

THE RISK OF HOPE

By WILLIAM YEOMANS

GAMBLING, except of course parish bingo clubs, is still slightly unrespectable. The thought of a bishop sitting in on a poker school would for many be as incongruous as the idea of a nun behind a bar. Betting and bishops, religion and roulette, do not seem compatible; and as far as I know no one has yet attempted a theology of the turf, not even in defence of the Irish Sweepstake. But curiously enough, the betting fraternity would be sadly depleted if its christian members defected. However, they see no reason to do so. If they need a patron saint one might suggest Camillus de Lellis, except that he always lost. And yet the christian should be the one person who is able to lose, who is ready to take a risk which involves everything. For the christian life is essentially a risk, an adventure, a gamble.

One of the implications of the parable of the talents in Matthew 25 is that the christian is expected to double his original stake, no matter how big or small it may be. The one 'wicked and slothful' servant was he who was afraid to risk what he had been given. He played safe and, to cover up his own cowardice, used the pretext that his master was a hard man. The point, of course, was that his master had expected him to trade with what he had been given, as the parallel passage in Luke 19 explains; 'Trade with these till I come'. In such circumstances, as far as the bible is concerned, not to do anything is the same as destroying what one has, 'He who is slack in his work is a brother to him who destroys'.¹ In the kingdom of God the apathetic, the sluggard, the lazy man, is not simply a passenger on the side; he is counter-agent to those 'who through faith and patience inherit the promises', and realize 'the full assurance of hope until the end'.² Not to do anything is tantamount to a denial of hope. For just as even the smallest bet is the expression of a hope of winning, so must the christian life be a lived expression of the great hope that came before men in the person of Jesus Christ.

The men who left their nets and boats and followed him, Matthew who left the security of a lucrative job, Zacchaeus who unlocked

¹ Prov 18, 9.

² Heb 6, 11-12.

his purse with his heart: all these took the most enormous risk. But they were able to do this because of the drive of a hope within them. Admittedly, that hope was mixed with all sorts of elements foreign to the hope of Christ himself. It needed to be purified, and purified it was – through loss. For in the movement of christian experience, hope is refined and honed to a keen edge more by what is lost than by what is gained. Paul, another who took the great risk, sums this up when he says, 'For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as refuse, in order that I may gain Christ . . . that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that if possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead'.¹ Here is expressed the most fundamental law of christian living and, for that reason, of human life. It is as simple and trite as 'nothing venture, nothing win', 'it is better to have loved and lost'; as simple as all the adages born of human experience which contain a grain of rock-solid common sense. But for all that, it is the most difficult thing in the world to do consistently throughout the course of a lifetime.

One of the deepest instincts in man is to possess, to be able to say: 'This is mine'. For possession means security in one form or another. The baby clings to the security of its parents, the hobo clings to the security of a lonely independence which is worth all the hardship he suffers. Security means something for every man, even though one man's security is another man's idea of utter peril and un-sureness. But unconsciously over the years we build for ourselves a certain bulwark of securities, intellectual, emotional, financial or anything else. We philosophize and theologize about them, call them the structure of the human mind, the structure of this, that and the other. They bolster us up and we give them our full support. What seems to be a solid foursquare building is, however, all too often a precariously balanced house of cards. The wind of change blows, and down crashes the whole edifice. From possessing we become the dispossessed. From being those who were established we become displaced wanderers, no longer able to recognize ourselves.

Reactions to such a situation are as manifold as the people involved. There are those who never survive the shock, those who refuse to believe what is happening and pretend that things are

¹ Phil 3, 8-11.

just the same; and there are those who emerge purified and strengthened, who are able to recognize that the wall they had built to secure their lives had in fact developed into an imprisoning and confining barrier.

When life loses its element of risk something dies in man. When everything is neat and tailored, every possible eventuality foreseen and forestalled; when all is clinical, tidy and hygienic, life is very safe. But all the spontaneity is gone, and with it all true creativity. For creation is always born of chaos, and no true work of art has ever emerged from those curious do-it-yourself painting kits which tell you exactly where to place each colour, lest you make a mistake. When the christian life is reduced to a set of safe moral principles, when the life of the Spirit is mapped out in terms of neat recipes for do-it-yourself sainthood, when the liturgy is confined within the strait-jacket of rubrics, guaranteed to make the whole thing work infallibly, when theology is only this, that or the other formula: then God begins to object, and the Spirit begins to appear in the most unlikely places and people. Whenever Israel became complacent and felt that they had really arrived, then they could be sure that in the not too distant future they would find themselves in very precarious situations which left them naked and defenceless.

It happens to all of us. When we think we are riding high we are riding for a fall. When the situation of our lives and our characters seem to be well in hand, then the whole lot begins to come apart at the seams. The reason is that we have destroyed our hope. No life can be fully human when it is deprived of all hope. No life can be christian when its hope is centred on anything but the source of all hope – the continuing presence of Christ in his Spirit.

For hope dies not only in despair, it has another death – that of being realized. The hope that becomes a reality is no longer a hope; it has become a possession, a monument to a past hope that is no more. Here is the acid test: does that realized hope stand as a pointer to the future or a memorial of the past? Does it lead to a new, more exciting and more demanding road, or does it end in a blank wall? Is it a yesterday which has lighted fools the way to dusty death, to disappointment and disillusion, or is it the dawn of a tomorrow full of unknown possibilities? One of the most consistent mistakes in history is to act as if the possibility of making a mistake had been eliminated from a particular situation. The Lord knows we should have learnt from our mistakes that there are mistakes in every situation, that all our solutions are partial and

temporary, that many of the objectives we set ourselves are ill-chosen, that, in the measure in which we are preoccupied and wholly involved in one particular area of concern or point of view, we are blind to other aspects. No one of us has the sort of vision which alone can eliminate all possibility of error.

Not that we should be complacent about our mistakes, or refuse to make the consistent effort to eliminate them as far as possible. The difficult balance to achieve is that of admitting that, despite our best efforts, mistakes will inevitably happen, and that we must be ready to cope with them when they crop up. This means accepting in practice that life is a risky and precarious business; that we can never have absolute sureness of anything except that we are not absolutely sure. It takes great courage to do this, and an even greater humility; but it is the truth.

It is indeed of the essence of christian hope that it should continually lead us to a healthy dissatisfaction with our ambitions and achievements. This is not the same as belittling them; and it is unfortunate that christian hope has sometimes been used for this purpose. There has been a way of living christian hope – St Paul came across it – which cuts out the heart of all human endeavour and reduces all human effort to nothing by comparison with the joys of heaven which await those who have behaved themselves, whether or not their lives have made a real contribution to humanity, even within their own small circle. Such aberrations will always be hardy perennials. The true christian hope should lead us to understand both the vital importance of our human endeavours and at the same time their relativity. It should lead us to act but make us realize that our action is a calculated risk. We must be utterly convinced of the worth of what we are doing, fully concerned with the issues we commit ourselves to; but at the same time we must be keenly aware that what we want to achieve is ultimately beyond us. True christian hope is always a reaching out into the unknown of the future, never a reassembling of the ruins of the past. Christian hope contains a built-in receptivity to the unpredictable.

Basically, christian hope is rooted in the firm belief that God can do the impossible: not simply the difficult, but the impossible. Jesus' answer to the astonished exclamation of his disciples, 'Who then can be saved',¹ was quite simply the affirmation that with God all things are possible. Indeed, it is only in the measure in which we

¹ Lk 18, 26ff.

reduce salvation to the level of a difficult but possible examination to be passed at the end of life that we can see salvation as possible for ourselves. The tremendous christian vision of the return of all mankind and of all things into the unity of love from which they came is just not possible. Whoever takes a realistic look at the world could at best hope to eliminate hate and suffering in a small area. But on the horizon of present history are the storm clouds of even greater problems. The realist would have to admit that, as far as we can see at the present time, humanity just cannot cope with its problems. It is just at this point, from this deep feeling of not being able to cope, that christian hope is born. All things are possible to God. Therefore it is worthwhile engaging all my efforts and all my life in a task which humanly speaking would seem to be a mere drop in the ocean. Belief that God is working out the salvation of all creation must never be a theological abstraction; and it is hope which brings that belief down to practical action, to the action of my particular life here and now. Hope demands that we take what we do with all the seriousness of God. It demands, too, that we continually refuse to be contained within the limits of reasonable ambition; that we allow ourselves to be drawn beyond what seem to be, and are in fact, our own possibilities. This is practically a definition of risk: to attempt what seems beyond our abilities. The christian is continually doing this. He is trying to work for the salvation of mankind by doing what everybody else is doing.

But if God can do the impossible, why doesn't he? This question is filled with all the agony of Gethsemani: 'Abba, Father, all things are possible to you'. Why then must the Son of man go to his death on the cross? This is the suffering which is only possible where there is a genuine theological hope. He who restricts hope to the humanly possible can never feel this agony. The conflict only comes from the realization that God can do all things and is not limited by human capacities. This too is the temptation of hope: to attempt to put pressure on God so that he does the impossible. It is the easy way out and leaves man with two alternatives: either to eliminate the value of his own actions under the pretext that actually they do not matter because God can do everything, therefore human activity is just a facade for the divine action; or to eliminate God - he can do all things, even the impossible, but he is not doing them, he seems to be just allowing history to take its course, therefore God does not matter, why then pay attention to him.

Both alternatives are false and the truth is much simpler and

more incredible. The fact is that God does the impossible but he does it through the humanly possible. This is the paradox of christianity and the recurrent problem of its theology. God acts through man, time is the vehicle for eternity, death gives birth to life; but in so doing God does not eliminate man, nor does eternity destroy time, nor does life banish death. This is the situation of christian hope which gives value to everything man does. This is no pie-in-the-sky religion, making light of the present because of the immensity of the future. Instead, it gathers into one, past, present and future in such close coherence that to minimize one is to minimize all. The seriousness of christian hope is witnessed to by the seriousness with which the christian approaches his present task. His hope brings him up against the importance of his human task.

Here we must walk delicately, for this doctrine again has been understood wrongly. Christian hope is not some sort of instant canonization of human activity. Hope tells me that what I do matters, it does not say that it does not matter what I do. It says that every human activity can contribute to the building of the new man in the new world, but it does not say that therefore my choice of what I do is immaterial. My christian hope is part of me. I am the one who hopes, whose activity must be a lived expression of that hope. I am making history here and now; and I cannot do that independently of all that I am and of all that is going on around me. The first expression of my hope has to be an intelligent choice of my sphere of activity. A choice which has to be based on my own abilities and on the needs of the world. Hope demands that I choose an objective and commit myself to it fully. There can be no half-measures. Christian hope can only come to life in wholeheartedness. The diffident man, who keeps a bolt hole available just in case, denies the very hope he professes. Hope will always demand that a man leave everything, that he sell all that he has. It is an all or nothing business. This is its risk. There is no going back. Complete success or utter failure are the end products.

But there can be no discipleship of Christ without this all-or-nothing spirit. Time and again Christ insisted on it. The text and its context, 'Therefore whoever of you does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple',¹ cannot be watered down. The condition of discipleship is complete wholeheartedness. These are the highest stakes a human being can play for; the Lord demands

¹ Lk 14, 33.

nothing less. But of course he gave nothing less himself – his entire being is for mankind. He is the gift of God and he gives himself entirely, for always and universally, in his Spirit which is poured out on all mankind. For this we can say that God is love; for love is always a thing of the whole being. And in Christ God is known as the one who is entire gift of himself to mankind.

But if the christian is one who risks all that he is, what of the vast majority of us who stand dithering on the edge of diffidence, caught up with pseudo-commitments. We have to realize that hope, and with it faith and love, never happens all at once. They are a growth. We move towards a deeper commitment of ourselves. The initial choice has to be made and made wholeheartedly, but its working out will take a lifetime. We have to be ready to risk everything from the very start, and this readiness has to find expression in everything we do. But God does not demand everything all at once. We shall gradually find ourselves giving more and more, living more and more the totality of what we have chosen to wager. Christian hope will never be fulfilled this side of the grave. It will always be incomplete; and our awareness of this incompleteness can become the sign of our hope. Not that waiting is purely passive. It includes an active alertness to what is happening and a constant readiness to meet the Lord in the most unexpected situations.

The growing fullness of christian hope is the solid source of christian joy. The deepest joy man can have is that of being committed fully in all that he is and has. It is the joy of Christ himself which sees even in suffering and death a sign of the plenitude of commitment and consequently a source of joy. Nor can any man take this away; it is a thing of the heart and mind and will and is indestructible. Furthermore, it is the gift of God in the Spirit of Jesus; and the gifts of God are never transitory. Nothing makes life more worthwhile than to be totally given to the process of human history in Christ. Harm is done by the half-hearted christian; and perhaps the greatest unconfessed sin in the lives of many is that of being uncommitted, of walking down on the other side of the road. Apathy is indeed a form of complicity. Hope calls for full commitment to mankind and to the world in Christ. It has to mean giving everything. We wager all and there must be no hedging our bet. The world needs the sort of massive hope that is the christian birthright; but it can only receive it from those who are fired by that hope, and keep it alive in the teeth of contradiction. Christian hope begins on Calvary where human hopes die. Now is the time for it.