

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

way God works. Over the years my life has been touched by so many different men and women. There was Sister Mary Teresa, the chemistry teacher on whom I had a schoolgirl crush and who influenced me to feel called to be a nun. A by-product of this first flowering of childhood love was the fact that to please her I drove myself to learn five years chemistry in two, and so got a place at university that I might otherwise never had managed! And so it has been over the years. A succession of heroes and falling-in-love have led me from a comfortable middle-class family with no overt social conscience into the world of missionaries and martyrs, hospices and homes for the handicapped.

Perhaps if I had not been hurt as a child, I would now be happily married with sons and daughters at university or art school. But no – for various reasons I find myself alone, at home on the margins of the professional world and the institutional church, pouring my precious ointment over those who, in economic terms, are quite useless.

I find in the story of the anointing at Bethany a marvellous image of the work of hospices or communities like L'Arche. The story goes that Jesus was at a dinner party in the house of one Simon the leper. It was six days before the Passover and he was in hiding from the Jews who were out to get him. As they sat at the table a woman came in with a box of precious ointment. The King James Bible speaks of an alabaster jar of *precious spikenard*, a fragrant ointment used to anoint the bodies of the dead. All the gospel accounts stress that it could have been sold for three hundred denarii – nearly a year's wages or the price of a car. And yet this foolish woman came in and broke the jar and poured it over Jesus' feet. What on earth did she think she was doing – making a spectacle of herself and Jesus, wasting money in a lavish public expression of love? As the scent of the ointment filled the house the people muttered, 'how dare she; that stuff could have been sold and the money given to the poor'. But Jesus told them not to upset her, that the story of her outrageous gesture of love would be told whenever his story was related for future generations.

I find it fascinating to speculate what was behind this act. John tells us that the woman was in fact Martha's sister Mary, the woman who had sat adoringly at his feet as he preached. It is clear from the story of the raising of Lazarus

from the dead that Mary of Bethany and Jesus were close friends – perhaps she was even the Mary of Magdala, from whom he had 'cast out seven devils'. Be that as it may, one can imagine that Mary knew what was on Jesus' mind – that he was sad and afraid as the days of his confrontation with the Jews approached. He knew quite well that he would be arrested and killed and yet he was driven to go forward when he might well have run away. Perhaps he sat at that party making polite conversation or carrying on with his teaching work – but inwardly sick and afraid of what was to come. Mary's extravagant gesture must have been her way of saying to him, 'I love you. I know what is going on inside you. I can't stop it happening, but I want you to know that I care and to take the memory of my love with you, to comfort you in the dark days ahead.' Perhaps this episode gave Jesus the strength he needed, at that moment, to carry on with his mission.

In the same way the love that we pour out on the dying or the handicapped says many things. It is an expression of *our* need to serve, to love, however flawed our motives. To the person cared for it is the gesture that makes the pain bearable, life somehow worth living:

No revolution will come in time
to alter this man's life
except the one surprise
of being loved.

Sidney Carter

But the most important message is the unspoken one to the world at large: that this 'dead loss to society', this dying woman or handicapped man, is infinitely precious. If I as a doctor spend an hour of my clinic time talking to a woman who has only a few weeks to live, I am making a clear statement of her worth. I am giving her time that could have been spent with people who will get better, who will be able to contribute once again to the common good. I am affirming the worth of one individual person in a world in which the individual is at risk of being submerged or valued only for his strength, intellect or beauty. It is a prophetic statement about the unique value of the human person, irrespective of age, social class or productivity. It is an affirmation that people matter just *because they are people*, because God made

them and loves them, just as they are, not because they are good or witty or physically beautiful.

It seems to me that hospices and places like L'Arche have unconsciously taken on a prophetic role in the church and in society at large. They evangelise in the most effective way – unconsciously – by living a faith that is credible to unbelievers. I saw this clearly in Chile, where the institutionalised church which had become identified with the landowners had long since lost credibility with the ordinary people, especially the young. It was only when church people left the security of their institutions and risked comfort, health and even life for the poor and the oppressed that they proclaimed the gospel in a language that could be understood. Of course the great paradox is that those who make a radical option for the poor often become a threat to their fellow Christians. This is particularly the case where there is a massive gulf between the rich and the poor. The poor are inevitably a threat to the rich, either because they make them feel guilty or because they think that they will try to take away their possessions. It is the same with the handicapped and the dying. We isolate the handicapped on the pretext that they will disturb the peace – when the reality is that their presence disturbs our desire for the beautiful. We isolate our dying on the pretext that they want peace – when the reality is that their presence disturbs our sense of omnipotence and immortality.

When Christians make radical options for the economically poor they enter into solidarity with them. They see the world and economic structures through their eyes: that is, they become aware of a society in which ten per cent of the people own ninety per cent of the resources of a world in which a small group of people eat their fill of fine food and drink while the rest starve. When I first went to Chile I made friends with the people from the Embassy and from the rich landowner classes. I enjoyed their company, their houses and their cuisine, but later on, when I became captive to the warmth and laughter of the missionaries living in the shanty towns, I was no longer at ease in the old dispensation: I could no longer make light conversation at the dinner parties of the rich and I ceased to be welcome at their table. It is so easy for those who work with the poor to be labelled Marxists – when their allegiance is to the stripped bones of the Christian gospel. It is more comfortable for the members of a wealthy

church to believe that their brothers have been corrupted than that they have seen the light of Christ.

In a much lesser way, those who opt to work with the physically dispossessed have become uncomfortable colleagues. I become tiresome when I spend an hour on one patient in a clinic which is used to processing someone every ten minutes. My treatment takes longer so it is more expensive. It also costs more in emotional resources and is more threatening, because if I ask the dying how they *feel* about their illness and their treatment I am liable to expose their anger at having their diagnosis missed or at having treatment that has prolonged their life at the expense of destroying its quality. Even if all has gone as smoothly as possible, those who become close to the dying become a sign of the ultimate impotence of technology and medicine. Hospices are in a curious way a sign of the failure of medicine to conquer disease: they force us to admit that there are limits to our powers of healing.

L'Arche too poses a threat to a society which locks its handicapped in institutions. When I see the fullness of life that can be lived by these people, I weep that it cannot be given to all – that this movement is but a drop in the ocean. And it cannot be given to all because the resources, human and economic, are not thus allocated. And the resources are not allocated because as a society we place our values elsewhere: upon raising the standards of living of a minority and then defending that way of life to such an extent that there are not enough resources to provide adequate housing and medical care and education for all.

The option for the radical gospel is always divisive – as Jesus was divisive – because it threatens to fill the hungry with good things and send the rich away empty.

Meanwhile there will always be those who find themselves called like Mary at Bethany to disturb the peace by pouring out over some dead loss to society that which could have been sold for three hundred denarii.

Stabat Mater

*Near the cross of Jesus stood his mother and his mother's sister,
Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary of Magdala. (John 19:25)*

*Stabat mater Dolorosa
Juxta crucem lacrimosa
Dum pendebat filius.*

*Cujus animam gementem
Contristatam et dolentem
Per transiit gladius.*

*At the cross her station keeping
Stood the mournful mother weeping
Close to Jesus to the last.*

*Through her soul of joy bereaved
Bowed in anguish deeply grieved
Now at length the sword had passed.*

Jacobo Benedetti
from *Stabat Mater*

Fourteenth-century hymn for the
feast of Our Lady of Sorrows

In the care of the dying, as in many other fields of endeavour, there comes a time when the carer's hands are empty, when all the treatment manoeuvres have been explored, all the words of comfort said. It is then that one is left standing at the foot of the bed, useless, impotent, wanting more than anything else to run away.

The first lines of Stabat Mater, etched in my memory from twenty years of pre-Vatican II liturgies, capture better than any photograph the agony of the death-bed vigil. In seven years of caring for the dying, I have stood at over a thousand

bedsides and shared in the impotence of families and friends as they watch the life ebb away from someone they love. This powerlessness to prevent impending death is one of the hardest things for carers to come to terms with, especially when the dying person is young. It produces all sorts of emotions which are often unexpected and hard to handle and may lead to patterns of behaviour which, misunderstood, can cause considerable distress, both to the person experiencing the emotion and those around him. The hospice movement, with its philosophy of openness, is producing a marvellous healing of the medical and nursing profession's wounded attitude towards death and dying, a recapturing of the ancient acceptance of death as part of life.

It is here that we must learn the spirituality of the foot of the cross, the stance of the impotent bystander. Of all the vigils that come to mind the one that I recall with greatest heartache is that of a young woman called Ros who died in our hospice on Christmas day. Ros was only twenty-eight when she died. She had a brain tumour which recurred a year after treatment and, in its final stages, caused her terrible headaches and bizarre hallucinations. Her last days at the hospice have remained fresh in my memory because of the singular poignancy of the circumstances. Ros was a doctor and, knowing that the tumour had recurred, faced death with a particular courage and charm. Absurdly, of course, she thought she was a coward; as the brave always do. She mistook fear for cowardice, and wept for her frailty, angry that she was not coping as well as she had hoped. At a loss as to know what to say, I remembered the preface of Martyrs, copied it out and gave it to her, shyly, because what helps one person may be useless to another:

Her death reveals your power
shining through our human weakness.
You choose the weak and make them strong
in bearing witness to you . . .

I like to think it helped. Anyway, she gathered strength and went home for a week, and then when things became bad came back. Together we faced the last lap. As it happens it was the week before Christmas, and Ros's mother kept vigil at her bedside amid the decoration of the house and all the preparations for the coming feast. Ros was unconscious now,

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