THE FLOOD

The Use of Creatures

I have spoken of man's creation and his fall; it is natural to pass on from that to an incident which follows at a very short interval in the sacred writings, the Flood. It has been pointed out that almost every people retains the memory, or has preserved the legend, of a great deluge at some remote period, which made a clean sweep of living creation and involved, as it were, a fresh start. Whatever else the Flood was or did, it seems quite certain that the memory of it is branded on our race-consciousness; the details of it may be dimly remembered, like a child's nightmare, but the tradition is there – that the world God had made needed to be remade, for all practical purposes, after being buried under a flood.

What is the lesson which this tradition teaches us? Why, first and foremost the lesson of our conservation. We might have been tempted to suppose, indeed, people often have supposed, that God simply created the world and then lost interest in it; left it to go its own way, according to some automatic principle of control which he had devised for it, without interfering in its destinies further, or busying himself about its welfare. Well, we all know that such a conception is wholly unsatisfactory as a matter of philosophy; that it is not enough for God to have created us; he must needs hold us in being by a continuous exercise of his power, lest we should slip back into the nothingness from which we came.

And, for fear that we might be oblivious of the daily benefit, we have a practical demonstration of it lodged deep, as I say, in the consciousness of our race. We cannot forget this continuous exercise of God's power, because there was a time, it seems, at which his creation on this planet was actually threatened with destruction, and only saved from destruction by a special disposition of his Almighty will.

We *are* like that, you know; we become so accustomed to our daily blessings that we begin to take them for granted, begin to regard them as a matter of course; until, for a moment, they are withdrawn from us. Nobody, I suppose, who has lived through a war, can ever feel quite the same afterwards about the bread on his breakfast table or the coal in his coal-scuttle. We no longer take it for granted; there it is, every day, but it might not have been there; would not have been there, but for that great conspiracy of human enterprise which has won the bread from the cornfield and the coal from the mine. So it is with this story of the Flood; we are to remember, as we take our paths in safety through a world so admirably designed for our use, that it might have been otherwise, but for God's protecting care. So the psalm says about the waters of the sea: "thou has set them their bounds, which they shall not pass, neither turn again to cover the earth." The sea rises higher, higher round the cliffs; what is to stop it? And then the moment comes, not of our contriving, when it begins to sink again. Every day, at high tide, God saves us all from a drowning.

It would be, I suppose, a continual subject for grateful meditation, if it did not baffle our finite imaginations so, this daily miracle of conservation. Our Lord said of the sparrows that not one of them falls to the ground without our heavenly Father. A sparrow flying against a telegraph wire and dropping dead, all according to God's plan – it hardly bears thinking of. Yet think of it we must, if we are to understand what we are and what God is. We sprang from nothing; and, as a man must sink beneath the waves if the protecting planks sink from underneath him, so we would return in a moment to the nothing from which we came, if it were not for God's protecting hand held out to preserve us. And God's creatures, which surround us in this material existence of ours, are a perpetual witness to that doctrine. If the sun refused us its light and heat, if the ground no longer produced its fruits, if all the animals in the world were destroyed by pestilence, what would become of us men, or rather of our material bodies? We are not alone in God's creation; our life is bound up with the existence of other material things.

We ought, then, to take a friendly interest in our fellow-creatures; and more particularly, I suppose, because they are nearest to us in the scale of being, in those other sentient creatures, our fellow-citizens in the animal kingdom. Children do; they attach a kind of personal significance to their pets, to the birds, even to animals at the Zoological Gardens. We were all fellow-passengers, long ago, in Noe's Ark, and we can never be quite strangers to one another after that cruise. I want to consider, in this meditation, what use we are to make of God's creatures, so as to attain our supernatural end. And, before we say anything else, we must begin with this friendly feeling towards our fellow-creatures; we must remember that they are meant to be there; they have undergone a heavenly scrutiny and been declared very good. And whatever else in ascetic theology is right or wrong, there can be no question that the attitude of St. Francis was a right attitude; his child-like acceptance of all created things, and the welcome he extended to them as his brothers and sisters.

On the other hand, the spiritual authors are not slow to remind us that creatures exist for our use. What other meaning, what other value their existence may possess, we cannot know and we are not meant to know. But St. Ignatius is certainly right when he tells us that everything else in the world was created for the sake of man, to help him to achieve the end of his own being. Bleakly put, perhaps, and unimaginative from the literary point of view; but there is no getting over the fact that man, as an intellectual being, stands in a quite unique relation to all other created things; it is his eyes that give them their colour, his ear that lends them their music, his thought that can organize them as a system and comprehend them as a whole. If he is priest of creation, he is lord of creation too.

It is a point which hardly needs establishing, that our use of creatures in the widest sense, that is, of all the material blessings God gives us, food, sleep, warmth, exercise, work, recreation, leisure, amusements, friendships, and so on, is of the greatest possible importance to our spiritual lives. For, after all, we have got to use creatures, and we have got to decide how to use them; even a hermit on the top of a pillar had to decide whether he is to stand facing the wind or with his back to it. We are making use of God's material gifts all day, and then night comes and we

make use of his gift of sleep; there is no sense in being proud about those things and pretending not to notice them. And on the other hand, we cannot afford to use these gifts recklessly, without regard to our supernatural end; Noe himself would tell us that. Our use of creatures has got to be an art.

Let us, then, by way of preserving the comparison, think of man's life as a voyage by ship. He has a supernatural harbor to reach, and the accomplishment of that journey is his principal care, a care beside which all others shrink into insignificance. Yet he has got to take supplies on board; his fellow-creatures are to be his fellow-passengers on the journey. It is evident that the captain of a ship must apportion his supplies with a view to sailing efficiently; he cannot afford to overload his ship with an indefinite quantity. So it is with us; prudence must determine how much use of creatures we are to allow ourselves. In a fallen world like ours, we have to fear the waves and storms which we shall encounter; we cannot simply gratify our own caprice in the matter. Let us take stock, then, of the supplies we mean to carry.

We are all accustomed to pictures of the animals going into the Ark which represent them as going two and two, one male and one female of each kind. That was not, as a matter of fact, the direction given to Noe. He was told to preserve two males and two females for every sort of unclean beast, seven males and seven females for the clean beasts. "Clean" and "unclean", as we know, in the vocabulary of the Mosaic Law, meant those beasts which are and those which are not suitable for human food. And the creatures which were meant for food were preserved, you see, on a more generous scale than the others. In the same way, the spiritual writers, when they talk about our use of creatures, make a division between those whose use is necessary to us and those whose use we may chose or refuse, chose at one time and refuse at another, as we will. Let us call them our necessary and our unnecessary gratifications. It is not very easy and it is not in the last resort very important to be able to draw an *exact* distinction between the two. Either kind of gratification is in itself perfectly innocent; we are not talking here of the *misuse* of creatures. And either kind of gratification can conduce towards our supernatural end; as we shall see, even our unnecessary gratifications have a real place in life. But it is convenient to accept that division as a rough division, and to treat of the two classes separately.

First, then, of our necessary gratifications, food, drink, rest, sleep, clothing, lodging, and so on. The things you cannot do without, although you may vary the quantity or quality of them. How are we going to regulate these? Richard of St. Victor gives us the formula, *Accipe, redde, time*; accept them, return thanks for them, be frightened of them.

Accipe; we are to accept God's gifts. Let us go to the New Testament to find our companion picture. The religious toy of a Protestant child is or used to be the Noah's Ark. The religious toy of a Catholic child – if the description may be used without irreverence – is the Christmas crib. It is not difficult to recognize the analogy. Mankind sunk under a flood of sin; only here, only at Bethlehem, only on the breast of the Virgin Mother, is a refuge to be found. That manger is a little ark on which rides the world's salvation. God is here, among his creatures. And, as if to

remind us that all creatures have their share in the happiness of that holy birth, the Christmas crib is not complete without a cow and a donkey, to make up for all the animals which the Protestant child marshals, two by two, ready to go into the ark. It is rather interesting to ask people who are not very well acquainted with the text of Scripture, which of the gospels it is that mentions the cow and the donkey. Of course they are not really there at all, in the gospels. But we feel sure they must have been there; the picture, as I say, is not complete without them. God is here, among his creatures, making use of his creatures. The cow is there, to remind us that our Lord made use of human food. The donkey is there, ready to carry the Holy Child on his flight into Egypt; he will accept from his creatures, even from his dumb creatures, food and protection. It is not wonderful that we should be allowed to use God's creatures, when, Incarnate as man, he used them himself.

He did use, though he could have dispensed with, human food. He did allow his bodily frame to grow weary, and to be refreshed by sleep. He did take human precautions to save himself from the malice of his enemies, when his time was not yet come. He would even join in, and encourage, innocent amusement, as when he sat down with the guests at Cana of Galilee. And at the very last, though he had refused the wine mingled with myrrh that would have deadened the pain of his crucifixion, he would still prove his humanity, and acknowledge his dependence on human aid, by accepting the merciful draft which the soldier offered him on a sponge. We must not be afraid of following such a model.

But remember, the word *accipe* is not simply a permission, it is a command. It is not that we *may* accept God's gifts, we *must* accept them. And in the first place, that rules out fastidiousness. We mustn't deny ourselves the proper amount of food, for example, because the particular kind of food given to us is not the kind we fancy; *accipe*, says the heavenly Child, wrapped in swaddling-clothes and lying in a manger. And again, we must not deprive ourselves of what is good for us simply through pride or through carelessness about our own health. Sleep, for example – I am afraid there are many more people in the world who deprive themselves of sleep because they boast of not needing it, or because they are too idle to go to bed, than people who deprive themselves of sleep as a means of mortification. *Accipe*, say the homeless Son of Man, and lies down to take his rest in the storm-tossed ship. And above all we have got to accept the kindnesses offered to us by our fellow-men, for their sakes if not for our own. What is it, that curious kind of pride which always prompts us to say No, when people offer us a helping hand or an umbrella, just because we do not want to feel that we are under an obligation to them? *Accipe*, says the World's Victim, and welcomes from a cross the rough kindness of his executioner.

Accipe; and then *redde*, return thanks for it. I suppose there is no Christian duty which is so universally neglected as the duty of giving thanks to God. We think a child terribly rude if it does not say thank you when we have passed something across the table; but how do we treat Almighty God? What is the proportion between the prayers that go up for a fine day, any day in the year, and the thanksgivings offered when a fine day comes? The root of all that trouble, you know, is our want of simplicity. We do need so much more of the spirit of St. Francis. We shall

never learn to be properly grateful for God's gifts until we learn, like St. Francis, to treat them all as surprise gifts; to regard the sun when it rises as a kind of birthday present, the shade of the trees as a treat specially arranged for our benefit. We will take God's blessings for granted, as I was saying just now, because we have never really had to do without them. To the day of his death, Noe never saw a bit of scenery that he liked better than the top of Ararat. And if we find sailors simple people, I fancy it is because they spend such a large part of their life at sea that everything on land is a treat to them. For sensational, obvious deliverances we do sometimes remember to be grateful; though we read that when our Lord cleansed ten lepers only ten per cent came back to give glory to God. But it is the small, daily benefits we are so bad at recognizing. *Redde*, give thanks to God – there is nothing else that you can do about it. Everything you offer him is already his. He gives us everything, and asks in return only that piece of politeness which we expect of children in the nursery; and nearly always he doesn't get it.

Accipe, redde, time; we have to be afraid, even of our necessary gratifications. Our ship has a Plimsoll line somewhere; we cannot gratify our appetites carelessly without the risk of self-indulgence; how easy it is, for example, to be self-indulgent about an extra five minutes of lying in bed! We must watch ourselves, because every excess in our necessary appetites is an imperfection; we must watch ourselves, to make sure that we are not becoming too much attached to this comfort or that – what would happen, for example, if health demanded that we should give up this or that? If obedience demanded that we should give up this or that? Even in such matters we have to be afraid; afraid lest we should lose the liberty of the will. And perhaps when God never seems to deny us any of the comforts of daily life, when we never have a sleepless night or an attack of liver, we should be afraid in another way; is it because we love him so little that God gives us so little to bear? We mustn't be scrupulous about that; but it is one way of keeping humility.

And now for our unnecessary gratifications; what a lot of them there are! Our friendships, harmless but not necessary friendships; the company of our fellow-men, the amenities of life, our enjoyment, for example, of scenery or music; our amusements – yes, we need *some*, but are they all quite necessary? – our self-cultivation (reading, for example); they are all extras, aren't they? And when we read the lives of the saints, it makes our hair stand on end to think what they did. Well, there is one thought which may help to console us when we feel like that; it comes from Père Tissot, I fancy – you may have a machine which runs well, but would run all the better for having a drop of oil in it. And innocent relaxations, of very various kinds, do really conduce to our supernatural end, because they act as the drop of oil which makes us run smoothly. St. John the Evangelist did keep his tame partridge, and St. Charles Borromeo took snuff; and most of us, I think, would be far worse-tempered and less useful people than we are if we gave up all our relaxations, unless at the same time we managed to become very much holier people.

Let us content ourselves, then, with one very simple principle by which we can test the position in our lives of any unnecessary gratification which seems to figure rather prominently. Let us

simply ask, Does it get in the way of my prayers? We have, of course, certain prayers and times of prayer which bind us by obligation; but we have, all of us, extra time which we like to spend over our own devotions – a visit to the Blessed Sacrament, certain pieties before we go to bed, and so on. Our relaxations may interfere with such devotions in four ways; by leaving us too little time, too little strength, too little attention or too little relish for them. Let us use these devotions, then, as our Plimsoll line. Does this game, this hobby, this form of self-cultivation cut down, often, the time I mean to give to God? Does this little indulgence lower my general state of health, so that when I pray I am too weak to pray properly? Does this strong interest in my life, this harmless ambition, constantly recur to my thoughts, so as to make me habitually distracted in my prayer? Does this friendship, this taste which I cultivate, diminish my love of prayer, make me want to be doing something else all the time? If so, watch it. I don't say, cut it ruthlessly out of your life, probably it is only a want of balance, a want of proportion in your life, which needs to be adjusted. But in retreat it is well to take good stock of our position, for fear that the routine of habit should run away with us.

And for the rest, if we will be faithful to our prayers, and above all to the habit of recollection, I think God will let us know when he wants us to make some little sacrifice for him. Either he will take away from us, by force, something that we cherished; or he will make us understand that he wants us to do without it, and we shall give it up, almost unconsciously, into his hands.

From 'A Retreat For Priests', Ronald Knox