

# 1 Signs of Hope

A LITTLE OVER seventy years after the crucifixion of Jesus we begin to find a great deal of confusion and suspicion amongst non-Christians over certain Christian practices. In a famous letter probably written in 109 AD, the younger Pliny reports to the Emperor Trajan that he has pulled in a large number of people for questioning in response to an anonymous pamphlet accusing people of being Christians. He learned from interviewing these people that Christians met regularly before dawn on a fixed day to sing hymns to Christ 'as to a God', to bind themselves to do nothing immoral and then 'to take food of an ordinary, harmless kind'. With a chilling logic only too familiar to the police chiefs and local army commanders of the present century he decided that, since he had found nothing untoward, he had better extract 'the truth' by torture from two deaconesses. 'I found nothing but a degenerate sort of cult carried to extravagant lengths.'<sup>1</sup>

We do not learn what happened to the two deaconesses. Did they recover from their torture, or did they, like Origen a hundred and fifty years later, die slowly and painfully as a result of the injuries they received? Did they confront their torturers, like the heroine in Ariel Dorfman's *Death and the Maiden*? There is no one to tell their story. We know them only because they appear in the margins of a governor's report, as today we know of tens of thousands of 'disappeared' who find their way into the Amnesty statistics.

Eighty years after this incident, in North Africa, the Christian apologist Tertullian notes that 'We are accused of observing a holy rite in which we kill a little child and then eat it, and at the end of our banquet revel in incest.'<sup>2</sup> This kind of rumour seems to have been quite common, and obviously has its roots in the language about 'body and blood' which stood at the heart of Christian eucharistic practice.

Right at the beginning of the Christian story, perhaps in 55 AD, Paul takes it for granted that Christians will gather for 'the supper of the Lord' (1 Corinthians 11.20), and he sets out the practice in terms of the tradition he received. This tradition now constitutes the heart of our own eucharistic liturgy:

I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, 'This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.' In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.' (1 Corinthians 11.23-5)

It seems probable from the prominence this narrative has in the Synoptic Gospels, and the way it is reflected on in the sixth chapter of John's Gospel, that the eucharist

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<sup>1</sup> *The Letters of the Younger Pliny* (tr. B. Radice, Penguin, 1963), page 294.

<sup>2</sup> Tertullian, *Apology*, chapter 7.

stood from the beginning at the centre of Christian life together. This is confirmed by writers throughout the second and third centuries. Thus the writer of the *Didache*, which may date from the last years of the first century, tells his readers: 'Assemble on the Lord's Day, and break bread and offer the Eucharist.' Ignatius of Antioch, on his way to martyrdom in Rome, writes: 'Take care to keep Eucharist', and to another church, 'Be eager for more frequent gatherings for thanksgiving (eucharist) to God and for his glory. For when you meet frequently the forces of Satan are annulled.'<sup>3</sup> In the middle of the second century another apologist, Justin, explains Christian practice to the educated Roman public telling how 'On that day which is called after the sun all who are in the towns and in the country gather together for a communal celebration.' His picture of what happens is very beautiful. First the writings of apostles and prophets are read, 'as long as time permits'; then follows an exhortation by the president,

Then we all rise together and pray and, when our prayer is ended, bread and wine and water are brought, and the president in like manner offers prayers and thanksgivings, according to his ability, and the people assent, saying Amen; and there is a distribution to each, and a participation of that over which thanks have been given, and to those who are absent a portion is sent by the deacons. And they who are well to do, and willing, give what each thinks fit; and what is collected is deposited with the president, who succours the orphans and widows, and those who, through sickness or any other cause, are in want, and those who are in bonds, and the strangers sojourning among us, and in a word takes care of all who are in need. But Sunday is the day on which we all hold our common assembly, because it is the first day on which God, having wrought a change in the darkness and matter, made the world; and Jesus Christ our Saviour on the same day rose from the dead.<sup>4</sup>

So it goes on. Writer after writer testifies to the centrality of the eucharist in Christian common life. Why was it, when contemporary society found the practice alien and suspicious, that the eucharist remained so important? Why has that continued to be true over nearly two thousand years through a whole variety of understandings of what the eucharist means? Is it still true for us? We are no longer accused of cannibalism and incest, but deep-rooted suspicions of other kinds remain. I was taken aback when, after a beautiful eucharist in a tiny medieval chapel near Oxford, a place where without question 'prayer has been valid', a student who had attended but not come up to receive communion burst out: 'It's all so much mumbo-jumbo! All that stuff about transubstantiation! I can't understand how intelligent people go on with it.' This kind of objection to sacramental practice is more widespread than those of us who think of the sacraments as essential to our living and breathing realize.

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<sup>3</sup> *Texts in Early Christian Writings* (tr. M. Staniforth, Penguin, 1968).

<sup>4</sup> Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, chapter 57.

What I hope to show is that the eucharist has been central to Christian common life because of the way in which it intersects with our daily life – the whole fabric of our social, political and economic reality. In a unique way it bathes that daily reality in the light of the Triune God, teaching us that our lives and our world are gifts. They are not something to hoard, corner or crow over – as if what we have or can do are the results of our own efforts – but are for us to share as the response to love. ‘Freely [you] have received: freely give’ (Matthew 10.8 AV). This teaching of Jesus is what is signified in the eucharist. The eucharist is a sign of God’s reality amongst us, at the depths of our world, and therefore a sign of the connectedness of daily reality to God. As such it is a sign of hope in a world where that commodity is often enough hard to come by. To understand the eucharist, then, we need to have some understanding of the importance of signs.

Humans are sign-giving creatures. This is as much a definition of what we are as to say that we are rational creatures (*Homo sapiens*) or creatures which play (*Homo ludens*). Signs are our means of communication, at all sorts of levels. The most fundamental signs, which constitute the framework of our common life, are words. Words are conventions which enable us to recognize and respond to the world. I say ‘tree’; she says, ‘*l’arbre*’; he says ‘*der Baum*’. All of us point to one reality, naming according to a local convention. Scripts are signs, which we must learn to decipher: watch young children as they learn to read, puzzling over the signs, learning to make connections between these signs and reality (often through pictures: t-r-e-e – picture of tree – tree in the garden). Words may indeed have originated as hieroglyphs or pictograms.

Fundamental as they are in the universe of signs, there has nevertheless always been a certain distrust of words. ‘Words are what we use when we have sod all to say’, says the Australian songwriter Eric Bogle, and people have always sought to go beyond words, to clothe words in flesh, by signifying through flowers, rings, gifts and monuments. Amongst the most mysterious of all signs is musical notation, a mystery which suggested to Plato a whole theory of the universe. Some philosophers have thought of the universe as a ‘book of signs’, and the argument to the existence and nature of God from the beauty and design of the universe makes something like this assumption. In that case absolutely everything can be a sign, and there is a sense in which this is evidently true for the Christian: existence is God’s basic gift and creation the product of God’s love. It is a sign, or a set of signs, which it is our daily task to construe. We have already noted a sufficient wealth of signs, however, to show that we must learn to distinguish, for there are signs and signs.

Consider, for example, the story in Jorge Semprun’s remarkable book, *Oh, What a Beautiful Sunday!*. Semprun was a communist who was interned in one of the Nazi death camps, near Weimar. Aryan prisoners in these camps were used for work in munitions factories, and his book begins with, and continually comes back to, an encounter with a tree he had one Sunday, returning from an unscheduled visit to the factory. Returning alone he was suddenly caught by the beauty of a single snow-encrusted birch. In that tree the beauty and mystery of the universe suddenly became

radiant and transparent. He left the path and went up to it, scraping the snow off the bark. Suddenly a challenge: 'What do you think you're doing?' The click of the safety catch of a revolver being released, and a member of the SS coming menacingly towards him. Death was the penalty for trying to escape, and he had left the path... All he could say was, 'The tree ... It's so beautiful.' In the midst of the worst form of human evil the world suddenly became transparent with glory, luminous. 'Things' become signs. It is possible to say 'Thou' to a tree, said Martin Buber, but in fact all sorts of realities, from Moses' bush irradiated by sunlight to Semprun's snow-covered birch, can suddenly leap from the taken-for-granted background and become signs.

Signs play a considerable part in the biblical narrative. According to the authors of Genesis 9, the rainbow is a sign. Coming as it does at the end of a storm it becomes a sign of the positive transcending the negative, of God's benevolence experienced in the regularity of nature. This idea could be generalized to the whole of creation. 'The heavens declare the glory of God', said the psalmist. Paul picked up this line of thinking in his letter to the Romans: God's 'eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made' (Romans 1.20). The whole created order becomes as it were a sign of God's love and constancy.

The phrase 'signs and wonders' crops up frequently in the Hebrew Bible where it refers above all to the plagues which compelled Pharaoh to release Israel from Egypt. Other miraculous signs are associated with Gideon, Elijah and Elisha. All these signs are manifestations of God's power to save and heal in response to the cry of God's people. A sign here is something unusual and out of the ordinary, quite different from the sign-fabric of our lives that words represent.

The prophets of Israel often gave their contemporaries 'signs' in a very different sense. These were odd, striking, but decidedly not miraculous events. Isaiah, for example, wrote the words 'Spoil speeds, prey hastens' on a tile before witnesses and gave this name to his unfortunate child as a sign of what God would do through the Assyrians (Isaiah 8.3f.). Jeremiah bought a new loincloth (not Y-fronts but more like the contemporary Indian dhoti), wore it without bothering to shrink it, and then hid it in rocks until it rotted as a sign of what was going to happen to Judah (Jeremiah 13.4f.). Ezekiel drew a picture of Jerusalem besieged on a clay brick and lay facing the brick with an iron plate between him and the brick as a sign of the same thing (Ezekiel 4.1f.). These signs were supposed to be effective and to hasten the events they signified. Before we write them off as sympathetic magic perhaps we should reflect on the impact they might have had in the small communities of their day. A contemporary example might be the self-immolation of Jan Palach in Prague in 1968 after the Russian invasion. Who can say that this terrible tragic protest did nothing towards the eventual withdrawal and crumbling of that regime? Signs like this have the capacity to go deeper than acres of newspaper comment.

Jesus spoke a good deal about signs. It seems he was often asked to provide a 'sign', in the sense of a striking and miraculous occurrence, which would remove all ambiguity about his person. He rejected this demand as a temptation and said that 'no sign shall

be given except the sign of Jonah' (Matthew 12.39). Presumably the point here is that Jonah did no sign, but only *preached* to the people of Nineveh. Jesus also warned that false prophets would work signs (Matthew 24.24). At the same time he implied that people should be able to 'read the signs of the times' and when the messengers of John the Baptist came to ask him, 'Are you the one who is to come?' Jesus referred them to the messianic signs mentioned by Isaiah:

Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. (Matthew 11.4 cf. Isaiah 35.5-6)

For centuries, Jesus' miracles were taken to be 'proofs' of his divinity, but his rejection of the demand for signs ought to put us on our guard about such a reading. In the passage from Isaiah to which Jesus refers the point is to take courage from the promises of God. Jesus is saying that the messianic age has indeed arrived, but he insists at the same time that 'wonders' are not the proof of that. The focus of the gospel miracles is not spectacular demonstrations of power, represented as a demonic temptation in the story of Jesus' testing by the devil, but the fact that people are healed and restored to the community. This, at any rate, seems to be the way the evangelist John understands Jesus' miracles. He uses the word 'sign' to refer to them, and tells us that he records them so that people may have faith that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God (John 20.30f.). On the other hand the signs do not in any sense compel faith but on the contrary generate controversy and are often met with unbelief (John 12.37).

That signs may be met with unbelief precisely shows their mediating status. They are not the thing itself, but they point beyond themselves. When we are dealing with God we need signs because 'No one shall see [God] and live' (Exodus 33.20). There is simply no way we can have God's reality as it were at first hand: we need signs both to make present to us the God who is not a member of this universe, and to protect us.

The fact that we live by signs has always exercised a great fascination for philosophers. Perhaps the whole of reality is but a sign world? One can understand the fascination, but on the other hand the distinction between signs and reality remains important. The word 'food' does not fill my stomach and help me grow. Real food does. This is where talk about 'mere signs' comes from.

The question of whether we have a 'real' presence in the eucharist or whether it is a 'mere' sign generated vast quantities of hot air in the sixteenth century. At a famous meeting between Luther and Zwingli, Luther hit the table and insisted that the eucharistic elements were not 'mere signs' but truly Christ's body and blood. No one sought to point out that the difference between the two Reformers was not over the eucharist but over the nature of the real. Zwingli was working with Platonic ideas for which signs might be the 'really real'. Luther, who walked to work each day through a farmyard, and who had a practical peasant's sense of what was real and what was not, insisted that 'This is my body' must mean that a change in the eucharistic elements took place.

In this [20th] century, this debate has been taken further precisely in terms of an understanding of the nature of signs. What we have in the eucharist, it is argued, is not transubstantiation – a view which in any case needed the metaphysics of Aristotle to make it stick – but trans-signification. We take bread and wine – the stuff of ordinary life, symbols of basic nourishment and of celebration – and we place them in quite a different context, within the context of the story of God’s redeeming activity. In this case what they signify is changed. This does not mean a change at the level of subatomic particles. It does mean that at the level of signifying, at the level of the social world which human beings occupy, the bread and wine are quite different. In attempting to spell out what the social, economic and political significance of the eucharist is, then, I am trying to show how the bread and wine of the eucharist is trans-signified. Luther was expressing the prejudice of the ‘plain man’ in insisting that unless there was a substantial change there was no change at all. Taking Zwingli’s side is to invite misunderstanding, but we have to say he had the best of the argument, being open to see that our interpretation of reality is, in fact, part of that reality.

The word which has traditionally been used to designate the sign character of the eucharist is ‘sacrament’. So the Heidelberg Catechism defined sacraments as ‘visible, holy signs and seals instituted by God in order that by their use he may the more fully disclose and seal to us the promise of the gospel’. The route by which the word ‘sacrament’ came to mean ‘sacred sign’ is very obscure. In classical Latin a *sacramentum* was a legal bond or bail or the military oath of allegiance. From thence it came to mean a solemn oath, or engagement. This latter use suggested its use to describe baptism. At the beginning of the fifth century, Augustine tells us that ‘Signs which pertain to divine things are called sacraments.’<sup>5</sup> When he is discussing sacrifice he says: ‘A sacrifice is the visible sacrament or sacred sign of an invisible sacrifice.’ The sacrifice he has in mind is a moral one: ‘The sacrifice the Church celebrates in the sacrament of the altar ... where it is shown to her that in this thing which she offers she herself is offered.’<sup>6</sup> From this discussion came the classic Western definition of a sacrament as ‘an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace’.

Augustine did not limit the word ‘sacrament’ to liturgical actions of the Church such as baptism and eucharist. For him the word had a much broader reference. Through the centuries the meaning got steadily narrower. By the early Middle Ages, people were proposing that there were perhaps thirty sacraments. Peter Lombard, Archbishop of Paris in 1150, restricted the number to seven. In this he was followed by Aquinas and then by the Council of Trent in the sixteenth century, which spoke of ‘seven sacraments, no more and no less’. These were eucharist, baptism, confirmation, ordination, marriage, penance and extreme unction. By this time the word ‘sacrament’ refers only to liturgical acts of the Church.

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<sup>5</sup> Augustine, *Letter* 138.

<sup>6</sup> Augustine, *City of God*, 10.6.

Luther debated whether to return to the New Testament use and speak of Christ as the only true sign of God's love. Later he fixed on 'baptism and bread' as being the only two sacraments of the Church, being the only two promises 'with signs attached'. In this he was followed by all the Reformed Churches. On the extreme left wing of the Reformation, however, there were groups which felt this did not go far enough. For them the word alone was all that was needed. This group was represented by the Quakers at the end of the seventeenth century and, at the end of the nineteenth century, by the Salvation Army.

Throughout the twentieth century there has been a progressive reopening of the concept. The Scottish theologian John Oman believed that life itself was 'the one Supreme Divine Sacrament' and the sacraments of the Church exist 'to express and, as it were, give the concentrated essence of the sacrament of life'.<sup>7</sup> All forms of human sharing and expressions of compassion, tenderness or love are, for Oman, sacraments. Many of those who took this up like to speak of a 'sacramental universe' or the 'sacramental principle'.

In the Roman Catholic Church, since the Second Vatican Council, a popular view has been to think in terms of a hierarchy of sacraments. Christ is the 'arch sacrament'; the Church is the 'fundamental sacrament' (sign of a sign) and the eucharist and other church sacraments are in turn signs of this. Christ is the basic sign of God's love to the world. The Church exists to speak about the incarnation of this love, and the sacraments are one form of this speech.

In a beautiful essay written in 1970 the Catholic theologian Karl Rahner went further than this.<sup>8</sup> The problem with Oman's theology of the 'sacramental universe' was that it easily suggested a kind of pantheism. Notoriously pantheism finds it difficult to say a clear-cut 'No' to evil. Rahner transforms this by speaking of history, rather than of creation, as God's liturgy. Creation is the product of 'grace', God's will to share Godself. When creation becomes history in the emergence of human beings, who become subjects of their own history, history remains imbued with grace. Rahner thinks of human history as a vast liturgy, celebrated both in joy and sorrow, depth and superficiality, love and hatred. The crucifixion puts Christ at the heart of this whole liturgy. What the Church sacraments do is to reflect upon the liturgy and make known the fact that God is to be found in it, even in all its folly and wickedness. Unless this connection is made at the deepest level the Church sacraments become 'empty ritual attitudinizations, full of unbelief'. The eucharist is celebrated in the knowledge that the world already offers itself in 'rejoicing, tears and blood'. The Church sacraments then are signs of 'grace' – the openness and fundamental hopefulness of human history under God's pedagogy.

Humans are sign-giving creatures. Beyond the very basic forms of sign-giving (for instance, to signal that you need water in an area where you do not know the

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<sup>7</sup> J. Oman, *Grace and Personality* (CUP, 1960), page 189.

<sup>8</sup> K. Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, volume 14 (Darton, Longman and Todd, 1976), page 161f.

language) this capacity for making signs has enabled people to explore the heights and depths of the universe conceptually, visually, geometrically and musically. Poetry, philosophy, music, physics and chemistry – all this is a sign world the function of which is to explore and celebrate the mystery of the given. Liturgy is part of this aspect of the sign world. It has its own reality, which must be respected – reality as signifying. When it is mistaken for essential reality it is fetishized. The ‘true bread’ of the eucharist is no substitute for the bread which feeds the hungry. It is true bread, the bread of life, only when it leads us to feed the hungry. But it is also, like philosophy and art, a way of exploring the depths of our world. Unlike poetry or philosophy it is not the result primarily of human reflection on the mystery of creation. Rather, it is a response to a given, to the heart of the mystery making itself known, to what theologians call ‘revelation’. It is a re-presentation of the heart of the divine self-giving to history. The point of re-presentation is that the divine story shapes our story, and is able to take on new creative dimensions through us.

Talk of the way in which the story shapes us leads to an important distinction between symbols and signs. Paul Tillich defined a symbol thus:

Symbols ... are intrinsically related to what they express; they have inherent qualities (water, fire, oil, bread, wine) which make them adequate to their symbolic function ... A sacramental symbol is neither a thing nor a sign. It participates in the power of what it symbolizes, and therefore it can be the medium of the Spirit.<sup>9</sup>

Sacraments *use* symbols, but they are not themselves symbols, but signs. Tillich’s definition makes clear that symbols relate to the order of creation. A sign relates more to the order of redemption. The difference between the two is that the latter involves a story, it locates us within redemption history. The former expresses, by contrast, something of the beauty and power of creation.

Whether it is the fact that something ‘participates in the power of what it symbolizes’ which makes it a medium of the Spirit is very much open to question. It is true that the eucharist, like every cultic act, uses symbols: light in the form of candles, bread and wine which signify the satisfaction of need and celebration. The inexhaustible depth of meaning in the eucharist gains from this symbolic function. The use of vestments, altar hangings, liturgical colours, all appeal to the ‘forest of symbols’.

On the other hand, the tradition of Israel seems from the start to have been wary of symbols. Their introduction of symbols into the Jerusalem Temple was the result of the need to assimilate the Jebusite cult and to come to terms with the culture of Canaan. For good or ill this symbolic tradition was never domesticated in Israel. Myth, said the Old Testament scholar von Rad, is a way of thinking by means of symbols and images, and Israel fought against the capacity of mythic symbols to serve as means of

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<sup>9</sup> P. Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, volume 2 (James Nisbet, 1968), pages 130–1.



revelation with all her might. 'This awareness of the barrier which men erect between themselves and God by means of images is ... Israel's greatest achievement.'<sup>10</sup>

Von Rad worked in Heidelberg, and in his lifetime had seen the erection of the neo-pagan Tingstätt, a sort of amphitheatre, in the woods above the city. Goebbels had it built as a focus for Nazi rallies glorifying the 'Aryan' past. Von Rad therefore had every reason to be aware of the way symbols and images could be used in the service of a demonic mythicization. Symbols are ambiguous. All of the great symbols can be used within both divine and demonic cults. Though the Temple was full of symbols Israel's liturgy centred around narrative, and it is at least suggestive that when the Temple was destroyed Israel survived without any sign of trauma.

Signs as opposed to symbols have a particular story attached to them: the use of bitter herbs at the Passover to signify the suffering of slavery, for example; the use of bread and wine in the eucharist to recall Jesus' last meal with his disciples. The great event of salvation, the exodus from Egypt, was recalled in the Passover liturgy. 'Let everyone live as if they came forth out of Egypt' said a Passover rubric and it is the liturgy which made this possible. The point of the eucharist is, like the Passover, to offer us a clue to what God is up to in human history. The sign-giving does not aim to take us back to the first century; the eucharist is not a time machine. Rather, it catches us into the stream of God's continuing and liberating activity. It goes without saying that only the signs, rather than the symbols, can do this. The signs speak of a God who is humiliated, cursed and spat upon. They take us into the heart of the darkness of the gospel, the folly which is wisdom and the wisdom which is folly, the weakness which is strength and the strength which is weakness. No symbol rooted in the order of creation could do this. The symbols speak to us of God's love but do not lead us into the mystery of redemption. They are ambiguous about the threat to creation by death, disease, wickedness. The signs take us to the heart of that darkness and illuminate it with the light of redemption. They are signs of hope. How we are to understand that is the theme of the following reflections.

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<sup>10</sup> G. von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, volume 2 (SCM, 1962), page 342.

