

## CREATION

### Ordination

In this retreat, I am going to do something which is, I suppose, unusual, but which will not, I hope, seem unduly far-fetched. I mean to take as my text for each meditation, or rather the subject which acts as a jumping-off point for each meditation, a story from the Old Testament. After all, St. Paul is our authority for saying that these old histories were written for our learning. I don't mean that I want to enter fully into Old Testament history; certainly I don't mean to examine the historical character of various incidents, or justify the rather unconventional behavior of various characters. I only want to use the Old Testament stories, more or less in their order, as a thread on which we can hang our meditations, as a rough outline of various spiritual situations, which will allow us to fill in the details in correspondence with our own needs. And, in most cases, I shall choose also some incident in the New Testament, and pit it side by side with the other, as type and anti-type; between the two, we ought by God's help to be able to see what warning it was, or what encouragement, that the Holy Ghost meant us to draw, when he inspired the sacred authors to write as they did.

And in this meditation I am using as my starting-point the Creation of Man, and the incident which follows on it with such pitiable rapidity, the Fall of Man. I would just remind you of the verse in which Adam's creation is described: "The Lord God formed man out of the slime of the earth, and breathed into his face the breath of life, and man became a living soul". Let us look, first of all, at that side of the picture which humiliates us, which puts us in our place. The Lord God formed man out of the slime of the earth – I don't think that means we are necessarily bound to regard the human race, so far as its bodily composition is concerned, as a special creation; after all, it does not appear to have been a creation *ex nihilo*. And certainly we are not meant to draw any conclusions about the exact chemical composition of the flesh we wear. What this verse does emphasize is the fact that man, on the one side of his nature, is a material being; is akin, not merely to beasts and birds, but to the lifeless clay under his feet. We are matter, we are potentiality; we change, as the years go past, every particle of the material tissue in our bodies; and when we die, we rot in the ground.

So it does not worry us, when angry materialists tell us that we all came from a monkey; "Monkey?" we say; "why, I was made out of the slime of the earth." And, for fear we should be in danger of forgetting our origin, the priest who celebrates the community Mass on Ash Wednesday is directed to say to us on that occasion, *Memento, homo, quia pulvis es, et in pulverem reverteris*. *Pulvis es*, we are slime of the earth, clay of God's fashioning; we did not make ourselves, he made us; his rights over us are absolute, to make, to break, to remake. *Pulvis es*, we are not like the angels, who, though created beings, are yet creatures of unalloyed and unconfined spirit; we have gross animal bodies, with gross animal needs. *Et in pulverem reverteris*, the day will come when this body of ours, so delicately fashioned, so exquisitely proportioned, will decay like dead leaves or fungus, and pass into the general stock-pot of inert

matter. *Et in pulverem reverteris*, the proudest of our civilizations may be buried, years hence, like Babylon or Carthage, beneath the drifting sand. No echo of vanity in our hearts but may be silenced by that terrible formula, *Pulvis es, et in pulverem reverteris*.

Yes, but there is the other side. The Lord God breathed in his face the breath of life. Not animal life merely; the animals had been created already. There is nothing to tell us how long the animals had been in existence in a manless world; nothing to tell us what other creatures, approximating to man in outward form, may have been created and allowed to die, cast aside like the broken moulds of a sculptor. But this is certain, that with the creation of man's intellectual soul the world, and not the world merely but the whole material universe, culminated and found a meaning. Without that, suns and stars and earth and sea were like a play without an audience. Creation lay there, a vast possibility of experience, with no human intelligence to experience it. Man came, harvesting his impressions by memory, reproducing them by imagination, correlating them by experience, tabulating them by abstraction; man came, with speech, and laughter, and wonder, and the power to organize a society and to hand down his hardly learned lessons to posterity. In all experience, there are two halves; there is the thing experienced and the mind which experiences it. And until a soul first looked out from human eyes, creation was only half finished. The play was there, the audience was wanting.

Our material body comes down to us from those first parents of ours. But the immaterial soul is different; when it was first created it dawned on the Universe like light on the primal darkness. And your immaterial soul was not handed down to you from any parents; it was created as specially as Adam's. Years ago there was a fresh creation of man's soul; a new fact came into existence, not owing its origin to anything that had gone before it – your soul. That same vast creative activity which long ago put the sun in the heavens and set the stars rolling on their courses was once more called into play, and the result was you. Cosmogony had repeated itself.

God chose to make you. It is true, he made the vast creation all around you. But you did not come into existence merely as a part of that creation, as a sort of added detail, an unnecessary flourish. The same Voice which spoke long ago and said, "Let there be light", spoke again, and said, "Let there be a human soul". You were, and are, as much God's individual creature, as much the object of his unique regard, as if he had never made anything else. Nothingness gave up its prey, and *you* began to exist.

Man, then, is utterly unique in creation. But he has also a place in creation. Why did God make him? The same text in Genesis gives you the answer, "There was not a man to till the earth". God wanted this planet, alone (as far as we know) among all the worlds he had created, to be taken in hand for him, managed for him, by a creature with a purposive will. His visible creation was to make, at last, a conscious response to creative love. Till then, the courses of nature and the beasts and the birds after their kind afforded to him their dumb chorus of praise by obeying, ceaselessly, the law of their own being. But now creation had found a voice and a self-consciousness; through man, this great chorus of praise was to become articulate. Man, we say,

is the priest of creation; composed of matter and spirit, he can offer to God, who is all Spirit, the gratitude of his material universe.

Centuries later – we have no notion how many centuries later – God breathed into the face of man once more. “With that, he breathed on them and said to them, Receive the Holy Spirit; when you forgive men’s sins, they are forgiven, when you hold them bound, they are held bound.” With one breath God created the whole human family; with one breath God created the whole Christian priesthood. As man is among the beasts, so the priest is amongst men; for we have called man the priest of creation. And at the same time, as man is a beast among the beasts, so the priest is a man amongst men; he is mad of the same stuff with his fellows; he shares their passions, their weaknesses, their disabilities. As man on his material side is only a beast, so the priest on his natural side is only a man; that is certain. And yet, when God breathes into the face of a priest, a new thing, in a sense, comes into being, just as when God breathed into the face of that clay image he had fashioned. It was a kind of second creation, when our Lord spoke those words in the Upper Room. It brought into the world a new set of powers, infinitely exceeding all that man had till then experienced, all that man could ever expect. It was a fresh dawn of life – supernatural life. Man could no more have evolved into a priest, than a beast could have evolved into man; it was a special creation, this time too.

You, to whom I am speaking, can look back upon your ordination day. And, as I said just now that the formation of your soul was a fresh repetition of the creative act, so I will say that in a sense your priesthood meant a repetition of Christ’s theandric action in the Cenacle. Every ordination means the creation of a fresh unit of spiritual force. And as God chose your soul, chose that it should exist, so he chose, before the foundation of the world, your priesthood; determined that you and not some other should stand at his altar and minister to his people. Once more, you have become the unique object of his regard. We may almost think of it, even, as a fresh Incarnation, when your hands become Christ’s hands, to heal and to hallow; your will, his will, your voice, his voice.

God then, had chosen you twice over – or rather, as it were, created you twice over; strictly speaking, you cannot *choose* a thing which does not yet exist. You have a double responsibility; as man, it is your duty to make a conscious response of love and gratitude towards God on behalf of his creation; as priest, it is your duty to make that response the first claim on your life. You make it not only on behalf of unintelligent things, but on behalf of your fellow-men, who have less leisure to spend in God’s service, less freedom from worldly anxieties. And at the same time you run a double risk of unfaithfulness. As man, you share with the beasts physical appetites which it is your duty (as it is not theirs) to govern by the rule of reason. As priest, you share with your fellow-men opportunities for self-realization and self-expression which it is your duty (as it is not theirs in the same degree) to curb by mortification. God made man as a kind of divine afterthought, when he had rested on the Sabbath day from his work of creation. Our Lord commissioned his first priests as a kind of divine afterthought, when he had rested on the

Sabbath day from his work of redemption. The peace of God, since you are a man, the peace of Christ, since you are a priest, must reign in your soul.

But now, we have not told the whole story. We have spoken of man's creation, of God's purpose in creating him, as if nothing had happened to shame that creation or to mar that purpose. We know that that is not so. We know that God made man in a garden, and man turned his garden into a wilderness. That perfect equipoise of his nature, in which his appetites were completely subdued to his reason, was overthrown fatally and permanently by one act of disobedience. Chaos succeeded to order; weeds of habit trialed over and choked the expected fruits of justice. Man fell, and as the result of his fall the predestined union of body and soul could no longer be a union of happiness and peace. The soul, created in God's image, finds itself an uneven match for its material partner. Man is born at war with himself.

It is difficult for us, perhaps, to look back on the memory of our first parents with a proper degree of natural piety. Most of us, I suppose, have felt tempted at one time or another to complain – if we may put it so crudely – that they should have been such fools; that they should have been chosen to be the subject of this unique experiment, and that the experiment should have ended so soon in failure. Fortified with the gift of innocence, no less that our Blessed Lady herself, sheltered by peaceful surroundings, privileged to enjoy the daily intimacy of God – what malice could have induced them to throw all this behind them, to prefer the gratification of a curiosity to the conditions of happiness which they had experienced?

I know, it does seem monstrous. And yet, if we look into our own hearts, I wonder if we shall find it in our hearts to throw a stone at them? It is quite true, of course, that we have no experience of their position; concupiscence is still with us, and even when we are at our best, reason cannot dominate *our* appetites steadily and effortlessly, as in those first days of human history. But, we ourselves, what do we make of the privileges, of the safeguards, with which Almighty God surrounds our lives? Man was created to live in a garden; shall we not say that the priest is ordained to live in a garden of spiritual isolation? Let us think of our enclosure in those terms in which our Lord rebuked, just before his Passion, the unfaithful husbandmen who were to put him to death; or in terms of that passage from Isaias from which he seems to have been quoting when he so addressed them. "My beloved had a vineyard on a hill in a fruitful place; and he fenced it in, and picked the stones out of it, and planted it with the choicest vines, and built a tower in the midst thereof, and set up a winepress therein, and he looked that it should bring forth grapes, and it brought forth wild grapes". Is it not the same with this garden of ours? He has fenced us in with the wall of obedience; he has picked out the stones of secular preoccupation that might interfere with our fruitfulness; he has given us recollection, to be a watch-tower against the first rumours of sin; he has given us the Holy Eucharist, a wine-press that is to be our daily instance and our chief care. How often, in the exercise of our priestly functions, we must needs take the Holy Name on our lips; how constantly our thoughts are turned towards the truths of religion! The touching reverence which the faithful display towards our sacred calling ought surely to put us on our mettle, remind us of what we are. And yet – he looked that it should bring

forth grapes, and it brought forth wild grapes; how stunted, how wizened, how soured are the fruits of devotion we have to show for it all!

Yes, if the first man tilled his garden badly, most of us priests, in this supernatural garden of ours, are not much different. The fall of a priest is like a second fall of man; even the daily imperfections of a priest are a sad witness to man's ingratitude. Do you remember that terribly impressive description of the way in which man first met his Creator after he had fallen? "And now they heard the voice of the Lord God, as he walked in his garden in the cool of the evening; whereupon Adam and his wife hid themselves in the garden among the trees. And the Lord God called to Adam; Where art thou? He asked. I heard thy voice, Adam said, in the garden, and I was afraid, because of my nakedness, so I hid myself." Yes, sin has come into the world, and with sin the sense of shame, and that sense of shame has completed the mischief which sin did. Instead of going out to find God, to fall at his feet and ask for pardon, man, already separated from God, would cut himself off still further, lest that accusing presence should brand more deeply the consciousness of his sin. We, born since the age of primal innocence, can form no picture to ourselves of the intimacy which this metaphor describes; how God, who is everywhere present, could walk in his garden at the afternoon air, or how man could hide himself from God, whose scrutiny is omniscient. But the essential truth of the picture is guaranteed to us by experience. Do not we too know what it is to have sinned against God, to be sought for by God, and to hide ourselves away from him, because we cannot bear the reproach of his presence?

I wonder if there is anything, really, which so disinclines us towards the habit of recollection as this consciousness of our own unworthiness to meet God? We are afraid that if we really came face to face with him the excuses which we make for ourselves would slip away from us; we should realize how much there is of deliberateness in the short-comings we put down to weakness, how many occasions of falling have been kept away from us because God spared us the temptation, not because we were at pains to avoid them; how much attachment we still have to the memories of sin, how much it still dominates our imagination, even when we have got rid of its stains in the confessional. If we really met him, we should stand naked in his sight; he would see us, and we should see ourselves, as we are; that is what frightens us. "Depart from me," cries St. Peter, "for I am a sinful man, O Lord"; there speaks the voice of humility; he does not really want our Lord to go away, or why does he crouch there, clinging to his feet? But with us, how often that cry is a voice of rebellion! Depart from me, because I know that I am really a sinful man, but I do not want to feel how sinful I am; it would make me uncomfortable, it would make me ashamed of myself; I might really have to break away from the attachments of sin. Depart from me, because I am a sinful man, and I want to go on being a sinful man, O Lord ...

The Lord God walked in Paradise at the afternoon air; there are, there must be, in our priesthood, moments of cool reflection which invite us to his presence – our preparation for Mass, our thanksgiving after Mass, and so on. "My child," he calls, "why dost thou hide thyself from me? I created thee, that there might be one more soul to offer its sacrifice of conscious love to myself. I chose thee out from amongst thy fellow-men to dedicate thee to my service; thou didst lie

prostrate before my altar, like a dead thing; and I came and breathed into thee once again the breath of life, that thou mightiest till the garden of my spiritual creation. I know thy weakness, and the clay whereof thou art fashioned; I come to seek thee, and thou hidest thyself away from me; hidest thyself among the trees of the garden, in the love of creatures, in the preoccupations of daily tasks, that thou mayest not see my face, and blush to stand in my presence. Want of recollection leading to sin, and sin leading to want of recollection – where will this end? Come back to me, in the afternoon air of recollection; come to me, for I seek thee, and thou art mine.”