COURAGE AND COWARDICE

By BRENDAN CALLAGHAN

AT SOME unreflective level, we believe ourselves to be not only immortal, but also practically omnipotent. We censor our experiencing of failure and death, and block out from our consciousness these reminders of our limited mortality. But by so doing, we make ourselves their prisoners; by denying that it is there at all, we render ourselves unable to face what we fear; by denying that we have fear, we make cowards of ourselves. The inability to face these simple facts of our own humanity can be seen not simply as a model of our other imbalances and inordinate attachments, but as lying at the heart of them all. So it is of considerable importance, if we are trying to come to some fuller understanding of the workings of the Spirit of God in our hearts, that we face up to this question of our fears, and find the courage to examine our cowardice.

We need to recognize that we *are* cowards. We often find ourselves saying something like, 'If only I had . . . ', as we reflect on a past opportunity. Perhaps the situation was one of taking a practical decision, or of an encounter with another person, the making of a commitment, or speaking up for a position or a cause: had we been a little more brave, the situation would have been better. We know that we are cowards, to a greater or lesser extent; but we do not fully understand why.

We need to recognize that we *have* fears: paradoxically, we may be too fearful to do this. We often over-react or under-react when the conversation moves to some topic or another, either vehemently dismissing it as totally unworthy of having any time wasted on it, or affecting an elaborate nonchalance and light-heartedness. We often find that we have listed for ourselves nine perfectly convincing reasons (where one would do) why we should not embark on a particular course of action; or that, contrariwise, having accepted the necessity for engaging in a task, we have somehow or other never

quite got round to it, and are now greatly relieved to discover that it is no longer possible to do it. If we are brave enough to look, then we can see how our fears *do* influence our actions.

Of course, it is possible simply to fall back on the first letter of John, to remind ourselves that 'perfect love casts out fear', and to go on our way rejoicing in our new-found freedom. But far from a casting-out of fears in the strength of the gospel, this can be in reality a 'spiritualized' denial of their existence in the first place. Only when our fears are recognized can they truly be uprooted; only when we have faced them can we know that they have gone. It is possible also, at an even simpler level, to rebuke ourselves for the mere thought that, as children of a loving Father, we might have fears at all. This, in reality, is being fearful of God knowing about our fears: a ridiculous notion when thus consciously articulated, but at the hidden level at which our fears operate, it remains a powerful motivation.

How, in that case, do we come to recognize our fears, and thus become able to bring them to the Lord? One illustration which may help us is that of a frightened child. Only when the child has been calmed, and made to feel safe and supported, will he or she be able to face and to talk about what it was that was frightening. Until that sense of safety and security has been achieved, it is far too distressing for the child to recognize whatever was the cause of fear. As with the child, so with the adult; and especially in the realm of fear. Unless and until we have been helped to feel that we are secure, we shall be unable to face our fears. Unlike the child, however, these unfaced fears do not surface in our conscious experience. With all the dangerous control of sophisticated adults, we block them off, bottle them up, deny them, and all unrealizing pay the inevitable price. If, in some way, we can be sufficiently secure, then we can face our fears: it is here that the gospel message of God's love has its part to play.

If we turn to the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius, we recognize this process of the establishing of security and the facing of what is fearful in practical form. During the First Week, the retreatant is led to contemplate sin and death and hell, and to experience the fear and horror involved; whilst the context for this prayer is that of the Principle and Foundation, calling not for an assent of the mind (which would be redundant, for these *are* the principles of our faith), but for an assent of the heart. By praying over these foundation-facts, we put ourselves in context, reminding our hearts of our

position *vis-à-vis* God our Father. Julian of Norwich puts it thus:

> Our faith is nothing else but a right understanding and true belief and sure trust that with regard to our essential being we are in God and God in us, though we do not see him.

The style is very different from that of Ignatius Loyola, but the sentiment is surely the same. Ignatius asks us to experience not just 'right understanding and true belief', but also that 'sure trust' which Julian links with them: the foundation of trust on which the Ignatian Exercises can build and which they in their turn can strengthen still further.

As for the microcosm of the Exercises, so also for the christian life as a whole: the prerequisite of any discovery and discernment of God at work in our lives, let alone of any response, is a sure trust. A sure trust that God is at work in the world; a sure trust in his unconditional love; a sure trust, at the last, in the goodness of the world, and of the goodness of ourselves in that world. Not that this sort of trust is in any essential way particular to Christianity: while the formulations will vary, the same underpinning of trust will be found in all the great religious traditions. It is to this sort of underpinning that Jung's oft-quoted remark refers, concerning religion in the second part of life: what he saw as essential to the recovery of his older patients was not belonging to a worshipping community, but having a basic attitude of trust towards the world. But for a Christian, that sure trust to which he too is called finds its expression in the very term with which we address our God: 'Abba, Father': a child-like response to a father's love, and a conviction that it is the Spirit speaking in us (cf Rom 8,14-17).

It is to the child that we must look if we are to understand what this sure trust is. Erik Erikson directs us to the first months of life as the time when this basic trust is achieved; or, to be more precise, when a balance is first achieved between basic trust and mistrust. The balance can be swung by later events towards greater trust or mistrust; but to alter the balance achieved in those first months becomes increasingly difficult as time passes. Basic trust is essentially unconditional. The helpless infant cannot do anything to make the outside world respond in any particular way; either it is experienced as worthy of trust or it is not. In no way can the infant 'earn' the experience of a trustworthy world. 'Abba, Father' is the child's unconditional response to unconditional love. But do we

experience God's love as unconditional? It would seem that, for the most part, we do not. Rather, we make ourselves a God in our own image, a God who loves us when we do good, and who does not love us when we do evil, a God whose love we earn, a God whose love is conditional. We can and do learn to be fearful — of ourselves, of particular others, of the world, of God.

But when it is a matter of being fearful of God, of mistrusting God, then we are in difficulties, because we have also learnt that we ought to love God, and to look on him as a loving Father. So we find ourselves in the classic *Catch-22* situation:

> If I am afraid of God I won't be able to love him freely. The only way to stop being afraid of God is to admit that I *am* afraid of him. If I don't love him freely I won't be able to admit that I am afaid of him.

There would seem to be no way out of this; the reader, though, may suspect that there is something missing.

One thing that is definitely missing is the Gospel: the good news of God's unconditional love. Another is the fulness of our humanity: the complex of motivations and desires and freedoms and limitations which enables us to be both courageous and fearful at the same time. But most important of all, there is missing the Other: the one who is not me, who is not governed by my fears and prejudices, who can take the initiative of loving me, and whom I can come to love. Despite all that we recognize in ourselves and in others, there is good news; despite our fears, we have courage; despite our loneliness, we are not on our own unless we choose to be.

To accept any particular passage from the scriptures as 'gospel' in this sense of good news for me, is equally to realize that the passages which speak to my fears and anxieties may not be those in which the Lord speaks to the fears and anxieties of anyone else. For most of us, the scriptures contain such special passages: an incident in a gospel, a word of Jesus, a song of hope or trust in psalm or canticle, the proclamation of a prophet or judge, an insight of a Paul or John. Whatever these passages are, they have a vital role to play: taking the gospel seriously is hard work, because it challenges our fears on their home ground. So for me, the trust of the psalmist expressed in Psalm 102 has been 'gospel' in times of anxiety, good news:

> As a father has compassion on his sons,
> the Lord has pity on those who fear him;
> for he knows of what we are made,
> he remembers that we are dust.

In similar fashion, Peter being rescued as his fears threaten to drown him in the sea of Galilee has its special place in my prayer. Each of us needs to make full use of the words which are particularly gospel-for-us. For to accept the gospel is not to throw away the key by which we keep our fears locked up, but rather to bring them out from the darkness, to see them for what they are, and, having looked them in the face and recognized our own features there, to be free to get on with seeing our lives more steadily.

We need also to accept that the gospel speaks to humanity: to a person who is free and unfree, brave and fearful, whole and unwhole. Our choice for God, made at the free centre of our being, has to work itself out through a whole complex of determinism, weaknesses, and neuroses which co-exist with freedoms and strengths and areas of health. We are affected by our heredity, by our upbringing as infants and children, by the way we were educated, by our experience of family life. We achieve freedoms, and we acquire habits of action and thought, feeling and attitudes, which limit and constrain our freedoms.

The late Archbishop Roberts S.J., in describing the human journey through life, once used the striking image of bringing home a crippled ship. In a world that often seems bent on assuring us that the storms we experience are purely imaginary, we can privately feel overwhelmed by the damage that we know has been wrought, and we can despair of ever reaching harbour. But the image can remind us also of the strengths we might otherwise overlook, as well as of the flaws which many of our contemporaries wish away as superstitious anachronisms.

As we grow, we develop the basic human qualities we can all recognize: trust, hope, autonomy, care, fidelity, wisdom, and so on. These are the qualities which make for the positive strength of our common humanity. We develop courage: courage born out of all the affirming events in our lives, courage strengthened by all those encounters with our fears that were successful in so far as whatever the practical outcome, we were not mastered by our fears. As followers of the Lord, we need to come to see what is true: in all that builds us up, all that affirms us, all that strengthens us, the Spirit is at work. The Spirit is a sound shipwright; if, like any shipmaster, we need to know the weaknesses and vulnerable points of our vessel, so also we need to know its strong points and its basic soundness.

The third element missing from our formulation of the human situation is the presence of the Other. In our heads we can accept the

gospel, and can come to appreciate the realities of our limited life; but 'it is by the experience of love that the iron circle of selfishness can be broken'. It is when another human person becomes as important to me as myself that I begin to be able to take the risk of self-revelation. It is only when I can take that risk that I can let myself be loved as I am, and love another as he or she is. For all the limitations of our humanity, we can and do experience unconditional love: my love for this person, his or her love for me. It is this experience which is for many of us both the context and medium of the Father's love for us, and a further step towards accepting and returning the unconditional love of God in all its fulness.

To put it another way, in the terms used by Julian: it is in the experience of trusting another, and of receiving their trust, that we learn to have a sure trust in God. It would seem that, for most of us, this experience is necessary on the human level: God works with his creation. But this is not to say that the human experience of love and trust is necessarily close in time to any growth in our sure trust in God. We may so have learnt trust in our childhood that with the increasing revelation of God to us, we come to trust him easily and naturally. But most of us come to adulthood in need of healing and affirmation for our hurts and lack of trust, a healing and an affirmation that generally come to us through our fellow men and women. Only exceptionally, it seems, does the Lord so touch a person with the presence of his love that any need of human affirmation drops away.

Our *Catch-22* situation, then, was a misrepresentation: as a human person, free and unfree, with the promise of God's good news spoken to me, affirmed by the love and concern of others for me and by my love and concern for them, I can love God freely from the midst of my fears. Any loving, any entrusting of myself, or the slightest part of myself, to another, is done in the tension between fear and trust. I can never know another person fully, no matter how close we may become; always there will be areas of darkness and mutual ignorance. Nor is any human person I may come to love ever entirely good, wholly free from limitations, weaknesses and sin. But my fear in such loving must be an appropriate fear: recognized and measured, subordinated to the trust I have learnt.

If we observe our own reactions, what the psychologists tell us is borne out: it is the 'unknown' that gives fear its real power. Take two recent films which many people found genuinely frightening: *Jaws*, and *Alien*. For the first half of the former, and the whole of the

latter, the audience never clearly sees the creature which inspires so much fear. While the film-makers limit themselves to hints and half-glimpses, the imaginations of the audience seize on such fragments and construct something truly fearful. Once the shark in *Jaws* is clearly seen, it may or may not continue to shock, but it loses the power to cause real fear. The creature in *Alien*, never clearly seen, retains that power to the end of the film and beyond.

To stay with the genre of science-fiction for a moment provides us with one positive formulation of this insight into the power of the unknown to strike fear:

> I must not fear.
> Fear is the little-death that brings total obliteration.
> I will face my fear.
> I will permit it to pass over me and through me.
> And when it has gone past I will turn the inner eye to see its path.
> Where the fear has gone there will be nothing.
> Only I will remain.

This 'Litany against Fear', from Frank Herbert's *Dune* trilogy, may be no more than a fictional trifle; but it does serve to express something important. To rob my fears of the power they have, that they have drawn from the 'unknown', it is necessary to face them, to make them fully known. This facing of my fears requires not just a notional acknowledgement that they exist, but a readiness to experience them as they actually are, permitting them to 'pass over me and through me'. If I can do this, then the greatest part of the power of my fears will be gone. Now I shall know what it is that I fear; and, whatever it is, it will be less than the terrible unknown created by my unconscious.

But, it may be objected, it is all very well talking about these groundless fears, which only need to be faced in order to be recognized as having no foundation. What of real fears, fears based on reality, in the world as it really is. Examples from films and stories are one thing; what of genuine risks and threats?

Frank Herbert's heroes in fiction stand alone before a callously indifferent universe, yet with the courage to face their fears. For the Christian, called to factual heroics, the world is in the last resort not callous, not indifferent; and no one need stand alone except by choice.

'I will be with you always, even to the consummation of the

world'. What we often overlook is that these words were spoken by the man whose fears left him drenched and exhausted in the garden, a man who prayed as only he could pray, that 'this cup might pass'. Our God chose to know human fear, chose to face his fear, chose to let himself be the path through which it flowed: and he chose this as a man. For if we think of Jesus as being able in some way to 'switch off' from his experience of the world, and to 'switch into' the serenity and peace of the Godhead, then we have made for ourselves an unfeeling Jesus, an inhuman Jesus, a schizoid Jesus. But the gospels show us a man sweating with fear, a man drenched and exhausted, and still going forward freely in love to his death.

It is to such a God, and not to some distant unfeeling being, that we can turn in our fear. The author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* tells his readers, battling with thoughts or memories that might draw them away from God, to 'look over the shoulders' of such thoughts, towards God. But there are occasions when we must reckon ourselves helpless if we are to be realistic, and on these occasions, the author of *The Cloud* advises us to surrender. To do otherwise would be false to the situation; but our surrender, our admitting of our helplessness, is into the hands of God — and that is humility.

> And this humility causes God to come down in his might, and avenge you of your enemies, and take you up, and fondly dry your spiritual eyes — just as a father would act towards his child, who had been about to die in the jaws of the wild boars, or mad, devouring bears.

There are more modern testimonies , speaking the same message in harsher terms: if in the depths of fear we turn to the Lord, he is there. Maximilian Kolbe, taking the place of the father of a family and going to the death cells with serene trust; a nameless group of Jews, numbered off for death (in Nazi Germany? in the Gulag?) and breaking out of their numbering into the triumphant proclamation of the *Shema*: 'Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is one Lord'. The awesome dignity and trust to be found among the totally destitute; the serenity and peace of so many of the terminally ill who know their state: in countless ways, if we are prepared to listen, we can hear the voice of the Spirit of the Lord encouraging — filling with courage — those who have most to fear.

It is here, in this gospel-proclamation of the power of God at work in the midst of all that is most fearful — inhumanity, destitution

and death—that the three elements of our christian experience come together again. For this message is 'gospel', it *is* good news. It is gospel proclaimed in the midst of humanity, where the worst that could be envisaged somehow brings forth a goodness that could never be envisaged; it is gospel proclaimed one to another, in the power of that Other who chose to share our living from its worst to its best.

There is no need for the psychologists to tell us that the matter of trust underlies all the rest of our human development: no need, that is, once we are prepared to realize how all-pervading its effect. So we find ourselves back with Ignatius, and the start of the Exercises in the trust-experience of the Principle and Foundation, or with the most famous of all Dame Julian's sayings:

> 'But all will be well, and every kind of thing will be well'.

The english mystics lived in a world of uncertainty and fear, which is perhaps why they speak so clearly to our own day. They lived in the world in a spirit of trust which remains a message for our own day. There would seem to be no more fitting way to close than with the clear-eyed observation of Julian:

> He did not say: You will not be troubled, you will not be travailed, you will not be disquieted; but he said: You will not be overcome.