

JOY IN WEAKNESS

By BARNABAS AHERN

SEVERAL MONTHS AGO I gave a lecture to a group of wide-awake african seminarians in Nigeria. When I happened to mention race-horses, I noticed an instant reaction of puzzlement and query. Teen-agers in the heart of Africa are not generally familiar with Ascot or Churchill Downs. This incident is typical of the experience a stranger often encounters in a foreign land. Images and words which are stock-in-trade in his own country may carry no meaning at all to the people of another culture. Even after years of residence in a country which is not his own, a man's speech is still apt to betray his foreign origin and background.

Whether or not it is *à la mode* to say this today, the fact is that christians are always foreigners in this world. Men can speak as much as they like about the sacredness of the secular and about the need to be involved in the world; but the truth stands that a christians always carries the passport of another country: 'For us, our homeland is in heaven'.¹ Time and again, therefore, he is going to reveal his foreign citizenship. Christianity has a whole set of values which may place a man of the gospel in sharp contrast to this world's standard of judgement. (Just try to explain the beggar saint, Benedict Joseph Labre, to men who are working hard to support their families!) There are many areas in which heaven and earth just do not mix; the values of one cut athwart the values of the other. It cannot be otherwise. The Lord who rules our home-country has said to men of this world:

My thoughts are not your thoughts, my ways not your ways.

Yes, the heavens are as high above earth as my ways are above your ways, my thoughts above your thoughts.²

As a natural consequence of this, christianity has a vocabulary all its own. Though the words it employs are the words which all men use, they suggest to the man of faith a special connotation which saves them from the nonsense they express if interpreted according to the dictionary. St Paul, for instance, laces his letters with all

¹ Phil 3, 20.

² Isai 55, 8-9.

kinds of phrases which, when taken out of their christian context, are shockingly enigmatic. His words are human words; the antinomy in some of his phrases follows the pattern of expression used by the stoics; but to make sense, each word and each phrase have to be interpreted in the context of faith. As a test case, ask your fellow-clerk at the office what he understands by the phrases, 'power at its best in weakness',³ 'consolation overflowing when the cup of suffering overflows',⁴ 'being renewed while we fall into decay'.⁵

These three texts are taken from St Paul's second letter to the corinthians. That epistle is especially rich with divine paradoxes which to the average person are simply human contradictions. These enigmas recur all through Paul's correspondence. Whether he speaks of Christ or of the christian, he expresses the transcendent truths of God in language that sounds like human nonsense. What is more, he shows no sign of embarrassment in making these statements, nor does he offer any apology. He just takes it for granted that the supposed 'foolishness of God is wiser than the wisdom of men.'⁶

His assured confidence is deep-rooted. He is so familiar with the terrain of our 'homeland', he knows so well the thoughts and the ways of God that, now in one way and now in another, he handles human language roughly in voicing his vision of what life really is through the saving presence of Christ Jesus. Whenever he talks to men of earth about their life on earth, this foreigner always speaks as a citizen of heaven who looks upon earth from God's perspective: 'Our eyes are fixed, not on the things that are seen, but on the things that are unseen: for what is seen passes away; what is unseen is eternal'.⁷

He was never at a loss to find new contrasts with which to shock his readers; the puzzling antinomies in his letters are abundant and multi-faceted. But all this richness comes from his mastery of a very simple truth. Though each of his variant expressions deserves to be studied for the insight it provides, nonetheless their value consists in the fact that they are all facets of the simple, wondrous mystery of God's loving and saving presence.

A christian child learns this mystery from his mother. If he matures as a christian, it will grow in brightness and give deeper meaning to his prayer. When, as an old man, he lies on his death-

³ 2 Cor 12, 9.

⁶ 1 Cor 1, 25.

⁴ 2 Cor 1, 5-7.

⁷ 2 Cor 4, 18.

⁵ 2 Cor 4, 16.

bed, this mystery will be his comfort and strength. If we call the saving work of God a 'mystery', it is only because it is hidden from fleshly eyes and, like everything else in our 'homeland', is present to human consciousness only through faith. For the man who takes God at his word, the mystery is alive with the presence and the work of each person of the Trinity and draws to them the love we owe each one. The mystery brings before us

- the Father: 'He did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all; and with this gift how can he fail to lavish upon us all he has to give.'⁸
- the Son: 'He loved me and gave himself up for me'. 'Christ is all and is in all'.⁹
- the holy Spirit: 'God's love has flooded our inmost heart through the holy Spirit he has given us'.¹⁰

It is in the heavenly light of this divine reality that Paul sees every christian. Created by God and totally dependent upon him, men and women who believe in God are called to live as his children through the loving, creative work of Christ and his Spirit: 'We are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to devote ourselves to the good deeds for which God has designed us'.¹¹

In this day, when there is so much talk about maturity and human fulfilment, men tend to emphasise the liberty and responsibility which is theirs in measuring up to the demands of personal development. I envy these people who stress what we can and should do as persons; though, after hearing their resolute words, I always have the feeling that the Lord made me genetically to be a coward and an idler. Paul, too, has a great deal to say about the earnest cooperation which men must contribute to God's saving work in them and in the world. But all the same (heartening comfort for lazy bones!), Paul puts much greater emphasis on the mercy of God and on the tireless work of Christ in us through his holy Spirit.

The apostle knew himself so well – and other people too – that he just takes it for granted that men are often going to muff and mess things. Study his epistles and count the number of times he talks about 'weakness', 'sin', 'fear', 'temptation', 'suffering', 'tribulation'. His letters always remind me of the american comic strip, *Peanuts*. When little Linus appears in this cartoon, he always

⁸ Rom 8, 32.

⁹ Col 3, 11.

¹⁰ Rom 5, 5.

¹¹ Eph 2, 10.

looks woebegone and bedraggled, ready to burst into tears. In fair weather and foul, he hugs his woollen security blanket and constantly looks to Charlie Brown for the help and answers he needs. The men to whom Paul wrote are best described as a motley group of Linuses, good and lovable creatures but so much in need of help. Paul himself made no secret about his own need to lean totally on the only real Charlie Brown: 'My present bodily life is lived by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself up for me'.¹²

This emphasis of Paul puts everything into right order. Certainly each one of us is a person, with a mind to know what is right, with a will to choose what is right, and with the responsibility to give a full measure of human cooperation to God's work in us and through us. There is no doubt either that men achieve their personal fulfilment only through likeness to Christ: 'God knew his own before ever they were, and also ordained that they should be shaped to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the eldest among a large family of brothers'.¹³ But there is equally no doubt that human life upon earth, where we do not see God, involves the tensions, weaknesses and sufferings of our first parent after his sin: 'The man made of dust is the pattern of all men of dust'.¹⁴ Though modern personalists may not like to dwell upon it, the fact is that we all have a great deal of 'Linus' in us.

If a man is sensible, he will put a red circle around this area of his personality; for it is precisely here that God meets us. Whether at the beginning or in the middle or at the end of life, the most authentic and radical dimension of the human person is his abiding need of God's creative love. We are nothing and we have nothing apart from his gift: 'It is by his grace you are saved, through trusting him; it is not your own doing. It is God's gift, not a reward for work done. There is nothing for anyone to boast of. For we are God's handiwork'.¹⁵ The most perfect creature this world has ever known saw this truth clearly. That is why, in her *magnificat*, Mary expresses forthrightly her full indebtedness: 'My spirit exults in God my Saviour; because he has looked down upon his lowly handmaid. Yes, from this day forth all generations will call me blessed, for the Almighty has done great things for me'.¹⁶

To do great things for men is the only thing God wants to do. For this he sent his Son to die for us and gave his holy Spirit to live

¹² Gal 2, 20.

¹³ Rom 8, 29.

¹⁴ 1 Cor 15, 48.

¹⁵ Eph 2, 8-10.

¹⁶ Lk 1, 47-49.

within us for our empowering and our holiness. It all appears so simple. With pure love God wants to fill our emptiness; and we, who are his creatures, are totally in need of him. But man has the unhappy knack of missing the obvious. To use a big word, we are often incorrigibly anthropocentric. Whereas we should be wide open to receive from God, we close ourselves in behind the locked doors of a very fragile self. We find it so congenial to play with self made baubles that we forget to put out our hand to reach for his. Call it sham or make-believe, faulty self-reliance is a gossamer earthly substitute for the substantial fulfilment which only God can give.

An incident in the life of St Angela of Foligno shows how at times God mercifully batters down this self-sufficiency. Angela felt quite comfortable in her glad rags of holiness. She busied herself with good deeds and liked to pray. Everyone, Angela included, was convinced that she had little reason for concern. A few more years of living in secure fidelity upon earth and she would wing her way to heaven for the reward she had earned. Then, one day, Christ appeared to her in the disfigurement of his passion. She saw the full weakness of his humanness in the bruised face and torn body; she experienced in her heart the need which he felt for God when he cried out, 'My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?' The Christ of her vision spoke only one word, 'See, Angela, I have not loved you in jest'. At that moment the poor woman saw how much of her life was just a paltry illusion of smug self-complacency. With choking sobs she whispered, 'Yea, Lord Jesus, but I have never loved you except with pretence and make-believe'.

There is no real love for God except in the heart of a person who, like Jesus on the cross, looks to the Father with yearning need. No real love, because no truth or sincerity. We cannot love someone truly unless we take them for what they are. Our God has revealed what he is in himself and what he must be for us, in the simple words of his Son: 'Without me you can do nothing'.¹⁷ To Catherine of Siena Christ explained clearly the full meaning of these words: 'Daughter, know this: I am he who is and you are that which is not'.

If a man has an eye in his head, it is not difficult to see this. No day of our life fails to bring its reminder of how much we need God. Problems, temptations, and a migraine headache; three out of five in the family irritable with 'flu; failure to secure a job promotion;

¹⁷ Jn 15, 5.

rejection slips from our publisher: all these catastrophic or petty upsets bear the monogram of what we are – little people very much in need of the Lord.

Life will always be rich with these reminders. It is true, many good men today are concerned that present technological advance and man's mastery of the universe will gradually bring forgetfulness of God, since men will no longer have to pray for safe journeys or good crops. But there is no need for worry. God is ingenious in reminding his creatures that they cannot get along without him. Men may be in the process of conquering the world of matter, but he is more helpless than ever before in the world of spirit. Give a retreat to youngsters of thirteen and fourteen, and your heart will ache as you learn of their uncertainties, their confusion and anxiety. In painful struggle for peace of mind people today are subjecting themselves to gurus of every ilk. The tortuous search for self-identity (years ago we took ourselves for granted!) means endless hours of self-probing and the searing sessions of a sensitivity programme. Though our modern Hamlets may soliloquize endlessly on 'To be or not to be', their hearts are crying out more loudly than ever before, 'We are restless until we rest in thee!'

Every kind of suffering and weakness lays bare before man's eyes the yearning vacuum in his soul. Truly enough, people can fail to read symptoms. In the presence of suffering they can rebel and grow bitter. Or, like King Saul, they can blame the Lord for failure and turn against him with bitter accusation. Still again, they can make a bed of weakness to lie there without effective desire to get up on their own two feet. Most often people simply live through suffering and incapacity with the fatalistic sense that this experience is just their plain, hard luck. Taking their lead from the 'grin and bear' endurance of others, they strike the attitude, more stoical than christian, 'I guess you can get used to hanging if you hang long enough!'

All these reactions are a tragic loss. People like this are numb to the point of God's revelation touching them in their most authentic self as creatures. They are deaf to Israel's exemplary response to God in the soulful pleading of the psalms. They are blind to the lessons in dependence and surrender which Jesus taught when, as a feeble man like ourselves, he felt the full pressure of his human weakness and cried out, 'Abba! If it be possible . . .'

Paul the Apostle was not numb or deaf or blind. When it came to suffering, his life was fire-tried. The weakness of his converts

spelled his own ineffectiveness. The harrassment of the judaizers spoiling his work was like a 'thorn in his side'.¹⁸ His years of imprisonment at Cesarea and in Rome meant inactivity and frustration. Never did he venture anything that he did not meet with some disappointment or set-back. Just read the snippet of his autobiography which he has given in 2 Cor 11, 21-33. It is true, he was so devoted to his ministry that his vocabulary of weakness and suffering is always coloured by an apostolic context. But Paul was not an unfeeling man. The suffering a parent endures in the tears and failure of its child is keener than the suffering of the child itself. And Paul was a father: 'My children! I must go through the pain of giving birth to you all over again, until Christ is formed in you'.¹⁹

Yet this is the very man who, with all the conviction of his heart, writes of 'consolation in suffering'²⁰ and of 'joy in weakness'.²¹ Paul means every word he writes. Though his phrases speak nonsense to men of this world, they are rich with meaning to a 'citizen' of heaven. For Paul, adversity was an 'Open, Sesame!' to the mystery of God's love, because adversity opened wide a heart which otherwise might turn in on itself. Paul knew exactly what to do when trouble came. In weakness, he looked instantly to God who is our only strength; in suffering he immediately cried out his word of surrender; in difficulty he pleaded with God to put things right. And God never failed him.

In the days of the Old Covenant Yahveh responded always to the cry of the *Anawim* ('the poor and needy people' whom the prophets and psalmists hailed as Israel's perfect ones, men and women totally dependent on God). In the same way God was always at hand to do his best work of love in the heart of Paul and in the saving purposes of his life. The Apostle was sure of God and sure, too, that our need for him, when felt and voiced, will always be fulfilled. This conviction, therefore, prompted him to write:

I shall prefer to find my joy and pride in the very things that are my weakness; for then the power of Christ will come and rest upon me. Hence I am well content, for Christ's sake, with weakness, contempt, persecution, hardship, and frustration; for when I am weak, then I am strong.²²

These words are not poetry flying high on emotional effervescence; they are not a 'display of fine words' which Paul despised.²³ By the very fact that he speaks of weakness bringing the 'power of Christ'

¹⁸ 2 Cor 12, 7.

²¹ 2 Cor 12, 9

¹⁹ Gal 4, 19.

²² 2 Cor 12, 9-10.

²⁰ 2 Cor 1, 5-7.

²³ Cf 1 Cor 1, 17; 2, 1.

to dwell in him, Paul lays bare the bedrock of all true joy for those whose 'citizenship' makes them children of God. The whole purpose of our heavenly life upon earth is to be 'shaped to the likeness of God's Son'.²⁴ This is our only fulfilment; and this, too, is our only joy. When suffering and weakness are accepted by us with eyes turned to God, we become more and more like him who 'in the days of his earthly life offered up prayers and petitions, with loud cries and tears, to God who was able to deliver him from the grave; and he submitted so humbly that his prayer was heard'.²⁵

Weakness is part of life. Whether it be moral or physical, whether it blight our character or our work, in God's plan it is permitted or intended for only one purpose. He who loves us, whose Son died for us and whose Spirit lives in us, arranges everything in life that, as his children, we be shaped to the likeness of his Son. Whenever weakness or suffering come, therefore, he intends that we look only to him with surrender to his will, with pleading prayer for his help, and with absolute confidence that all will be well. He for his part will never fail us, for we have the pledge of his own word: 'He will be gracious to you when he hears your cry; when he hears he will answer'.²⁶

Have you read Clement Tigar's little book, *Forty Martyrs of England and Wales*? Read one of the brief biographies each day; and, when you are finished your first perusal (there will be many more), check your impression over against mine. The little book fairly sings with joy in suffering and strength in weakness. Every one of these saints, from Philip Howard, Earl of Arundel, to John Rigby the farm-hand, is of the same stuff as ourselves. They all seem such home-spun people. Probably during their life no one noticed anything spectacular about them. But their end was their revealing. When suffering came, they turned their eyes instantly to the Lord. With hearts opened wide to him by the cry of their weakness, they received the fulness of his power and went forth to the scaffold radiant with joy.

Weakness and suffering are a wondrous opportunity to live, like Christ, wide open to the Father. When a dark sky lowers and when we feel wrapped round with feebleness and pain, Paul's words bear a much-needed message: 'Be always joyful; pray continually; give thanks whatever happens; for this is what God in Christ wills for you'.²⁷

²⁴ Rom 8, 29.

²⁵ Heb 5, 7.

²⁶ Isai 30, 19.

²⁷ 1 Thess 5, 16-18.