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Chapter xvi:
Lesson, Epistle.

CLAY WELLBORN IS SPEAKING: a single, calm voice. Otherwise there is motionlessness throughout the church. Mr Wellborn, our **lector** for the day, in ordinary (albeit handsome) clothes, without candles or costuming or gestures, is standing at a lectern reading to us, and we are sitting silently to hear him.

This is the quietest, most understated moment in the Mass (which this long series of chapters tries to describe and explain). At this frozen-frame in our ritual there is no ceremony going on at all, if we don't count the Master of Ceremonies hovering courteously beside the lectern. The only thing we have to talk about is what we're hearing: the Lesson, the first of the three 'lections' read at each High Mass.

And there is a good deal to be said about these lections, especially the first one, from the Old Testament. For although the movements and music of Mass have reached their most subdued moment, if we listen to the words we find ourselves plunged into a realm of the remote and uncanny. The Old Testament often sounds like *The Arabian Nights*, and this morning's fragment seems like a caprice, a flight of fancy, a dreamy, irresponsible fairy tale:

> *Serpens erat callidior cunctis animantibus terræ quæ fecerat Dominus Deus : qui dixit ad mulierem . . . .*
> *The serpent was more subtil than any beast of the field which the Lord God had made. And he said unto the woman . . . .*

Indeed, today's Lesson ends on a bizarre note not far from comedy:

> *. . . consuerunt folia ficus et fecerunt sibi perizomata.*
> *. . . and they sewed fig leaves together, and made themselves aprons.*

And yet today is one of the most sober days of the year: the first Sunday in Lent. The Litany, awefully chanted in procession, was a preparation for today's three lections, which explain the nature and consequences of human evil, and what is to be done.

Read on its own, out of context, our Lesson might appear eerie, outlandish, or merely charming. Unbelievers often find this odd tale of snakes and aprons grotesque. And a few years ago, just as grotesquely, the Kansas Board of Education, reading these first few chapters of Genesis on its own, without the aid of liturgy, decided that God meant them as a summary of the biological mechanism He used to generate this planet's organisms. The Kansas Board of Education therefore took it into its head to shut down certain parts of its biology course, to the perpetual shame of the great flat state of Kansas.

But read as the Old Testament was meant to be read by the men who assembled it – without coarse incredulity, or coarse credulity – it illuminates in a way nothing else can. Today's Lesson is not silly: but it is so sophisticated it seems *naïve*. Here is discernment so mature it wraps itself up in folktales. That is how the wisdom of the Old Testament works. What sort of wisdom is this?

The Lesson.

THE OLD TESTAMENT is the name the Christian Church gives to the huge *corpus* of sacred writings she inherited from Israel.

For the first few centuries of the Church, these Hebrew writings *were* 'the Scriptures'. When at Mass passages of were recited (how many? it varied) they were always (or almost always) from the Hebrew Scriptures – usually passages to do with the coming of the Messiah, the Christ. In other words, the Hebrew Scriptures were regarded as evidence of the long preparation God had made for the advent of JESUS of Nazareth.

But this *corpus* was enormously varied. It was not even uniformly venerable. For Jews, the most sacred text was and is the Torah, or Law of Moses, which is itself divided into five books: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Deuteronomy and Numbers, and is therefore sometimes called the **Pentateuch** (from *penta*, Greek for *five*). In Christ's day there was also, at a lower level than the Pentateuch, a secondary body of holy texts, vaguely defined and then still slowly being added to, known as the Prophecies and Writings. Some of these texts had been composed in Hebrew, some in Greek; but since most Jews could no longer read Hebrew, the Law, the Prophets and the Writings had all been rendered into Greek. It was this

Greek Bible, the **Septuagint**, that Christ and His contemporaries knew and quoted from.

Some centuries after Christ, feeling threatened by Christianity and Christianity's own sacred texts, Judaism defined its **canon**, which means its range of sacred books, more strictly than it ever had before. All of the Writings that had been composed in Greek, rather than in the sacred Hebrew tongue, were ejected from the Jews' canon. But these ejected books continued to be honoured by Catholic Christians, and remain incorporated in our Bible.

(By an odd quirk, English Protestantism much later decided to accept the Jewish canon rather than the Christian one. Protestants call the rejected the 'Apocryphal books' or **Apocrypha**. But that is eccentric of them: the so-called Apocrypha is integral to our Old Testament canon, and we hear readings from it as our Lesson quite often during the Church year.)

In her first few centuries, the Church began compiling her own canon of Christian writings, as we'll discuss in a moment. But she didn't immediately discard the writings she had acquired from Israel: she continued to read a lection from the Old Testament at Mass. Sadly, the Church of the Dark Ages did drop the first lection, the Old Testament Lesson, and the ministry of the Word shrank from three lessons to two. The custom of having three lessons wasn't revived until the twentieth century – a very rare example of twentieth century liturgical innovations or revivals being useful and good and decent. Let it never be said that these notes are merely bigoted. The revival of the Old Testament Lesson was a noble deed.

Having said that, the Old Testament does not matter as much as the New; it is at a lower level of authority and splendour, whatever the Kansas Board of Education may think; it is not necessary to Mass. Therefore at Low Mass – which is Mass shorn of all richness, Mass pared to inessentials – we still only read two lections, with the odd result that the gradual (which we'll come to in a minute) gets compacted with the Alleluia.

Enough talk. The Lesson ends. We have heard God's Voice curiously uttered through the medium of ancient and troubling legends. We have heard, in today's Lesson, how the ego of mankind corrupts our happiness, so that we are made self-conscious about our moral status, and hence awkwardly aware of our bodies as separate from out distraught and exiled minds; we tear down the good leaves and mesh them into covering . . . . At least, that's one way of turning today's Lesson into explicit teaching. But it's better to leave it as it is: profound, though dark; a story which seems to contain all stories within it.

Here endeth the Lesson, declares Mr Wellborn; *Thanks be to God!*, cries the congregation; and means it, I hope.

The Gradual.

AN INTERLUDE FOLLOWS, or rather a commentary and a bridge. As the Lesson ends, the choir begins chanting, and their chant dramatically breaks up the readings, as well as holding them together.

Gradus means step; this little anthem, the **Gradual**, is a song of steps. It got its name because it was chanted *from* the steps of the huge marble lectern, the *ambo*, you can still see in European cathedrals, or perhaps *while* the subdeacon mounted the ambo steps to recite. In either case it is like *DER*-dah *DER*-dah *DER*-dah music on movie soundtracks. After the understated Lesson, tension is once again being ratcheted up.

Just like the Introit (if you can remember that far back), the Gradual used to be a whole psalm, but was honed down to an apposite few phrases, chosen to comment on what went before and want comes afterward. Today the Gradual's comment is so neat as to be almost waggish. The Lesson has been about man's revolt against God, and we know where this initial crime against obedience is going to lead. An angel with the fiery sword is about to fling Adam and Eve, cringing, out of Paradise, ejecting them into the hard and dubious world where human history is worked, where God is hard to see, where the worst that we dread sometimes befalls us. And the choir, in commentary on this story of man's first disobedience and the Fall, utters, in the calm ecstasy of plainchant, these lines:

Angelis suis mandavit de te
ut custodiant te in omnibus viis tuis
in manibus portabunt te
ne forte offendas ad lapidem pedem tuum

He shall give his angels charge over thee,
to keep thee in all thy ways.
They shall bear thee in their hands,
that thou hurt not thy foot against a stone.

What is choir thinking of? Or rather – since the choir is merely the mouthpiece of the Church, the Bride of Christ, and the Church is God's normal way of communicating with man – what is God up to in the face of human rebellion? If we have cut ourselves off from Him, and from each other, and even from our own bodies, so that we have to cover them with ludicrous 'aprons', and must stagger about over the stony and fatal earth – what's the point of this song of absolute safety?

We are about to hear this anthem expanded, when the choir sings again, between Epistle and Gospel, almost the whole psalm from which these remarkable lines come. And then in the Gospel itself, we are going to hear these lines are taken with cretinous literal-mindedness, toyed with, by Satan himself. The Fall makes us insecure; this Psalm sings of absolute security; and such security is refused by Christ. What subtleties are these? The Church has woven Lesson and its Gradual, Epistle and its Tract, into a counterpoint with the Gospel which hints that . . . but I mustn't preach. Our business is to admire the wit of the Church's use of her book, the Bible, which easily outpaces Satan's theft and overly literal misuse of the Bible (and, if it comes to that, outpaces the theft and overly literal misuse of the Bible by certain heretics).

From Lesson to Epistle.

WHILE WE ARE CONSIDERING this remarkable song, the choreography has got richer. What comes next, the Epistle, is serious in a way the Old Testament Lesson is not. The Bible is not all the same, and its various parts are not to be read or heard in the same fashion. Authority and revelation move up a notch now, and ritual makes that difference visible. After our subdued listening, more extravagance is afoot.

When the Lesson was being read, the celebrant and his two ministers gazed west at the lector. As he finishes, they swivel back to their natural position, facing God's altar: celebrant, deacon and subdeacon in their ordered file. The Master of Ceremonies takes the book of lections from Mr Wellborn, carries it back into the sanctuary, and approaches the line of the sacred ministers. Standing politely on the subdeacon's right, he hands the volume to him: for now is the subdeacon's moment, the pinnacle of his glory. It's fitting that the Epistle be read ceremoniously, by a man in white linen and silk damask. Therefore the subdeacon, holding the magnificent book before him, genuflects before the altar, turns, and approaches the crossing, where the sanctuary meets the nave, the Holy of Holies the world. The Master of Ceremonies holds the book for him; the subdeacon folds his hands in prayer, and suddenly –

By the way, observe the servers, standing dignified and motionless at the bench behind the sacred ministers. As the Gradual is sung, you might noticed one of the servers slip discreetly from his place and vanish away, off into the sacristy. Has he lost interest? Did he find the Old Testament so entirely satisfactory that he doesn't need to stay for anything else? Has he

left his car lights on? In fact, his disappearance is part of the deepening emphasis of the lections, a premonition of greater opulence still.

The Epistle.

SUDDENLY, THE SUBDEACON SINGS. At least, he *chants*, using an ancient stylised **chant** that taps each syllable on one note, but goes down a tone at the end of phrases, up to show questions, and up in a trill at the end of the lection. (These ups and downs are marked in the book with an elegant system of little symbols.)

We might not have expected such richness, after hearing the Old Testament read simply without flourishes. But the Church uses this chant to express the elevated quality of the New Testament. It is not mere writing, she says: see, it is a sort of song! – In any case, practically, it is easier to project the human voice 'with note' than without.

What are we listening to, exactly?

The Hebrew Bible, what we now call the Old Testament, *was* the one sacred writing of the first generations of the Church. But these early Christians were a literate and talkative lot, and were soon writing about the Faith. For Christianity, the religion of the Word, is wordy – that's not just a weak pun. God has explicitly revealed Himself: so explicitly that we can discuss Him at enormous length. The Christian Faith is not vague or meagre, but inherently complicated. For all these reasons, Christianity has always been – compared to Islam or Buddhism or even Judaism – a long-winded Faith, perpetually explaining itself, pouring out more and more words. (Alas, this comparatively laconic book is up to page 143!)

The first Christian documents included long, public letters addressed by apostles to congregations, letters that taught and badgered and reproved and encouraged and accused when the apostle wasn't there to teach or reprove or encourage them himself. The apostles clearly regarded these letters as a second-best to being there to speak themselves, and sometimes they were dashed off. But such letters were not just effusions: they were, most of them, written for liturgical use: they meant to read out in church during Mass.[1]

Christian preaching and Christian writing have never stopped, and there is no end to the torrent of words about the Word. Some writings, old and new, are rightly held in veneration as revealing fresh depths in the Christian Gospel. But from the second and third centuries, the Church began

[1] Colossians iv[16], I Thessalonians v[27].

to pay special regard to certain of her earliest documents: those writings produced by the apostles themselves, the first generation of Christian leaders, the first bishops. Such writings were held in particular veneration because they were only one stage away from the words of JESUS Himself, and also because they were a useful weapon against new-fangled heresies. The heretics fabricated books they called the Gospel of Thomas or the Gospel of Mary, foisting their ideas on Christ's long-dead first followers. To resist them, the Church defines a new canon, a fresh 'testament' or witness to the actions of God, a canon meant to sit side by side with the Hebrew Bible or former testament. Nothing more could be added to this new canon, the Church declared; she was privileging these particular writings forever as especially sacred, uniquely suitable for use in the liturgy.

This the Church created for her own liturgical and doctrinal use the **New Testament**.

The rule for what went in and what stayed out of the New Testament was simple: if a document was thought to be by an apostle it was included in the canon; if not, not. Actual content didn't matter so much. Thus the canon includes Philemon, a letter which is interesting the way a short-story is interesting, but is hardly religious at all; however it is certainly written by St Paul, which is enough. The letters of St Clement to the Corinthian Church, which are more edifying and relevant than most of what Paul writes, were not included in the canon, because St Clement, though an excellent man, was not one of the first apostles.

As it happens, the apostle who left the most writings behind was *the least of apostles, not worthy to be called an apostle* (as he said himself, in an unwontedly humble moment): **Paul of Tarsus**. Paul spent decades rushing about the Mediterranean planting churches and seeing them plucked up, fighting with the other apostles and often losing the fight; and all this produced a heap of writing, not all of it attractive. Indeed, the heap of fourteen 'Pauline' letters included in the New Testament canon includes one (Hebrews) which is definitely not by him, and four or five more which almost certainly aren't. The Second Letter of Peter is also clearly not by Peter – and so forth.

Of course there's nothing incompatible between knowing that Paul didn't actually dictate the letter we call Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians, and taking Ephesians seriously. The authority of that document comes from the Church having chosen to include it in her canon of books to be read liturgically. The Church produced and sanctions the New Testament; the literal origin of what she chose doesn't much matter.

We remind ourselves here of the parable of the earthlings fleeing alien invasion with a suitcase of random literature.

A more serious problem is not authorship but comprehension. Paul was a great man (if not as influential a theologian as people assume); *a little man overflowing with friendliness*, recalled one contemporary. He was a great writer in some ways, for instance in his uncanny knack of flooding the page with emotions glad or black, and conjuring up the presence of his personality. He would have been a monumental preacher, if he hadn't stammered; but that stammer was just another aspect of his larger-than-life energy, teeming over all bounds and wrecking grammar and ever pronunciation with its surplus liveliness. How could he not stammer? Hearing Paul's letters is like hearing a sermon: a sermon more lucid than any sermon he could have preached, a wildly stirring but still rather incoherent sermon. His thoughts tumble over each other like wrestling puppies; he often experiments with ideas, dynamically tossing them here and about and *wham*, over his shoulder as he snatches up another idea; and he is maddeningly lax in his use of the connecting word *Therefore*. "Wherefore 'therefore', O Paul?" you shout, as you try to follow his reasoning; and you throw the book across the room. – That is, you are tempted to fling the New Testament against the wall when reading St Paul on your own, a perilous activity if you have an arrogant mind. It was this activity that cost Luther his soul, for the rapturous bubbling of the warm-blooded Greekified Jew found a weird echo in the violent, thundering, fæcally-brown, solitary mountain torrents of Luther's own Ostrogothic soul, until reason and obedience were swept away and a storm whipped up that was to lour over man for centuries to the carnage of millions of men and the pitiable ruination of Europe.

Paul, you see, is not at all a systematic writer. This doesn't matter so much when he is read liturgically, and being read liturgically is, after all, what he is *for*. For liturgy disciplines and orders the words of the text, submitting them to the larger artistic arrangement known as the Proper of the day: that is, the lections and anthems of Mass, and indeed the music and preaching and ceremonial, woven together into a whole greater than the sum of its parts.

Thus in this morning's Epistle Paul is feeling his way – the writing is too intense to say 'thinking his way' – through the questions *How does Christ save us? From what? And why?* Death was defeated by one Man, JESUS; must it not have arrived in human experience by one man, the first or universal man, Adam? (Here King James' translators have kindly supplied us with a set of brackets, to mark off a long digression about Law and Grace and Justification and Righteousness and Free Gift and the Similitude of

Christ with Adam, ideas that hurt our heads because they hurt Paul's, and in any case meant different things to him than these curious English words, all coined to explain Paul according to Protestant dogma. We emerge from the brackets to find:) Whoever our father Adam was, the obedience and sacrifice of our brother Christ have undone the disaster; however human nature came to be so disastrous, it is turned round now, entirely; in Christ gravity is reversed; life does not necessarily drag us down any more.

Therefore

– ah! that terrible word *therefore* –

Therefore as by the offence of one
judgement came upon all men . . .
even so by the righteousness of one
the free gift came upon all men
unto justification of life.

This is poetry, rather than prose; and rather than worry what *justification of* means (Paul didn't know, either) it makes much more sense to lay these words out as poetry –

the free gift came upon all men
unto . . . life!

For as by one man's disobedience
many were made sinners,
so by the obedience of one
shall many be made righteous

– or to read them in authoritative Latin, which turns their sonorous antitheses sublime (don't try to understand the Latin words, read this *aloud*) –

igitur sicut per unius delictum
in omnes homines in condemnationem
sic et per unius iustitiam
in omnes homines
in iustificationem vitæ[2]

– or to set these words to great music, as Handel did:

Since by man came [dark harmonic colouring; a hush:] *death,*
Since by man came [excruciating chords] *de-he-he-heath –*
[intolerable pause. Then a sunny burst of sound:]
By man! came also! the resurrection! of! [di-dah] *the dead!*
By man! [di-dah] *came also! the resurrection! of! the dead!*
The [upward run of notes] *RE-EH-HE-SURRECTION! of!* ***THE DEAD!***[3]

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[2] From today's Epistle, Romans v[12-19].

[3] *The Messiah*; the words are from elsewhere in Paul, but that doesn't matter. This notion of Christ reversing the flow of spiritual logic is Paul's one great idea, and he constantly relies on these lists of

Failing Latin or Handel, we do very well to hear Paul's overheated prose *sung*; which is what we doing at the moment. Singing these words elevates them above mere theological speculation. It lifts them and us to the plane where we can see what Paul, in his turgid fashion, saw: that Christ's existence as a Man transforms what it means to be a man. Every facet of human nature which we know to be wrecked and awry (and our first lection was an image of the universal disaster of humanity) is now reeling back toward perfection. Our species' one huge devastation is sent flying back toward order, not by the quiet individual reform of themselves by millions, but by one Man's massive act. How? What did He do? And so we demand to hear the Gospel.

So much for the second lesson. It is known as the **Epistle**: *epistle* simply a formal or high-falutin' word for *letter*, but the word gets a bit misused, or stretched, in this liturgical context. For other documents beside letters got included in the New Testament: four very different accounts of the earthly life of JESUS Christ, called Gospels; also a long and delightful account of the doings of Paul and other early Christian leaders, named The Acts of the Apostles, which is really part II of the one of the Gospels; finally, a bizarre series of visions (some beautiful, some ugly) known as the Apocalypse of St John, or Revelation. The Gospels, because they are directly about Christ, were at once regarded with unique devotion; everything else in the New Testament was loosely called the Epistles, and that's the name given to the second lection at Mass, even if it is from Acts or Revelation. Still, usually 'the Epistle' is a reading from one of the Apostle Paul's epistles (Greek Christians actually call the second lection 'the Apostle', since it's most often Paul speaking), an we have to get used to Paul's strange manners if we are to get grips with this part of the Mass.

Suddenly, the subdeacon stops singing (. . . *unto eternal life by Jesus Christ our Lord!*; the turn of melody shows he is finished), and startles us by saying, in his own voice, *Here endeth the Epistle*. And we reply, *Thanks be to God* once more, although our minds are already running on to the next stage of Mass. Everyone is suddenly astir: the Gospel is upon us!

Things get more busy.

THE GOSPEL IS THE CLIMAX of the ritual in the this part of the Mass. The Old Testament Lesson was a prelude or hint of the coming of Christ; the

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antitheses, declaring how in paradoxical Christ death is become life, death life, law lawlessness, Gentile Jew and Jew Gentile.

New Testament Epistle was an attempt to explain the coming of Christ; the Creed, which comes next, defines – or rather heads off errors about – the coming of Christ, and the Sermon, which completes the 'ministry of the Word', expands on these ideas of the coming of Christ. But the singing of the Gospel is the centre: it is honoured *as* the coming of Christ. This book is an attempt (human and fallible, but canonised by the Church and thus reliable) to show us Christ, coming to earth, speaking and acting and dying amidst the human mob. Our pulse speeds up

Indeed, since the whole ministry of the Word forms the second movement of the Mass (between the introductory rites and the ministry of the Sacrament), and since the Gospel lection is the third element, the centre and climax, of the five elements of this movement, we might say unfancifully that now is the absolute middle of Mass: not the most exalted moment – that lies before us – but the pivot.

Here's what happens, all at a bustling rush. The book of lections is shut. The subdeacon, his moment at the centre of attention triumphantly over, carries his book, its coloured ribbons fluttering, as the Master of Ceremonies leads him up, up, well past his normal step below the deacon, up to the right-hand corner of the altar. He kneels before the celebrant, holding up the book like a trophy, and the celebrant blesses him for his work of reading it.

Osculationary divagation.

THIS IS THE FIRST TIME we've seen an individual get blessed during Mass. The method is this: the celebrant makes the sign of the cross with his right hand, as we'd expect, and then lays that hand on the scarlet book. Rather surprisingly, the subdeacon kisses the hand, in token of reverence, and of glad acceptance of the priest's blessing.

Or rather, **the kiss** is not a *token*. Ritual actions do not work like that – as mere tokens of states of mind that exist on their own. Ritual actions are gestures indicating what would be too vague to exist at all without the gesture. The kiss is what makes the subdeacon's reverence real.

Of course we're a little shocked that the sign of reverence is a gesture as warm as kissing. We find these liturgical kisses – there'll be a lot more as Mass approaches its zenith – embarrassing and odd. That's because we are odd. Ours is a chilly Northern civilisation. We're not far removed from the sullen blond Northern barbarians who invented the English language and demolished the Roman Empire in Britain. Happily, Britain wasn't left to groan under such frigid reserve: a warm and emotional Southerner named

Agostino was sent to restore the land to Christianity, and to restore to the invaders civilised habits. The first morning after he landed in Kent, Augustine celebrated Mass, kisses and all, and no doubt the Anglo-Saxons who watched him were shocked to their chilly marrows at such fervent gestures. But Augustine got them in the end. And one of the countless benefits of the Catholic Faith is that it forces on chilly Northerners the warm-blooded, Mediterranean gestures of Mass. That's no doubt one reason Northern cultures that have more-or-less retained their Catholic Faith (the Irish, the French, Bavarians) remain fairly warm and merry; whereas Northern nations that have slumped back from Catholicism into barbarian religion (Scots, Prussians, Scandinavians) – we've already mentioned the icy torrent of Luther – are notoriously grim and glum. They have reverted to type: they have iced over again. English civilisation, having barely maintained its Catholic grace, is a border-line case, sadly inclined to be morose and shy when unchrismated; and this is also true of English religious culture, or in other words the Anglican tradition. I hope my readers will forgive this digression; it's hard to think of anyone who mightn't have grounds to take offence at these notions. I only meant to say that – unsurprisingly – the technical word in English for this liturgical gesture is **osculation**: a Latinism, because English is such an inhibited language it shies away from calling a kiss a kiss.

Assembling the procession.

HAVING REVERENCED WITH OSCULATION the celebrant's hand, the subdeacon surrenders his book to the Master of Ceremonies, who ferries it off to a man with a higher and better office: the deacon. Now is the deacon's hour, the time of his exaltation. He turns, taking himself down to the bottom step; and then formally ascends to the heights, laying the book on the altar itself.

The two servers who are today's acolytes – the carried the two candles in at the introit procession – fetch their lights from the table beyond the altar where they stowed them long ago. Out from the sacristy, stepping between the acolytes' perfect symmetry, pops that server who mysteriously vanished during the Gradual. We see that he's changed his short surplice for a long alb: that is, the same ankle-length white shift, girdled at the waist with rope, which the ministers also wear. And we can see why he has had to change to a more excellent costume: he has now taken on the office of **crucifer**, or Cross-bearer. He carries a silver processional cross, the Church's banner, more impressive and significant than the eagle carried before each Roman

legion. On it is reproduced the unfathomable shape of God done to death. Heaving this Sign about is more than mere candle-carrying, and therefore his dress has changed, since he is for the moment more than a mere server.

With the acolytes on either side of him, the crucifer descends the steps, and the three of them line up before the altar, facing east, waiting for the procession to arrange itself.

We meditated some chapters ago of the excellence of incense. We could hardly read of the life of Christ without burning incense; and, anticipating this thought, Keith the boat-boy has fetched his boat-shaped incense-holder from the sacristy, bringing with him the thurifer. Together thurifer and boat-boy approach the celebrant and deacon, forming that tight efficient smoke-making knot we admired many chapters ago, when incense was last 'imposed'. The deacon takes the thurible from the thurifer and lifts up the lid; thrice the celebrant spoons fragrant crystallised sap of terebinth onto the incandescent coals. Down goes the lid; the thurible is returned to its keeper; he and his boat-boy step out of the way, down the steps, and assemble with the cross and lights.

By now so many bodies are moving about, with the celerity and precision of clockwork, uncolliding, that our eyes can hardly keep up. As the thurible party sweeps off one way, the deacon descends two steps, to kneel and silently recite a drastic prayer: *Munda cor meum . . . .*

Munda cor meum . . . .

CLEANSE MY HEART *and my lips, O thou Almighty God,* prays the deacon

who didst purge the lips of Isaiah the Prophet with a live coal:
and of Thy sweet mercy vouchsafe so to purify me,
that I may worthily proclaim Thy holy Gospel.

This ancient prayer recalls Isaiah's staggering vision of God, suddenly visible and enthroned in His Temple, *high and lifted up*: His robes cram the nave, the smoke fills the air from an immense altar of incense, the pillars shake at His voice, the burning seraphim hover before Him, covering their immortal faces with wings against His insupportable grandeur, crying *Sanctus! Sanctus! Sanctus!* This is about as near as man can come to seeing the Existent One, and Isaiah is appalled:

> *I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips: for mine eyes have seen the King . . . . Then flew one of the seraphims unto me, having a live coal in his hand,*

> *which he had taken with the tongs from off the altar: And he laid it upon my mouth, and said, Lo, this hath touched thy lips.*[4]

For although it's only a book describing the life of a man two thousand years back, the book of the Gospel reveals God, and is as dreadful in its way as Isaiah's vision. We are to imagine the glory of Christ jammed into this church now that His Gospel is to be read, and we almost groan to think of uttering and hearing such words. That is, we don't groan, being culturally Northern and passionless; but the fine warm Latin prayer puts decent sensibility into our heads by giving us words to express what is not, alas, naturally there. So we ask for our lips and ears to be touched by fire too ardent for seraphs to handle without tongs.

Having prayed, the deacon rises, climbs back up the steps, and takes the Gospel from the altar – a little gingerly, perhaps, as if it really were a live coal. The Gospel is so much more excellent than the Epistle that he needs to be blessed not afterward but at once, before he utters it forth. So the deacon kneels, asking to be blessed (*Jube, domne, benedicere: Pray, Lord* [Priest]*, give me thy blessing*), which he duly is (*Dominus sit*, murmurs the celebrant: *The Lord be in Thy heart and on thy lips, that thou mayest worthily and rightly proclaim His Gospel*). Once more a liturgical osculation; then the celebrant swishes back to the Epistle corner, where he stands all alone and forgotten until the drama of the Gospel is completed. The deacon has risen, and gone down to join the whole corps of men assembled at the foot of the altar. They all genuflect – a throng, variously equipped, the deacon at the front holding the book, standing beside the subdeacon – .

A cliffhanger.

I'M EAGER AND SO ARE YOU to get on with the Gospel procession, which is, apart from anything else, grand fun. But the subdeacon has been acting oddly since he kissed the celebrant's hand, and his movements in the general commotion of preparing for the Gospel procession have to be explained, for they summon up a whole new dimension of liturgical sensibility: north and south, an axis to set against the east-west one with which we're familiar.

That will be next week's work, and next week we'll also consider what the choir has been up to while all this swirling about occurred (the Tract), and what the choir hasn't been singing but might have sung (the

[4] Isaiah vi^1-7.

Alleluia; the Sequence). Then, at last, we'll consider the forms with which the Gospel is proclaimed. I'm not going to say much about the contents of the Gospel because that is too huge a question even for a long chapter on the use of the Bible and Mass. In any case we're about to launch into Lenten talks – during coffee hour, after High Mass, if I may plug them – on the nature of the Gospels. And enough is enough.