Introduction

Can the bones of Luther's sermons live again? Not all of them certainly. There are too many. A modern German rendering of Luther's sermons on the Gospels makes five huge volumes of nearly three thousand pages. Besides, some of the bones are vestigial and of interest only to historical specialists. If Luther is to be widely read in our day, he will have to be excerpted. That which is selected must have an element of the universal, yet, if it is completely denuded of its temporal vestments, it will be only naked spirit. Great preaching is that which relates the timeless to time, and it cannot be transferred to another time simply by divesting it of all reference to its own era. For that reason, the effort has been made here to select from Luther's sermons passages that deal not only with man as man but also with man as German. No equivalents have been substituted for the names of coins—heller, florin, and gulden. References remain to the Reichstag, the Kaiser, and to such places as Wittenberg, Erfurt, and the Joachimstal. Thus Luther prompts us not to repeat his preaching but to imitate it by doing for our time what he did for his.

We should bear in mind, incidentally, that the problem of translating into the terms of another age applies not only to Luther but to the Gospels themselves. They were written years ago against a Palestinian background of simple, rural communities occupied with sowing, reaping, fishing, tanning, and carrying water from the well. Luther's setting was actually closer to that of the Gospels than is our own.

Take for example two sayings from the Sermon on the Mount—

"Ye are the light of the world" and "Ye are the salt of the earth." The first referring to light is universal if light be simply light. At this point there has been no change in a million years. But if we go on and read, "Which of you takes a lamp?" then we are in the age that preceded the incandescent bulb. Again, "Ye are the salt of the earth." Salt as a seasoning is universal, but salt as a preservative has been superseded by refrigeration. If one would convey the full sense of these sayings, whether in the Gospels or in Luther, one has to explain how salt formerly was used!

Luther is removed from us not only by the outward aspects of his culture but even more profoundly by a state of mind. He belonged to the Middle Ages in his envelopment by the supernatural. Heaven then lay close to earth. Angels, saints, and demons hovered over the abodes of men. To whom among us would it ever have occurred, as it did to Luther, that the Virgin Mary, when the boy Jesus was lost, should have reproached herself with the thought that because of her negligence God had taken his Son back to heaven and had decided not to save the world after all? Luther, indeed, protested against the childishness of regarding God's throne as if it were set up in a cardboard heaven. Yet, he had about him much of the spirit of his own little Hans and Magdalene whose simplicity he envied.

In other respects, however, he broke with the tradition of the Middle Ages and stands therefore nearer to us or rather we to him by reason of his break. He dropped the lush profusion of the legendary and adhered strictly to the text of the Gospels. The age of Gothic drew as heavily from the apocryphal as from the canonical gospels, in which, for example, we are told only that Wise Men came from the East. Nothing is said as to their number or rank. The early church began to make them into kings and to make their number three. Not till the tenth century did the artists give them crowns. The names Balthasar, Caspar, and Melchior cannot be traced back farther than the sixth century, and not until the fourteenth was one of them given the features of a Negro. By then the three had come to be regarded as representatives of the three races of mankind, the European, the Asiatic, and the African. Luther discarded all of these accretions for himself, though others might believe them if

they liked. The legends of the Virgin Mary were similarly rejected, save for one little detail from the apocryphal gospels that Mary was fourteen years of age when confided to Joseph.

The allegory so dear to the Middle Ages, Luther almost entirely left behind. One could hardly expect him not to see in the Good Samaritan the figure of Christ, but in the case of turning water into wine he did not in medieval fashion equate the water with the Old Testament and the wine with the New, though he did have an allegory of his own in that the water stood for the tribulations and the wine for the joys of marriage.

The typology, which from the days of the early church linked the Old Testament and the New, was not repudiated as such by Luther. He too viewed history as a symphony of redemption in which certain themes recurred with variations from the creation of the world until their resolution in Christ. The suffering of Abel foreshadowed the suffering of Christ. The readiness of Isaac to be sacrificed was a foretaste of the sacrifice of Christ. But the stereotyped crudities of the illuminated manuscripts and the block books of the late Middle Ages disappeared in Luther. In those works a scene from the Gospels was flanked by two typological anticipations from the Old Testament. Christ going down into the tomb had on either side Joseph being let down into the well and Jonah being swallowed by the whale. The resurrection was flanked by Jonah emerging from the whale but not by Joseph being lifted out of the pit. Instead, there was Samson carrying off the gates of the city as Christ broke down the gates of hell. A whole series of such triptychs had become conventional. Luther instead treated the Old Testament stories with a graphic human realism and only in the profundities of human experience discovered the patterns of God's dealings with humankind.

The same treatment was applied to the New Testament. With what poignancy Luther imagined the distress of Mary when her son was lost! The quaint fancy that she thought God might have taken him back to heaven does not obscure for us all the anguish of uncertainty and all the self-recrimination with which she reproached herself. Then the joy that follows pain and the unfathomable paradox that God must first cast down before he can exalt! When Luther meditates on the love of God, on the utter self-emptying of Christ,

on the inexpressible humility of the Lord of life, on the power of God's grace to strike a man dead and make him alive, to rout Satan, swallow death, and confer eternal life, how he makes one tremble for fright and quake for joy!

The following material has been taken entirely from Luther's sermons and lectures on the Gospels. In the selection of the excerpts an eye has been had to the piquant, the poignant, and the profound, and at the same time to the comprehensive, both as to the Gospels and as to Luther's ideas. Certainly all the essential themes of the Evangelists are here. If there is little of the eschatological, it is because Luther's interest did not center here, and there is no treatment of the transfiguration, the Gadarene swine, and the withered fig tree because on these themes Luther was not at his best. His own primary emphases are recurrent: the utter marvel of God's love; the salvation of man solely through divine grace and human faith; the futility of man's endeavor to gain a claim upon God and the sheer wonder of the forgiveness of sins; the insistence that though sins be forgiven, sin does not cease and yet that man should not acquiesce in his imperfection and cease to strive.

Much of Luther's preaching was polemical and here arises a doubt whether such portions should be repeated lest they revive the confessional animosities of the sixteenth century. But if they be left out, we shall miss the measure of the man. He lived in the midst of strife. For twenty-five years he was in imminent danger of the stake and was saved only because the emperor was too busy fighting the French, the Turk, and the pope to come to Germany and enforce the Edict of Worms against Luther. Therefore when he talked about the narrow gate, the little flock, the bearing of the cross, his words had a stark realism, intelligible fully only to those who in our day have felt in their flesh the calamities of this century.

The polemic refers not always to the Church of Rome but also to the radicals in Luther's own circle whose attack shook him even more because completely unexpected. Mention in the following sermons will be found to Carlstadt, whom Luther called a Spiritualist because he regarded the physical and sensory as inappropriate for the communication of the divine, which comes only through the

Spirit. For that reason, Carlstadt rejected images and church music and denied any physical presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper. Luther's reply as to the latter point well appears in the excerpts. One rejoinder requires a comment. Luther found a confirmation of his view in that at the baptism of Jesus the presence of the Spirit did not suffice to proclaim the Lamb of God, but John had to point to him with his physical finger. Now the Gospel says nothing about the finger. Luther must have had in mind a picture like that of Grünewald in which John points with a highly elongated finger.

As for Luther on the Lord's Supper, since the subject was so controverted alike with the Catholics and the Spiritualists, Luther had occasion to deal with it frequently and with varying emphases. For that reason it has seemed best to set up the illustrative excerpts in a topical arrangement but to attach to each its date.

Mention also is made of the Anabaptists, who held that since baptism rests on faith and babies do not have faith, babies should not be baptized. Luther never managed that one very well. In our excerpt he has an amazing argument from the case of the unborn John the Baptist, who leaped in the womb when Mary greeted his mother, Elizabeth, thus showing his responsiveness to the Spirit even prior to birth.

Another figure mentioned is Thomas Müntzer, an inflammatory enthusiast, who summoned the elect to usher in the day of the Lord by the slaughter of the ungodly. Luther believed that the minister should never take the sword in defense of the gospel but only the magistrate in the keeping of the peace. The distinction of the two kingdoms, or administrations—the spiritual and the civil—is a constant theme.

The woodcuts accompanying the text are taken from an epitome of Luther's Bible published by his onetime amanuensis Veit Dietrich in 1562 at Frankfurt with the title *Summaria.* These cuts mark a departure in the history of gospel iconography. The artist signed himself "VS," standing for Virgil Solis. He was a resident of Nürnberg, born in 1514, who died in his forty-eighth year in 1562. His output was so vast that some have been tempted to try to advance the date of his death in order to get it all in. The German encyclopedia of artists (*Künstler Lexikon*) says that his best work

consisted in his Biblical illustrations. These were his finest and his most German production. He is not to be compared with Dürer and Cranach, but he is by no means contemptible in craftsmanship and imagination.

The significance of the cuts appears to me to lie in the introduction of a new style of gospel iconography. The validation of this statement requires that one go back to the thirteenth century as a point of departure. With reference to this period, Emile Mâle has observed[1] that the themes in the life of Christ illustrated in the manuscripts and cathedrals were taken from the beginning and the end, from the Nativity and the Passion, whereas with rare exceptions there was no portrayal of the events and sayings of the public ministry. The reason, he surmised, was to be found in the liturgy. The two great festivals of the church year were Christmas and Easter. Christmas called for the graphic representation of the Annunciation, visitation, the birth, the presentation in the Temple, the flight into Egypt, and the massacre of the innocents. The Christmas cycle included Epiphany, on which was celebrated the arrival of the three kings on Twelfth-night, as well as the baptism of Jesus and the miracle at Cana. These last two went back to very primitive Christian beliefs and practices. In the early church the Adoptionists believed the baptism to have constituted the birth of the man Jesus as the Son of God when the Spirit entered into him at the baptism. When this belief was rejected, the continued celebration of the baptism as well as the birth on January 6 was justified on the assumption that Jesus was baptized exactly on his thirtieth birthday. The commemoration of the miracle at Cana had its origin in a Christian counter to the Epiphany of Dionysus who on January 6 turned water into wine. When this motive was forgotten the practice was again justified on the assumption that the miracle took place on the thirty-first birthday.

The Easter cycle might reach forward to include the ascension and even Pentecost and backward to embrace Lent, which called for the commemoration of the temptation for forty days and commonly also included the transfiguration.

1. Emile Mâle, *The Gothic Image* (Harper & Brothers, 1958, from the French of 1913), p. 178.

These, then, were the only events in the life of Christ to be illustrated. What Mâle has observed for the West in the thirteenth century, Millet has shown to be true also in the East for the fourteenth through the sixteenth centuries.[2] Dürer likewise was in the same tradition, for he covered the Nativity in his *Marienleben* and did two series of woodcuts on the Passion but nothing on the public ministry of Christ.

The pre-Lutheran—printed German Bibles, seventeen in number, exhibit a much greater parsimony of illustration. There were two types. The style for the first was set by the Pflanzmann Bible of 1470, which was followed by the two editions of Sorg in 1477 and 1480, the two by Zainer in 1473 and 1477, and by the edition of Sensenschmidt in 1472. In these Bibles there is a large woodcut of the Creation, but thereafter the only illustrations are the figures of men for the prophets, evangelists, and apostles. The life of Christ is not illustrated at all.

The second type was set by the Cologne Bible of 1480, to be followed by the Koburger in 1483, Strassburg 1485, Schönspurger 1487, Othmar 1507 and 1518, and Trutebul 1520. The modern reader, who has not access to the originals,[3] can study the types in the facsimile edition of the Strassburg Bible in the edition of Paul Ahnne. The woodcuts were not simply reprinted[4] from one edition to the next, but the themes were the same. The Old Testament had eighty-seven illustrations, including the Creation, Fall, Cain and Abel, the sacrifice of Isaac, and so on. The New Testament had twelve, chiefly for the Apocalypse. The Gospels had only one illustration each, the sign of the Evangelist plus accessory scenes exhibiting some point distinctive of the particular Gospel. Matthew was accompanied by the ancestors of Jesus, Mark by the resurrection, Luke by the Nativity, and John by the Trinity. And that was all.

This type persisted throughout all the editions of Luther's Bible printed during his lifetime. All these woodcuts have been

2. G. Millet, "Recherches sur l'iconographie de l'Évangile aux XIV^{e}, XV^{e} et XVI^{e} siècles" (Paris 1916, reprint 1960), *Bibl. des Ec. franç. d'Athènes et de Rome,* fasc. 109.
3. Richard Muther, Die ältesten deutschen Bilder-Bibeln (München, 1883).
4. Paul Ahnne, "La Bible de Jean Grüninger 1485," *Les Livres illustrés Strasbourgeois de XV' siècle* (Strasbourg, 1952).

reproduced in a single volume by Schramm. The Revelation was the only book to be illustrated in the New Testament. The Gospels had the signs of the Evangelists[5] but without the accompanying scenes. In one instance Matthew was Luther himself and Luke, Melanchthon. Only in one edition was there a single woodcut on anything else in the life of Christ, namely, once a cut of the good Samaritan.

One cannot but wonder whether this reduction had any theological significance, because such a distribution of the illustrations meant an emphasis on the Creation, the Fall, and the judgment, since the weight of the illustrating was for Genesis and The Revelation. The Passion dropped out entirely and with it the resurrection. One cannot suppose that this was due to any diminution of interest because the Passion continued to be as central for the late Middle Ages as for the earlier centuries, and certainly for Luther it was the very core. As already noted Dürer devoted two series of woodcuts to the theme. Could it be that the Passionals, independently of the Bible, provided such a profusion of material that the Biblical accounts could leave the word to speak without the aid of the pictorial?

At any rate, whatever the explanation, this is the fact. But when we come to Virgil Solis' woodcuts in Veit Dietrich's epitome of Luther's Bible in 1562, this whole tradition is broken. He has, in all, seventy-six illustrations of the entire life of Christ: for Matthew, thirty-five; for Mark, two; for Luke, twenty; and for John, nineteen. Here are the themes in the order of their occurrence:

Matthew: The Evangelist, the Wise Men, slaughter of the innocents, baptism, temptation, call of the first disciples, the higher righteousness, "no man can serve two masters," storm at sea, dinner with a Pharisee, Jairus' daughter, John in prison, discourse on cross-bearing, the sower, the tares, Herodias, miracle of the loaves, Canaanite woman, Peter's confession, "suffer the little children," the kingdom is like a householder, the mother of the Zebedee, Palm Sunday, cleansing the Temple, marriage banquet, conspiracy of the Pharisees, abomination of desolation, Gethsemane, scourging, Pilate, Herod, *via crucis,* crucifixion, burial, empty tomb.

5. Albert Schramm, "Luther und die Bibel," *Die Illustrationen der Lutherbibel* (1923).