

neurotic is often worse than the finding of a genuine pathology! If I am outspoken in my criticism of the way doctors and nurses handle patients, it must be remembered that I speak from the inside, and that I am often as guilty as my colleagues of causing distress; I, like them, am caught up in a complex pattern of behaviour which is conditioned by years of tradition and a very genuine shortage of human and material resources. One of my colleagues sees fifty women with breast cancer in a single clinic. Even with two or three doctors helping him, it is impossible that he should see each patient fully clothed. It is likewise impossible that he should ask her how she feels about the disease, how her husband is reacting to her mutilation, how she feels in her spirits. It is no wonder that recent research shows that many cases of severe anxiety, depression and psychological disturbance are being missed in women with breast cancer. The doctors are so busy attending to the physical side of their patient's disease that they pay scant attention to the psychological issues. As one gynaecologist said to me recently about sexual dysfunction: 'that's a whole Pandora's box I'd rather not open'.

Sick people are not called 'patients' for nothing. It is as well for us carers that they will put up with endless pain and indignity and still be grateful to us for doing our best. Again and again it comes home to me that we professionals are a frail and wounded race; like G. K. Chesterton in his *Hymn for the Church Militant*, we can sing:

Great God, that bowest sky and star,
Bow down our towering thoughts to thee,
And grant us in a faltering war
The firm feet of humility.

Lord, we that snatch the swords of flame,
Lord, we that cry about thy ear,
We too are weak with pride and shame,
We too are as our foe-men are.

Yea we are mad as they are mad,
Yea we are blind as they are blind,
Yea we are very sick and sad
Who bring good news to all mankind.

Holy Thursday

When he had washed their feet and put on his clothes again Jesus went back to the table. 'Do you understand' he said 'what I have done to you? You call me Master and Lord, and rightly; so I am. If I, then, the Lord and Master, have washed your feet, you should wash each other's feet. I have given you an example so that you may copy what I have done to you.' (John 13:12-15)

I spent Easter at L'Arche, a community of handicapped people and their helpers, which lies in the French village of Trosly Breuil on the edge of the forest outside Compiègne. The community, which began in 1964 with two handicapped men and a gentle French Canadian called Jean Vanier, is now home to two hundred men and women, handicapped and helpers, who live together in *foyers*, ordinary houses, in groups of anything from ten to twenty. As an outsider with little French I often find it difficult to distinguish between carers and handicapped, for the boundaries are frequently blurred. Perhaps the most important thing that L'Arche has taught me is that labels are of little consequence, for we are all wounded, handicapped in some way or another. Having long feared to come to L'Arche because I thought I could not cope with the mentally handicapped, I find myself absurdly at home, recognising for the first time that I too am handicapped, hurt and maimed from birth and by circumstance and that this is an acceptable way of being a person.

On Holy Thursday we celebrated the liturgy of the institution of the Eucharist and washing of the feet. I have a deep love of these Holy Week services and for many years have spent the Easter Triduum at Ampleforth, a Benedictine monastery in the North of England where the monks open their doors to share their prayer with a large number of lay people like me. On Holy Thursday night the abbot and a

number of other priests celebrate mass and as a part of the liturgy they wash the feet of twelve men from the congregation. This washing is a rather stylised affair, with the abbot, girded in a towel, pouring water from a silver jug on a clean pink foot held over a large silver bowl. It is a symbolic act, a ritualised re-enactment of an old story: that Jesus, the night before he was betrayed, rose from the supper table, tied a towel around his waist and washed the feet of his disciples. When he had finished he returned to the table and asked his disciples, 'Do you understand what I have done to you?' One can imagine them looking blankly at him and then at each other. What on earth was he doing, he, their rabbi and master, humbling himself to touch their dirty feet, caked in the dust of the Palestine roads? How did he speak to them, I wonder? Gently, or with an undertone of urgency and mild exasperation? This was his last time with them, his last chance to instil in them the principles of a way of living so different from the norm that they still could not grasp it. 'Look,' he said, 'you call me Master and Lord, and rightly for that's what I am. So if I, your Lord and Master have washed *your* feet, so *you* should wash one another's feet. Do you see? I have given you an example so that you can copy what I have done to you.'

That night in L'Arche, in the *foyer* they call Le Val Fleury, I witnessed a re-enactment of this scene that left me spellbound and gave me new insights into Jesus' last, most urgent commandment – that we must love one another just as he had loved us. The evening went on like this: at first we all gathered for mass, a glorious motley of several hundred people, men, women and children, the handicapped and the outwardly whole, in a large meeting room. There were readings, hymns and a flute solo, woven into the celebration of the Eucharist, the memorial of Jesus' last supper with his friends. As always at L'Arche the service was long but everyone seemed happy, even toddlers who roamed freely around the church as whim and courage took them. Then came the supper in our *foyer* with forty to fifty people gathered around a long table. There were Luisa from Italy, two Marias from Austria, and a Professor of Geophysics from Paris who had been born in Vietnam. There was Jean, who began it all, gentle, shabby and full of laughter, and Barbara, his assistant, tiny with shining eyes and mind and wit razor

sharp, flitting from language to language as she spoke to the people around her. My neighbour Ted was from Toronto, a Jesuit student studying theology in Paris, drawn, like myself, by the magic of this unwieldy family.

After the meal Jean spoke a little of the meaning behind our celebration: of Abraham, the first Jew who had taken his family into an unknown land, a prototype of all who find themselves answering a call into the unknown; and of Moses who led the people of Israel from the slavery of Egypt into the Promised Land. God loved the people of Israel so much that he rescued them and they, in their turn, were to remember their liberation by celebrating the Passover meal; by remembering the story and telling it to their children. And now we were remembering another Passover meal – the last one that Jesus shared with his disciples before he gave himself up for them. Greater love hath no person, man or woman, than to give themselves for the love of another. This is the magic and mystery of our humanity that one man will sacrifice himself for another, in the gift of a life spent in service or in one incredible gesture of love, like that of Maximilian Kolbe, the Polish priest who took the place of a condemned man in the death chambers of Auschwitz. Individually and together we recalled the gifts of the past year. It was hard for me to understand the muttered words of the native French speakers, but now and again I caught the more stilted phrases of foreigners like myself, for whom the gift of the love in L'Arche had brought a new dimension to their lives. The halting words of the carers, trying to express what God had meant to them this year, was balanced by the simplicity of the handicapped for whom a gift or trip had been a precious sign that they were loved.

When all had had their turn to speak we moved to another room and arranged ourselves in a great circle for the washing of the feet. A carer and a handicapped man sat in the centre of the group, waiting with towel and basin for the ceremony to begin. Then it was the turn of Xavier, the professor from Paris, to speak. Had we noticed, he asked, that St John had omitted the passage of the Eucharist from his account of the Last Supper? The other gospels related how Jesus had taken bread and broken it and given it to his disciples, telling them that this was his body, given for them. But not John. Instead he told how Jesus had taken a bowl of water and a towel and

washed his disciples' feet. He had replaced one story with another. Why? Because they conveyed the same message: that life was about sacrifice, about service, and the love of God must be cashed out in love of neighbour. Greater love hath no man than he who pours out his life for another. And life is not just blood given once and for all, it is time and energy, tears and laughter, poured out hourly, daily, over a lifetime.

Impatiently, Michel waited, poised to wash the feet of Patrick, the man seated in front of him. I'm not sure how much he understood of what the professor said. His eyes were fixed on the water and he held the towel in readiness. At last he was allowed to begin. No silver jug and basin here, and certainly no symbolic or ritual ablution! This was the real thing: a washing up bowl, full of warm soapy water with Patrick's foot plunged firmly in. Lovingly, Michel soaped it, up and down, round the heel and then gently between each toe. At last, he was satisfied, and lifted it out onto his lap to dry. Gently he patted the clean skin and separated the toes, drying each one individually. Then the other foot was soaped, rinsed and dried with equal care. I sat fascinated. Here was the carer being tended by his charge. Here was Michel, the simpleton, showing us how to love. It was not just the gentleness, but the rapt concentration and attention to detail. He was showing us in his own way that people are precious, that the human body is wondrously beautiful, to be honoured and handled with care. I was reminded of times I had seen nurses at the hospice, washing an unconscious patient with such infinite tenderness that it breaks my heart. This manner of handling the body is for some an instinctive thing, an expression of a love that possesses the carer, driving out natural squeamishness or distaste and replacing it with an innate sense of the holiness of people, of their infinite worth.

I find in this unselfconscious love a very special revelation of God. It struck me the first time I visited L'Arche and sat up in the gallery at mass watching the helpers with their charges. The natural tenderness with which they handled the profoundly handicapped touched me deeply. There was something so moving in the contact between the youth and beauty of these carers and the deformed bodies and damaged intellects of their charges. They sat together on a rug at the foot of the altar, arms entwined, stroking the hair and whispering gently in the ear of the person they were holding.

I thought of the majority of the profoundly handicapped, hidden in the wards of long stay hospitals and of the way they are shunned by those of us who are strong and whole. Their very existence poses questions about God and life and human values that we find difficult to answer. And here were these young helpers, so beautiful and full of promise spending their love and vitality upon these broken creatures, with their necks awry, their eyes rolling and their tongues monstrously protruding from their open mouths. As I watched, I remembered anew this fragment of Sidney Carter's poem which speaks so powerfully of my own work:

Over this dead loss to society
You pour your precious ointment.
You wash the feet
that will not walk tomorrow.
Call the bluff and laugh
at the fat and clock-faced gravity
of our economy.

I have a deep sense of the wholeness of the liturgy at L'Arche – a liturgy in which everyone has their place. The presence of the handicapped at the foot of the altar is somehow so right and fitting. They are there at the heart of the liturgy, given pride of place at the table. It is difficult to write without sounding sentimental – perhaps I am – but I find myself so much more at home here, with this motley of people and little children wandering about, than I do at my own parish church. There is a deep sense of reverence in the congregation that has nothing to do with arriving on time or kneeling up straight in a pew. Mothers with tiny babies wander in and out, clumsy handicapped men lurch unselfconsciously to their feet and go out for a while and then return, physically disturbing their neighbours, yet somehow not breaking the silence. Many of the less severely handicapped act as acolytes and they too merge into the liturgy. There is a sense of acceptance of all that makes each person comfortable and therefore not disturbed by behaviour which would be unbearably intrusive in another environment. Truly, this is for me, as Eliot would say, a place where worship is valid.

You are not here to verify,
Instruct yourself, or inform curiosity

Or carry report. You are here to kneel
Where prayer has been valid. And prayer is more
Than an order of words, the conscious occupation
Of the praying mind, or the sound of the voice praying.

T. S. Eliot
Little Gidding

Our foot-washing liturgy took over an hour, but rarely have I been so prayerful and at home among strangers. Each person washed the feet of his neighbour; when the water got a bit grey and the towel sodden, a fresh bowl and a dry towel were brought. It was a joy to watch the handicapped for they brought simplicity and seriousness to an act which otherwise might have been banal. From time to time there was laughter which flowed as naturally in the silence as the babies gurgling in church. It was a good time to watch, to pray and to reflect. At one stage in the proceedings I had a strange sense of the beauty of these people. It was not that they were pretty or that they glowed or were illuminated, I just *saw* them as beautiful – not different. They just *looked* beautiful to me, their faces full of concentration, gentleness and laughter. I felt as though I was seeing them through God's eyes, and knew briefly how it was that he loves them – each one so different and so precious.

I am conscious that I write rather emotionally about a group of ordinary people who live, love and hate just as the rest of us do. I believe however, that sometimes one is given a glimpse of a deeper truth about life and people – an eternal truth which lies beyond the immediate. It is not so much that the handicapped and their helpers are special and holy but that their way of life makes the uniqueness and holiness which is innate in humans easier for me to see. I know well that the hospice where I work provides the same experience of revelation for many people. Most of the time I am so close to it that I am blind to the power of what we are doing: a foot-washing of a different sort.

I remember well the night I was given the Sidney Carter poem that I quoted earlier:

No revolution will come in time
to alter this man's life

except the one surprise
of being loved.

I had been asked to speak to a group of volunteers from the Home Care service in a nearby town. I was so exhausted by pressures of work and a heavy schedule of lectures that I could not face the hour's drive and asked my secretary to take me. We had been invited to supper by the lady involved with the volunteers, and as we sat at the table her husband asked me if I had been 'healed' of my experience in prison. Finding the question bewildering and intrusive, I muttered something a bit sharp in reply whereupon his wife asked me brightly what had been my worst experience in prison! My secretary, sensing that I was about to explode, either in tears or rage, managed to avert the conversation so there was no ugly scene. Later in the evening when the talk was over my hostess gave me a copy of the poem – a passage which has given me greater theological insight into my work than anything else I have seen written.

The next day one of my patients, Frank, a lovely north countryman suddenly went off his legs – became paralysed from the waist down because the cancer in his kidney had invaded his spine. Over the next few days we explained to him that he would not walk again, and tried to help him grapple with the terrifying loss of his strength, independence and privacy. As I drove around the city and walked down the hospital corridors, I found myself saying again and again, 'You wash the feet that will not walk tomorrow', and realised that this was *my* job, my calling. I, who have little patience with the demented and no love for tiny babies, have a special gift of warmth and understanding for those whose time is running out. I, who hate parties and find it nigh impossible to make small talk know instinctively what to say and do for a gentle Manchester builder who is facing the humiliation of incontinence and the fear of death.

For everything, there is a season, for every task, someone is given the tools.

Precious Spikenard

And then took Mary a pound of ointment of Spikenard very costly, and anointed the feet of Jesus, and wiped his feet with her hair.
(John 12:3)

The next day was Good Friday and as I sat at the breakfast table in the guest house at L'Arche there was the usual kaleidoscope of people from all over the world, passing through this strange crossroads for a day, a weekend or perhaps a year. Over coffee and French bread one meets professors and tramps, nuns and dentists, missionaries and an endless variety of young people from Sweden, Japan, England – it seems from every nation under heaven. That morning's brief encounter was with Claudette, a French Canadian from Montreal; Alexandra, a French university student; and Jonathan, a young Irishman working in a house for down and outs in Paris. He had a particular vitality and charm, laughing and clowning in the sunshine of the spring morning and I thought to myself, here it is again, that razor edged sign of God in our times: the young pouring their lives out in lavish abandon on the useless members of society. What on earth, I thought, is this young Irishman doing working with tramps in Paris? What, one might equally ask, is a twenty-two year old Irish girl I know doing working in the latest L'Arche foundation in Bethany, near Jerusalem? She wrote to me the other day, sitting on the bathroom floor waiting for a handicapped Arab woman to move her bowels. What, in God's name is Gaby doing there?

That's it, of course, she is there in God's name. That is the only way to make sense of it. It is a particular form of Christian madness that seeks out the broken ones, the insane, the handicapped and the dying and places before their astonished eyes a banquet normally reserved for the whole and

the productive. One could, of course, look for all manner of psychological motives behind this kind of giving. These young people are perhaps rebelling against over-protective parents, or searching desperately for a love they were denied by mothers who had themselves been damaged somewhere along the way. Like the doctors and the nurses, priests and social workers, they number among the ranks of Chesterton's 'sick and sad, who bring good news to all mankind'. Oh, of course we are all sick and sad, wounded somewhere in the heart or psyche. Perhaps we are all sublimating some great sexual drive or yearning for parental love. But the *facts* are that the blind see, the lame walk and the poor have the good news preached to them, and where these things are happening we find the kingdom: God is somehow revealed as present among his people.

It has taken me a long time to understand this. At first I saw my own acts of service and those of others as out of the ordinary – special and holy. Then, as I explored my motives and drives, I realised that much of what I had interpreted as a direct call from God, his hand in my life, could equally well be explained in psychological terms: the result of childhood experiences and relations with my parents. I saw that my great religious calling was, in fact, a product of childhood repression and yearning for love and affirmation. At first this insight was enormously painful and for a while I was moved to reject all the religious structures and language that had so long upheld me. Then after a few months I rediscovered my faith at a different, perhaps deeper level. I found that the knowledge of the workings of my emotions and unconscious was totally compatible with belief in God and the theories of call and covenant with which I had been raised. Perhaps it was analogous to the move one makes from the childhood fundamentalist understanding of the creation story to the synthesis of evolution theories and belief in an all powerful creator God. At first one finds the mat withdrawn sharply from under one's feet and all props removed, but after a while one learns to live with mystery and unknowing. I can now accept that I am driven by my unconscious – but I see my wounded psyche as somehow part of *my* story, which in its turn is part of the salvation history of all those whose lives I touch.

Touch. Perhaps that is the key word to understanding the