

this was nonsense and that he must come *with* his organ and play it for us. Never will I forget the way that man's face changed. When he realised that I was serious, his eyes lit up and he seemed to sit straighter and taller. From being useless, he was suddenly wanted again, his sense of dignity restored. Two days later he came to us and the day after that the administrator went home with him to collect the organ in the hospice van. It was only a week or so that he was well enough to play for us, but those days could have been a lifetime for the joy they brought him. It is a rare happiness and privilege for us to provide a home and family for people such as this and reward enough when they mutter in disbelief, 'I never knew places like this existed.'

## A Time of the Olive Press

*It is a time of fear, of apprehension,  
a fear of pain and disfigurement,  
a fear of hateful eyes and deeds of violence,  
a fear of the power of those who want  
to quarantine, to imprison,  
to tattoo with identity marks  
(shades of Auschwitz),  
a fear of the death dealing.  
There is a tightening,  
a pressure on the chest,  
a desire for air, for space  
beyond the narrow constricted gate.  
There is cold fear in time of tribulation,  
a time of the olive press, the wine press,  
the crushing of grapes,  
and no guarantee of a good vintage.*

Jim Cotter  
from *Healing More or Less*

It happens from time to time that people ask me if I will stay in Plymouth or go somewhere else, perhaps even return to Chile. I usually smile and say I don't really know; but I have no immediate plans to move on. It is difficult to explain that working day by day with the dying makes one acutely conscious that life is a gift and one cannot count on receiving it tomorrow, let alone in a year's time. At a more personal level, I have a deep sense of having been chosen to do this work and I remain ever open to the possibility that I might 'burnout' or be sent somewhere else. Like many people, I wonder very much if the present AIDS epidemic will change my life, if we at the hospice will be drawn into caring for a quite different group of dying people. This chapter is a

reflection; a viewpoint from someone waiting in the wings, not knowing when, or even if, their name will be called.

It is May 1987, and I sit at my desk watching the ships on Plymouth Sound. The supply ship lies patiently at anchor by the breakwater, dull and grey in the afternoon light, awaiting the transforming darkness when she will be lit up like an ocean liner, casting magical reflections on the black water. A white yacht, blue spinnaker filled with wind, races across the bow of a shabby rust-coloured tanker while the pleasure cruiser takes yet another load of sightseers up the Hamoaze to get a glimpse of the warships lying quietly at anchor, waiting for refit. The dockyard and its ships are an integral part of Plymouth, providing work for its menfolk; and for us at the hospice a steady trickle of 'mesos' – mesotheliomas, the lethal asbestos-related lung cancers, which catch a man unawares, twenty or thirty years after he has been exposed to the dust. And somewhere, scattered secretly throughout the city, are thirty men whose blood tests show they are infected with the AIDS virus. What are *they* doing, I wonder, this grey Saturday afternoon? Are they milling around the city centre with the other lads, happily anonymous – or sitting in bed-sits, waiting, wondering, terrified and alone? I remember Jim Cotter's poem, written for an evening of meditation in San Francisco and my heart goes out to the lonely and afraid:

There is cold fear in a time of tribulation,  
a time of the olive press, the wine press,  
the crushing of grapes,  
and no guarantee of a good vintage.

This chapter, like all the others, can only be written from where I sit, this day, in the spring of 1987. It will be a little out of date next week and surely more distant when this book is published. And yet it must be written, must have its own validity as a stage on a journey into an unknown tomorrow. For me, the future with AIDS is a particularly unknown quantity. With thirty men HIV positive today, it is predicted there will be two or three who will be dying of AIDS in two years time. Perhaps though, there will be many more and we shall need a special hospice, and a team of people to care for them. I do not know yet if I will be involved, but as a doctor specialising in terminal care, it seems likely.

What will it be like, I wonder? How will we cope? Will it bring a whole new series of demands that we long to live up to but cannot? I too, am a little afraid, not of the idea of contagion – that is no longer a nightmare – but at the idea of being caught up in a tidal wave of anguish that will roll me over and over until I am disorientated and gasping for breath.

Again rises from the heart of suffering the ancient cry,  
O God, why? O God, how long?  
And the cry is met with silence.  
Dare I look steadily at Christ,  
at God involved in the isolation and despair,  
willing to be contaminated, to be infected,  
loving faithfully and in patient endurance,  
until all that is being created reaches its final destiny,  
in glory, joy and love?  
And yet, why *this* degree of pain?  
Why these ever-repeated battles,  
with a swathe cut through a generation?  
Horrible sacrifice – for what?  
Why? Why?

Jim Cotter  
from *Healing More or Less*

The *Brittany* ferry ploughs a grey furrow across the Sound, scattering the sailing boats like so many barnyard chickens. The door in its broad stern is tightly shut, grim-lipped in defiance against the waves and the memory of the *Herald of Free Enterprise* in which so many died in the cold waters off Zeebrugge. Why? why? we all cried, as we sat glued to radio and television, aghast at the waste of life and the thought that 'there but for the grace of God go I'. The anguished 'why' of the dying is never more poignant than in the young, and those who love them. How will we cope with this when it is compounded by fear of contagion, social ostracism and guilt? The young dying of cancer frequently become honoured in their community; people rally round, money is raised in pubs and schools for treatment in America or at least a holiday in Majorca. But AIDS. Who will come and sit with *these* patients? Who will stand in church and pray for them by name? Who will hold their frightened hands or cradle in

their arms a frail sore-covered body racked with the sobs of intolerable grief? Jim Cotter writes:

AIDS shows up clearly what our attitudes are.  
It is forcing us to choose,  
and the degree of our health is revealed by our response.

Do we punish those who suffer, compounding their suffering by condemnation and social ostracism, withdrawal of insurance cover and graffiti on the wall? Or do we go out and meet them in their heartache and distress? Do we quote passages from the story of Sodom and Gomorrah to substantiate our unconscious fears – or remember that Jesus was the man who touched lepers and refused to condemn the woman taken in adultery? How tempting it is to oversimplify the moral issues involved, rather than being open to a culture different from our own. How tempting too, to agree that compulsory testing and quarantine are the answer, forgetting that the sick are beloved of God and are our brothers.

It seems to me that the AIDS epidemic is offering the single largest and most clear-cut challenge to the Christian community of this decade, if not this century. The demands are made, the gauntlet thrown down at the whole of society but it is we Christians who *claim* to follow the God made man who loved and healed the unclean. The gospels are unequivocal in their teaching:

Be compassionate as your Father is compassionate. Do not judge and you will not be judged yourselves; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned yourselves; grant pardon and you will be pardoned. Give, and there will be gifts for you: a full measure, pressed down, shaken together, and running over, will be poured into your lap; because the amount you measure out is the amount you will be given back. (Luke 6:36–38)

In many places, Christians are prominent in the community's response to the distress of AIDS sufferers, but in others they are open in their condemnation. Some priests and pastors are quick to condemn the secular 'play safe' approach to prevention, but give no exhortation from the pulpit to understand, to befriend, to forgive.

How easy it is to be selective in our understanding of the gospels, to get hung up on sexual morality and lose sight of

the message of compassion and forgiveness. Even easier is the subconscious decision that this is someone else's problem and no concern of ours, so that we find ourselves hurrying busily by on the other side of the road. For me, for my team at the hospice, this time of decision is yet to come. Already we are saying openly among ourselves that we will take 'AIDS cases' – but in the same breath we mutter, 'What will the other patients say?' How will the ordinary patients and their families cope with the knowledge that the patient down the corridor has AIDS? They need not know, people say: confidentiality must be maintained. But will that really be possible, especially if many members of the gay community are involved? Perhaps it will be easier to care for people at home: but how will the ladies from the meals-on-wheels service manage, and how will the district nurse be greeted when she comes from the AIDS patient to the mother with a new baby? Of course we do not know how things will be: but we foresee much heartache and difficulty.

Then of course there is the inevitable gulf between theory and reality. Sometimes it happens that we do not have the emotional resources to cope with very difficult, wounded patients. It is difficult to go on loving someone who is manipulating or who is cruel to other patients. So often it is the very poor one longs to love but cannot quite manage to. There have been too many hurts to establish a good and trusting relationship in a short time and one can only do one's best, always acutely conscious of a sense of failure and what might have been. Such situations are enormously draining – yet good for the humility! We get so much affirmation that we are in danger of believing that we are indeed angels in disguise.

Meanwhile we wait, with the rest of England, with an eye to San Francisco, Zaire and the reports from our own capital cities. Perhaps the cure will be found before the epidemic hits Plymouth, but if it is not, we pray that we may not be found wanting.

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## Disciples Alone

*If you live alone,  
whose feet will you wash?*

St Basil the Great  
Fourth century

In the early days of my Christian searching there appeared to be two basic options: to be married or to become a member of a religious community. No one spoke to me of a third option: that I might simply remain as I was, a single woman. Even now in these more lay-conscious times it seems that little has been worked out in the way of spirituality for those who either consciously choose not to marry or find that the single life has somehow chosen them. I am not talking here specifically of those who feel called to a life of celibacy but to the wider body of individuals who find themselves, for what ever reason, alone.

People live alone for many reasons. Some make a positive decision for a life of celibacy and take public or private vows. Some are divorced, some widowed or deserted and others find that marriage just never came their way or that they did not particularly want to share their lives with another person. Whatever the reason for their single status such people, men or women, must find a *modus vivendi* that works for them, in which they can be well and happy and fruitful. In this chapter I would like to explore some of my own experience of discipleship lived alone in the hope that it may be relevant for others.

I did not set out to live alone, indeed for many years, like most young women, I assumed that I would marry and live happily ever after. Then, in my teens, I felt a calling to the religious life and for the next twenty years or so I played a sort of hide and seek game with what I thought of as the Hound of Heaven. Eventually, in my early forties, I made

my 'fiat' and with a massive leap of faith entered a monastic community of women. Eighteen months later I was again in the world, psychologically quite battered and very clear that I had no vocation to be a nun. It was not that I had 'lost' my vocation through carelessness or infidelity, just that religious life in community was not for me. So what then? What do you do when the Carthusian monk inside you has tried to give away everything to follow Christ – and then crawled back bleeding and in tears? What do you do with the story of Jesus and the rich young man which has inspired and tormented you for most of your lifetime? Do you decide that the call to sell all is directed at someone else – or do you try and live it out wherever you happen to be, clinging to the call of the radical gospel with a grim determination and bleeding broken fingernails?

When I was on my way out of the convent in 1980 I spent a couple of nights at Stanbrook Abbey, a large Benedictine monastery where I know a number of the nuns. The then abbess, a tall and regal lady, came up to me in the refectory and, towering above me, said in her best abbatial tones, 'Sheila, *what* have you been doing?' Nonplussed, I muttered that I had been trying to fit myself like a square peg into a round hole. She paused, thoughtful, for a moment and then, with devastating simplicity, said, 'Why don't you just be Sheila?'

I was too battered and sick at heart then to laugh or realise the depth of her wisdom but I have spent the last seven years doing just that and I commend it as a rule of life for all who find themselves exhausted and bewildered in their search to do God's will. As another monastic friend put it to me, 'the great moment of take-off comes when we stop trying to do God's will and allow his will to be done in us'.

But just being Sheila was not something I learned to do overnight – nor will you learn to be Mary or Michael or whoever in the twinkling of an eye. Discovering who one is and how one is meant to live and be seems to take a lifetime of trial and error, laughter and tears. In those early post-convent days I still wanted to be a cross between Joan of Arc, Michael Hollings and Helder Camara and I set out to live my life accordingly. For a little while I tried to be a hermit, living in a caravan on my brother's farm but it was not long

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