keep my commandments (John 15:7; 14:23; 15:10; I John 2:3-6; 3:22-24). Piety cannot be dissociated from morality. Man's love for God is proved true by his love for his neighbour, according to the 'new Commandment' which Jesus has given us: 'That ye love one another as I have loved you' (John 13:34).

To return to our original question: can a Christian take part in war? Is our participation in the general killing a glorification of the name of Jesus Christ, a clear positive witness rendered to our Saviour, an evident and indisputable expression of our loyal and living obedience to our Lord, a preaching of the Son of God crucified and resurrected for the salvation of all men, a fruit of the Holy Spirit within us? I find it impossible to answer these questions with anything but a categorical 'No.' And in pronouncing that 'No,' I believe I can hear the whole New Testament singing with me, as in a majestic Bach chorale, the glory of the Crucified and His martyred disciples.