

# HIMSELF HE CANNOT SAVE

By JOHN HARRIOTT

A FEW WEEKS AGO I spent some days in hospital. On my last evening an old man lying in the next bed drew several harsh breaths, tried to sit up, and died. It was a very casual death; within an hour his remains had been tidied up and removed from the ward with all the decent circumspection of a modern hospital. The rest of us had to be considered; death must not be allowed to put ideas into our heads. It was the end of a life, the moment christians regard as the most solemn and potent of all, but here it was reduced to something trivial, a momentary inconvenience. It might have seemed to be of no consequence at all if I had not come to know the old man's wife, and the effect his death would have upon her. For her this apparently trivial event was an earthquake, uptilting and destroying all the landmarks of her life. Yet there was nothing the old man could do to keep death at bay; nothing I as a priest, nor his wife, nor the doctors and nurses with all their professional skill could do to defend him. There are no barriers against death.

There seemed to be little connection between this death, which our society somehow put on the level of waste disposal, and the solemn event which is at the heart of every real and fictional tragedy. Public deaths, of a Churchill or a Kennedy, can still hold us in thrall, as Caesar's cast its spell centuries ago. That twentieth century art form, the cinema, is as obsessed with death as were ever a mediaeval lyricist like Dunbar, or a tragedian like Webster; one thinks of Zhivago felled by a heart attack in the street, hopelessly reaching out to the oblivious Lara; of Harry Lime's fingers clutching at life through the grating of a Vienna sewer; of the barbaric annihilation of Bonnie and Clyde. Like the deaths of Lear or Othello, they dramatize the sustained human conviction that the fact and manner of our going from the world are crucial to the meaning of life. The old man's death in hospital was as humdrum as death can be, yet it sealed and interpreted and in some sense justified the whole of his life, and his wife's. Like every death it was

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universal, because in the suffering it caused it somehow revealed the strength, dignity and value of the relationship between two human beings. And if there had been no sorrow that too would have been a judgment on the old man and whatever he had fashioned from his life.

Even independently of any religious belief, death is the measure of life. It is the moment of death which makes us more clearly and acutely conscious of what a man has made of himself, and what he has done to others. Even without religious ceremony, even without belief in a day of judgment, the living turn death into their judgment. The death and funeral of a Churchill, the death and funeral of a meths drinker, seem naturally to grow out of and inevitably to seal the kind of lives they conclude. A man makes his own death, and his death imposes a judgment on society.

Death has a thousand several exits. And entrances too: ways of seeping, infiltrating into our minds almost continuously, because we live within a world of death. People, animals, plants obviously, the inanimate world less obviously but no less truly. All about us, buildings, furniture, trees, the very walls of the room, wilt, melt, sag in the process of dying. And even though we may raise our spirits with the thought that every moment of death is simultaneously a moment of birth, or that the declination of one pattern of matter is the growth of another, that is not how we experience our own mortality. It is easier to be optimistic about the condition of humanity or of the natural world, or the progress of science or the development of cities, than it is to be optimistic about our own self. The ordinary healthy-minded man does not continuously focus his attention on buildings and vegetation and people as they die all about him: their mortality is something only faintly sensed, like a mild irritation. But the taste of his own mortality is thick in his mouth. It is not a question of saying how often or at what times or in what conditions the fact of our own death springs to the forefront of our mind – as Behan described himself as a ‘daylight atheist’ – but that the experience of mortality impregnates and saturates our whole physical frame, and mental consciousness. Death stamps us through and through like a stick of seaside rock. As the years flick past we can so easily feel like a climber slipping down an ice-coated surface, scrabbling desperately and hopelessly for a handhold. Life slips by and offers no handhold, no moment of permanence, no pause while time stands still.

Death mocks every human activity. But most of all it mocks what

human beings most eagerly pursue, a relationship with another human being which is established in faith, sympathy and love, as secure and confident. Whether we come upon it by way of religion, psychiatry, personal experience, social observation, art or literature, it is hard to avoid the conviction that the strongest force in any individual's life is the longing to find some outlet for his capacity to love, and the desire to hold the first place in the affections of another. To give and to receive a love which is intense and enduring. We are deafened by the various expressions, ranging from the sublime to the vulgar, from grand opera to the latest pop song, of this fierce longing and the buoyant hopes it continually awakens, the generosity to which it gives rise: and also by the litter of hopes dashed, failures of trust, shattered illusions. But the worst irony is that when success is achieved, when two people do achieve or discover that marriage of true minds, that sense of being one person, which is under various guises the holy grail of human love, a dozen enemies threaten it from outside, of which the most inescapable is death. If man as an individual resents and revolts against this power which dashes to pieces himself and all his mortal accomplishments, even more does he revolt against the destruction of those relationships which are his dearest achievement; that death which tears parents from children, lovers from each other, and breaks the embrace of husband and wife at the end of a long, harmonious life. The last enemy is the worst. And even though he dodges or delays its coming, man knows that there is no final evasion of death either for himself or for those he loves. Every other affliction can be registered under redeemable suffering; only death is blank horror, unspeakable tragedy, without any savour of hope. We can attempt to cheat with our monuments and plaques, our endowments, books and legacies, but we have only to name them to know that there is no compensation for being able to say, 'I am alive and well'.

What can be said about death can to a lesser extent be said about all the more painful afflictions that flesh is heir to. There is, it is true, a wide range of suffering which is simply the result of human ignorance, folly, malice, ambition, and insensitivity. There is no reason, for example, why people in a modern industrialized society should be badly housed, or that hundreds of thousands of people in under-developed countries should starve to death, except that so many of us do not care enough to devote our intelligence and energy to the search for an effective cure and to applying it. There is no reason for most of the poverty, sickness, hunger and homelessness in

the modern world, except for what one might loosely describe as the spiritual frailty of man. The resources, technical knowledge, scientific understanding and skilled experts, all exist in abundance. It may be true that the poor will always be with us, but if they are we have only ourselves to blame.

There is another range of human afflictions of which the same cannot be said. These are the afflictions which are experienced as psychic or spiritual or what you will. There is the experience of failure, the experience of loneliness, of self-contempt, of being unlovable or incapable of giving love, of being uprooted from familiar surroundings, of being at odds with the spirit of the age, of knowing that earlier hopes and ambitions will never be realized, or that certain talents will never be developed as they might have been. They are an example of little deaths, for which doctor, welfare worker, politician, and to some extent the priest and the psychiatrist, have no remedy. They are not manageable social problems to do with the re-distribution of property and goods, or even an improved social environment. You cannot cure loneliness simply by putting a person alongside other human beings; you cannot cure self-contempt by building better houses, roads, and planting more trees; you cannot cure the sense of failure with a bottle of pills. The fact is that if government and welfare agency were perfectly enlightened, and the whole human race brimful of love and goodwill, there would still be a huge area of pain and suffering which nobody could affect, and which has to do with the way people experience themselves, evaluate themselves, and envisage their future.

It is in this area that we experience the need of salvation. And it is also, happily, the area in which we are most likely to recognize some intimations of salvation. It comes when all human resources fail. There is no human remedy for the private grief of parents at the grave-side of their dead child; none for the man or woman who at last realize that their love has been finally rejected; none for the woman who is told she will be paralysed for life, or for the nun who walks away from the convent door feeling that she has wasted her life. When feelings are devastated, as they can be in moments of profound suffering, there is little or nothing that outsiders can do for the sufferer. There is dumb sympathy, there are a few conventional sentiments which people express to show they care; but even these have to be used with tact, or the intended salve can become salt in the open wound. Those who suffer deeply retire into depths of themselves where we realize it is unwise for us to follow.

This distinction between circumstances which can be manipulated and circumstances which cannot, human miseries which can be controlled or cured and those which cannot, is an important one, because it is very largely the answer to those who believe that the christian idea of salvation involves a refusal to face up to the bleak realities of human existence, and weakens the resolve to bring about whatever social amelioration of human life is possible. Both charges have a long ancestry, and both have been re-inforced by the statements and behaviour of professed christians at various times in history. There certainly have been christians who have justified indifference to the suffering of the poor and hungry by repeating Christ's word, 'blessed are the poor in spirit'. There certainly have been christians who made their belief in the life to come the justification for slap-happy and irresponsible behaviour in this one. But the unique character of christianity is that it supports neither fatalism nor utopianism, but places man's fate firmly in his own hands, respects the value of every effort at human betterment, and yet does not hold out hope of a perfect and permanent temporal society. The complete christian has an element of both Martha and Mary in his constitution.

The choice for the christian is not between being unwilling to fight remediable human misery and being unwilling to accept the existence of a life after death. The spiritualists, who wish to fossilize the social order in their own interests, can find little comfort in a gospel which tells the rich man to sell all he has and give it to the poor, and the man who has two coats to give one to the man who has none; the materialists can find little comfort in the words of the Lord that man does not live by bread alone, or in the actions of a Lord who died rather than be limited to the role of a political or economic revolutionary. These observations suggest, it seems to me, that we are more likely to accept or reject both halves of the equation than to accept one and reject the other. Despite the traditional comparisons made between spiritualists and materialists, there seems little enough evidence that half the christian community cannot drag its mind away from thoughts of the kingdom of heaven to spare a moment for the needy, and that the other half is so frantically busy relieving human misery that it has no time for thoughts of God and the kingdom. Just as there is continuity in the christian scheme of things between what we do with this life and what we are in the next, so there is continuity between the quality of our faith and the energy we display in serving the poor and needy.

It is necessary to labour this point, because any attempt to suggest that there is such a thing as inescapable and irremediable suffering, and that this has a function in the order of things as they are (we shall never know what God originally intended) is likely to be greeted with howls of derision and charges of complacency. But there is surely no complacency in saying that our vocation as christians is to work might and main, with all the mental and physical resources at man's disposal, to relieve every kind of human need, and at the same time to state that there are kinds of suffering which it is beyond man's power to cure. That there is too, in every human being, a feeling of emptiness, and yet a sense of something secret, just beyond his grasp, which would make him permanently whole. Surely it is this we are talking about when we say that money isn't happiness (life almost comically reflects the clichés: I met my first millionaire a month ago and his first words were, 'Father, you're talking to the unhappiest man in the world'), when we become aware of the boredom in affluent city suburbs, or sense the hopelessness in the youngsters hanging around street corners.

It is at those periods and at those moments when we are broken and helpless, that we begin to recognize the need and coming of salvation, and can experience the difference it makes. The natural, spontaneous reaction to suffering is evasion – to reach for the aspirin, move house, buy oneself out; or for persons more spiritually inclined, to ask God to wave his wand and remove the source of the trouble. But faced with the kind of inescapable suffering I have tried to describe, we cannot practise evasion. A man cannot hold death indefinitely at bay; parents cannot bring back to life their dead child; the paralytic cannot suddenly rise from his bed and walk. It is in such situations, when human impotence in the face of suffering is most keenly felt, that the power of God begins to work. And salvation comes not as an anaesthetic or emollient or a magical deliverance, but as a power which enables us to accept, take hold of and use our pain. There is a fine example of such a moment in Pierre d'Harcourt's autobiography *The Real Enemy*. As a member of the french Resistance during the war, he was betrayed to the Gestapo and shot down in a Paris street. While recovering in hospital he planned to escape, but his plans were discovered, and one evening the police rushed in and chained him to his bed. He writes:

The hour which followed was one of the blackest of my life . . . As I realised my chance had gone, despair overcame me . . . Beneath everything, beyond everything, I felt myself humiliated and defeated.

I had been so confident and now my pride had been laid low. There was only one way of coming to terms with my fate if I was not to sink into an abyss of defeatism from which I knew I could never rise again. I must make the gesture of complete humility by offering to God all that I suffered. I must not only have the courage to accept the suffering he had sent me; I must also thank him for it, for the opportunity he gave me to find at last his truth and love. I remember the relief of weeping as I realised that this was my salvation. Then the inspiration came to me to kiss the chains which held me prisoner, and with much difficulty I at last managed to do this. I am not a credulous person, but even allowing for the state of mind I was in that night, there can be no doubt in my mind that some great power from outside momentarily entered into me. Once my lips had touched the steel I was freed from the terror which had possessed me. As the handcuffs had brought the terror of death to me, now by kissing my manacles I had turned them from bonds into a key.

Salvation is a deliverance, but not a deliverance from physical and mental anguish as such. It is a deliverance from arrogance and over-weening self-confidence; it is a deliverance from the lies we tell ourselves about ourselves; it is a deliverance from fear, sometimes panic fear; it is a deliverance from thinking that our wholeness as persons depends on external circumstances; it is a deliverance from the illusion that people or property can in our case keep time and decay permanently at bay; it is, in short, a deliverance from every form of self-preoccupation, self-reliance and self-righteousness which will prevent us from plumbing the depths of our own nature or from shutting our eyes to the whole grand destiny to which we are called. It is the way of making us realistic, honest, and ultimately whole.

We have to be beaten to our knees before we are ready to acknowledge the truth that our autonomy, although great, has its limits, and that our resources are insufficient to make us absolute overlords of our destiny. We hate and shrink from intense suffering, but it is in suffering that we encounter mystery and through the mystery find meaning. This is not mere phrase-making, or enigma for its own sake. The conviction that human life has resonances over and beyond what is visible, mortal and tangible, can come through the experience of, for example, intense love or startling human goodness. But perhaps for the majority of people it is in bitter suffering that we are shocked into the realization that there is a power beyond our own, an order of things which is more extensive than the visible pattern of human affairs. It is in the moment of bitterest suffering

that faith is born, the kind of faith which involves personal conviction and commitment, and not merely mental adhesion to a set of beliefs which have never become truly operative in our lives.

Through suffering we acquire a sense of spaciousness. Far from being imprisoned within the confines of space and time, we suddenly realize that the whole story of our life is to stretch beyond the grave and that the physical and mental limitations that gall us in our present constitution are not to last for ever. It is through suffering, which at first faces us as a blank wall, that we eventually discover the secret entrance into the pleasant garden of God's love, and taste for the first time that security which nothing short of God can supply. Through suffering we come to understand the way in which human lives interlock and mysteriously influence each other, so that Jean Daniélou's statement, that suffering is the meeting point between good and evil, begins to make sense and the possibility that the wicked are redeemable through the suffering of the good becomes a genuine conviction and motive of action. It is through suffering that all kinds of power and understanding which have lain dormant in us are released. All sunshine, runs an arab proverb, makes a desert. Those who have not suffered lack a dimension. However much we shrink from it, without suffering we cannot become fully human – and salvation is the process through which we are given the power to achieve full humanity. Even Mary shared our suffering, though not our sin.

It was not by coming down from the cross that Christ redeemed the world. However much we argue that death and suffering were not necessary to the redemption of the world, it is hard to believe that we would grasp so well the intensity and extension of God's love for mankind, or so clearly the central dynamic of human fulfilment, which is love, if Christ had turned away from the suffering which was the logical outcome of a life which in its every aspect was an expression of love. As a man, how else could he have known all that was in himself except by being driven and driving himself to the furthest borders of physical and mental anguish? And how could his message that we are to find our true selves in loving our neighbour to the very point of self-sacrificing death ring true, if he had shown himself unwilling to accept the worst possible outcome of such a principle? We, too, if we are to be whole men, and in our turn witnesses to salvation, must not flinch from the suffering that is salvation.

It may seem morbid, and even alarming, to attach such import-



ance to the experience of futility and helplessness in our lives. It may suggest a return to the kind of pessimistic mentality which induces a man to shut his door upon the world, leave it to its own contemptible devices, and spend his time in prayer and penance. But this would be to miss the point. One may with Teilhard de Chardin believe wholeheartedly in the onward progress of man, and in the ever-growing sensitivity of men as individuals and as a race. Despite all the disappointments and back-trackings with which we are familiar, it does seem that the world we live in is the subject of an evolutionary progress which gives ground for optimism. But one can hold such a position and at the same time observe that if we are to play our part in this evolution with a fully developed consciousness, and with that wisdom which is the child of knowing the truth about ourselves, we have to face up to the limitations which we experience in ourselves. 'Man is a little crudded paste'. The experience of our mortality, our own fragility, our vulnerability, our capacity for pain, the experience of utter futility, worthlessness and despair, all these have a part to play in making us face up to ourselves in the round, in giving us some understanding of what is awry and needs mending, and in developing the conviction that the power to mend and heal is available to us, through Christ Jesus our Lord.

Salvation is not comfortable; there is something terrifying about it. Even human love is terrifying in the forces that it releases and directs; and human love is a faint radiation from the fire of love which is God. Salvation is not a gentle application of vaseline to a small cut, but the breaking and re-setting of ill-set bones. The man who is complacent about himself, his family, his home, his work, who feels in short that he has got it made, will never glimpse the meaning of salvation. He will never even glimpse his own grandeur, and all the powers that, because he is a man, lie within his grasp. There is only one way for him to know his grandeur and that is for him first to know his need. There is only one way for him to recognize that, in the great commandment, Christ has put the key to our existence in our hands, that in Christ's own life we see that principle lived out as in a kind of working model, and that through this life perfectly lived, the power to break out of our selfishness and be whole, has been put at our disposal. We discover our need when we are faced with situations over which we have no control, and in which we have no hope. When the sick man knows that this sickness is unto death, that he cannot save himself, it is then that he hears a voice telling him to take up his bed and walk, and knows that salvation is at hand.