CHAPTER EIGHT

Jeremias and the God of the Heart

Amos was the first to announce that the judgment of Yahweh, far from sparing Israel, would make very special demands upon it. Isaias, with that superior realism which is one of the most striking characteristics of his religious personality, perceived in the logic of the historic events in which he saw his people engaged a first and imminent realization of this threat. He went so far as to name the instrument of the divine wrath: it would be the Assyro-Babylonian power against which Juda was to revolt, after having in vain tried to flatter it. Jeremias was to be the immediate witness of this realization and to aid Israel to endure the terrible ordeal. It was thanks to him, thanks to his message, that this ordeal, in actual fact, was not the pure and simple destruction of Israel, but the purification of this "remnant" already promised by Amos and, as we have just seen, precisely defined by Isaias.

Jeremias' preaching immediately succeeds Isaias', as Osee's that of Amos. And as Osee in many respects brings a necessary counterbalance to the statements of Amos yet without minimizing any of them, so does Jeremias for Isaias.

Isaias, once and for all, raised the figure of Yahweh to a religious transcendence which no confusion, no misunderstanding could henceforth dim in the consciousness of Israel. There is no further danger that the God Who spoke to him might be absorbed into abstract justice; He is the reality par excellence beside Whom...
kind of exegesis sometimes has been inclined, one of the first religious individualists. For him as for all the prophets, it is not to one man in isolation that God speaks; it is always to the people. But what is true is that, thanks to him, the people of God begin to be distinguished from all other peoples in that it is no longer a mass gathered together but a communion of persons: as was soon to be said, a church, the Church, in which a God Who is more and more clearly a personal God makes Himself the bond between persons more and more conscious of their own personalities.

When Jeremias appeared, the judgments of God were ready to fall on Israel. This could have been, this should have been the occasion of a decisive progress in the conscience of the people, a progress for which it had been the work of Isaias to prepare the "remnant." But this occasion coincided with the greatest temptation to despair: Yahweh Who allowed Judah to be conquered, its inhabitants to be scattered or led away into captivity, Jerusalem to be sacked, and His very temple to be profaned—had He not abandoned His own, destroyed with His own hands the Covenant that He once made, forgotten and denied His promises?

However hard the message with which Jeremias was charged: unceasingly to remind those who were going to suffer, who were beginning to suffer, who were near to death, that they were suffering for their sins—this message remains the only possible support for hope. If it is because they had sinned that they were suffering, if it was to chastise them that God’s justice has delivered them to their enemies, if this chastisement, as Jeremias states following Isaias, was not simply to destroy, but to heal them, even at the price of a most painful operation—was it not, then, the assurance that “the arm of the Lord is not shortened,” that God loved His people, and that His love had in no way become powerless?

Certainly, it is not easy to make men who are suffering understand that if God strikes them, He does so precisely because He loves them. Does not Jeremias enable us to receive this lesson only because he shows the living image of it in himself? The same phenomenon is reproduced in him as earlier in Osee. It is in his own life, in his own heart, that the prophet furnishes the best illustration of what he proclaimed, concerning Yahweh and the people. Jeremias is the bearer of words of threatening and condemnation. He adhered to them with his whole soul. But how striking is the sorrow which these words give him, the anguish that he finds in them in the presence of those whom he must wound so deeply—being himself wounded far more deeply than any of them! At the moment of the chastisement, at the moment in which he announces it and even, perhaps, provokes it by his curse, he cannot help interceding once again.

If it is true that our iniquities testify against us, Yahweh, act nonetheless, for the sake of your name! It is true that our infidelities are many, we have sinned against you. But you, the hope of Israel, its deliverer in times of distress, why will you be as a stranger in this land, a wanderer who pitches his tent for the night? Why will you be as a wandering man, a warrior powerless to save?

Yet do you dwell in our midst, O Yahweh. Your name is invoked upon us, forsake us not!

Doubtless, for his inexorable mission, Jeremias has to accept a life cut off from men, as it were inhuman; he has no wife, no children, he takes no part in funerals nor in feasts. So he gives the impression of being an unfeeling wall, and he must do so. But he is the first to suffer from this inevitable attitude:

Cursed be the day on which I was born: let not the day in which my mother bore me, be blessed... Why came I out of the womb to see pain and sorrow, and to spend my days in confusion? But there is another aspect to the suffering of the prophet, directly opposed to the preceding. This aspect shows us better
than anything else how much, in spite of appearances, far from having abandoned the people which he is scourging, he dwells near them, gone with them in their distress, the first to bleed from their wounds. This is found in the fact that Jeremias himself, more profoundly than any of the members of the people being punished, feels himself abandoned by God. That a prayer such as this which we are about to read could have come to be considered as the Word of God, did this not do more than any demonstration to lead the people toward the idea that God Himself suffered with them, in them?

You know it well, Yahweh! Cans for me, avenge me on those who persecute me; do not take me away, in letting them act: know that it is for you that I suffer reproach! As soon as your words were given me, I devoured them; they became my joy, the delight of my heart. . . .

Why (then) is my suffering endless, my wound always inflamed, refusing to be healed? Should you be to me like a deceitful stream, like waters no one can count on? 8

To appreciate the tragic quality of this complaint, of this reproach which the prophet addresses to God, we must remember that he put the same image into the mouth of Yahweh lamenting over the people:

They have forsaken me, the fountain of living water, and have dug for themselves broken cisterns, muddy cisterns that hold no water. 9

Do we not seem to perceive here as it were a heralding echo of the cry "My God, My God, why hast thou forsaken me?" of Jesus on the Cross? Here in truth the tragedy of the situation of the dying Christ is already in seed: abandonment by men combined with abandonment by God. . . .

Thus Jeremias, by his bold expression of the interior struggles of his soul, aided Israel to understand that God had not abandoned them in delivering them to the ordeal. What is more, he helped

them efficaciously to find the divine presence in the heart of the ordeal which is the fundamental message of his contemporary and successor, Ezechiel. He is the first, indeed, to express the invincible assurance that fidelity to God in trials is worth much more, is worth infinitely more than the cessation of the trial by forgetfulness of God.

You have deceived me, Yahweh, and I have let myself be deceived; you have seized me and have been the stronger, I am a laughing-stock day after day, all men scoff at me.

For every time that I speak, I cry out, I announce violence and devastation, and the word of Yahweh is a reproach to me, cause of derision day after day.

I said: "I will mention him no more! I will speak in his name no longer. . . ."

But in my heart was a devouring fire, enclosed in my bones: I strove to hold it in, and I could not. 10

Only a man whom God has led by such experiences could, then, in the name of God, demand of man and promise to man what Jeremias demands of him and promises him, as the whole of religion, the whole of the new Covenant which He wishes to establish with His people, of the new and eternal Covenant soon to be proclaimed emphatically by Ezechiel. What Yahweh demands of man is his heart. And what He promises him is a new heart.

Jeremias, indeed, who never ceased to reproach the people of Yahweh for their sins and to show them that the calamities falling upon them were their punishment, reproached the people above all for the hardness of their hearts—and we have seen how far removed he is himself from such hardness, and how, in him, Yahweh manifests that He is also far from it.

By his mouth, God says to the children of Israel:

". . . . I said to them: "Hear my voice"
and I will be your God, and you shall be my people; walk in the ways that I will show you, so that you may be happy. But they did not hear, they did not listen, and they have walked according to their own counsel, according to the hardening of their wicked hearts. And when the punishment has come, the prophet says:

Why is the land destroyed, burned up like the desert where no man may go? Yahweh says: "It is because they have forsaken my law, that I put before them, because they have not heard my voice not followed it, but have walked according to the obstinacy of their heart." or again:

I have warned them unceasingly, saying: "Hear my voice." But they have neither heard nor listened; each of them has walked according to the whim of his own wicked heart.

On the contrary, what Yahweh expects of the people is what Jeremias calls the circumcision of the heart, the purification of the heart. For He is the God who "searches the heart and proves the reins." It must be understood that here we come to a decisive moment. We are at the extreme limit of the Old Covenant. Nothing more is needed in order to reach the New: we shall, moreover, hear the prophet announce it in a moment. It is not only his daring interiorization of religion which causes us to speak in this way. It is the creative reality of a truly supernatural creation, which is already outlined. The prophet, indeed, is more aware than anyone else of the enormous transformation presupposed by the change which he demands: this interior change, this metamorphosis of the heart.

Can an Ethiopian change the color of his skin, the leopard cause his spots to vanish?

Nur more can you do good, you who are used to doing evil.

What the prophet asks is impossible to human eyes, and he knows it. The experience of his preaching, after that of Isaias, establishes the tragic impossibility of human nature's becoming converted and at last practising the fidelity which God asks: the truly interior perfection of which the God of Holiness offers the model to His people. But, in spite of this experience, hope is not denied by the prophet. At the height of the siege, on the eve of the catastrophe which Jeremias knows better than anyone else to be imminent, he nonetheless carries out a symbolic action, the pledge of an inexplicable but invincible assurance of better days to come. He buys a field in his native countryside from one of his cousins in Anathoth. For, he says himself: "Houses, and fields, and vineyards shall be bought again in this land." Yet nobody is more convinced than he is of the necessity, if the restoration is to come about, of the conversion which he himself has said is beyond human powers.

How to escape from the dilemma? God alone can do it, but God will do it. What man, by himself, cannot bring about, God will bring about. God will re-create the heart of man according to His own heart. Here is the great promise which closes that book of desolation which is the book of Jeremias. And, once again, the prophet so clearly sees the greatness of the promise he is bringing from God, that he is the first to call it what it will be in fact: a New Covenant.

I will give them a heart that knows me, aware that I am Yahweh: they shall be my people and I will be their God, for they shall return to me with their whole heart.

Or again:

Behold the days are coming (oracle of Yahweh), When I will make with the house of Israel
and with the house of Juda a new covenant, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers, on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, the covenant that they have broken, although I was their spouse. But here is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel, after those days (oracle of Yahweh): I will put my law within them, and I will write it in their heart, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.\textsuperscript{21} and Ez 36 (9.12B)

We might say that the Gospel will bring nothing further than the realization of this promise: the New Testament, the New Covenant established by Jesus will be, and will be only the last vision of the prophet become an accomplished fact.

\textsuperscript{21} 31:31-32, also 32:33-40.