

LEARNING TO LIVE ALONE

By MARTIN ISRAEL

IN THE GENESIS story God, having fashioned man in his own image, says, 'It is not good that man should be alone. I will make him a helpmate'. None of the other animals proves suitable, and so God creates woman out of the man's own flesh and bone: this is why a man leaves his parents and joins himself to his wife, and they become one body (Gen 2,18-24). And yet, on a deeper level of being we are all alone, for there are tracts of the human personality that are too sacred for the gaze of any outside eye. God alone knows the reaches of the soul, for these are hidden even from the sight of the individual until he has acquired the proficiency of self-confrontation that comes from much experience in the school of life, a school where we learn by loss as well as by gain. It is certainly right that people should never be alone, yet paradoxically they may have to spend many years learning to live alone before they acquire the ability of being at one with all life.

There are few experiences more shattering in the self-revelation they incur than that of being on one's own for even a limited period of time. When we bask in the company of our fellows, indifferent and even hostile as this may be, we can at least direct the focus of our attention to the world outside and away from the centre of darkness which is our inner domain. This darkness is the central chasm of menacing meaninglessness that is normally covered over as plausibly as possible with a superficial draping of events, activities and relationships. In that sombre inner realm, which emits the ominous stench of a cellar, there are strewn the primordial skeletons bearing witness to the common end of life: ageing, disease and death. No matter how convivial our social activities, how propitious our material circumstances, or how fulfilling and zestful each moment may be, there is not far below the deceptive surface a pit in which the debris of life's consequences lies dimly exposed. When all goes well outwardly, we can afford to avert our gaze from the problems inherent in existence itself, but there comes a time in the life of many of us when the convivial, prosperous surface wears thin and a void gapes menacingly in front of us.

This void directs our attention to the uncharted depths of the

unconscious, depths not previously entirely unknown nor their forbidding contents absolutely hidden from our more profound awareness, but we had preferred not to notice them, since their existence casts an ominous shadow on our present complacency that passes for happiness. We all prefer the amiable security of the moment in hand to a perilous adventure into the unknown. But life does not respect our wishes: we are to grow into real people and not simply to vegetate in a world of temporary convenience that masquerades as a paradise. Such a world is an illusion because its stability depends on the compliance of other people and the benign temper of outer circumstances; when these are disrupted, the house of cards that we call our private life falls in. We have, in the end, to be like the person, described in Matthew 7,24-25, who built his house on a rock which withstood rain, floods, and gales. The rock is the word of God, on whom alone we can rely absolutely.

While we have even one person on whom we can call for consistent support we can continue to live an evenly contoured existence; even that person serves to direct our gaze outwardly and away from the darkness within. However, the more awry our inner life becomes, the less competent are we to sustain an enduring relationship with anyone, and the greater becomes the danger of losing that essential bulwark against a descent into the hell within us. The two classes of people especially exposed to this precipitate descent into the self-knowledge of hell that stems from a terminated relationship are the widowed and the divorced. It is the woman who is especially liable to suffer inasmuch as the man often has a greater opportunity for remarriage. Nevertheless, for not a few people the experience of living alone may continue indefinitely, even until the ending of earthly life. Ample time will therefore be afforded for the person to explore the topography of the soul, and what was previously obscure and menacing may at last become familiar ground, even indeed a holy place of tranquil contemplation.

When one is obliged to live alone, the old landmarks of friendly support and mutual interest that are normally accepted without comment recede into the background. Other people can no longer be counted on for sustained companionship, since they have their own interests to serve, and in any case the divorced and bereaved soon become an unwelcome, if not frankly embarrassing, incubus. If they are given too much attention, their plight diverts the gaze of the worldly ones into unexplored depths of human experience that are neither amiable nor easily negotiable. Only those who know their

inner space well and are untroubled by its intensity and extent can afford to give freely of themselves to others on the arduous path of self-knowledge. But it is nevertheless to this goal that our spiritual adventure is directing us even when the darkness before us is so complete that we are ignorant of the destination to which we are proceeding. The bitterest fruit of both widowhood and divorce is the ensuing loneliness, but from it we can learn how misplaced our priorities have been: we have exalted a fellow human being above God even to the extent perhaps of neglecting our primary allegiance to the things of the spirit in our concern for the material attractions of the passing hour. Humankind indeed should never be alone, and yet until an individual is bereft of all human fellowship he may never attain that absolute self-acceptance which is a prerequisite for any enduring, mutually enriching relationship with another person.

How can we come to terms with a state of imposed aloneness that follows such a natural disaster as the death of a loved one, or the sense of betrayal that may linger after the break-up of a marriage? The first step is acceptance without in any way trying to play down the emotional anguish of the stark loss. What is accepted in its naked reality and given to God in child-like trust is somehow softened and made bearable; what we ourselves try to manage continues to be hard and unyielding no matter how much we may believe that we have come to terms with the event. Acceptance in trust, on the other hand, brings with it the courage to proceed onwards beyond the receding light of known day into the gathering darkness of the approaching night. If one tries to escape the dark chill of aloneness, one can all too easily fall victim in the future to an unsatisfactory relationship that may end more categorically in failure than did the present one. The way ahead is towards self-discovery, so that in the end that vast estate which we call the personality may become fully the domain of the one who inhabits it. Then even the darkness, which is identified with the unconscious, may be brought finally into the light of consciousness, so that the native dread of the unknown may be slowly lightened by knowledge and healed by understanding and tenderness. Every separative experience in life is a little death, but in its wake there is a small resurrection of the bereaved person to a greater height of self-awareness and a finer ability to identify with others that may eventually attain a dimension of universal sympathy.

'We brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it; but as long as we have food and clothing, let us be content with that' (1 Tim 6,7-8). The experience of living alone distinguishes

between the accessories of comfortable living and the elements of a fulfilled life. All that does not belong to the core of being that we call the self is of the nature of comfort and is there to divert us in life's varied journey; that which is inseparable from the self is necessarily with us in all circumstances, and it is this that must be known, accepted and loved before an impregnable personality can be fashioned out of the hard, living elements of truth, toil and sacrifice. The microcosm of the self is an image of the macrocosm of the universe. As we grope furtively in the darkness of ignorance, so we discover elements deeply set in our own nature that resonate with the dark passions of the world: fear, anger, prejudice and veiled destructiveness. These malign attitudes have been in existence since the dawn of human consciousness, and will persist until they are finally redeemed and healed in selfless love. Nothing in ourselves can remain hidden forever, no matter how strenuously its existence is denied, but if it is faced in faith and courage it will slowly be transfigured by a love that radiates from a source previously unknown in our experience. This source lies below the surface of disturbed emotions that normally dominate our lives, and if unchecked lead us perilously along the path of imbalance to self destruction.

As we explore the turbulent reaches of the mind, as we enter the inner life of aloneness, so we come all at once to an oasis of quietness and peace. It is called traditionally the soul, or the spiritual self, and from its centre there radiates the peace that passes all understanding. This is the peace of the spirit, where the soul is constantly illuminated and enlightened by the Spirit of God. It is a sad comment on the reality of everyday existence that we may have to be deprived of human company before, perhaps for the first time, we become aware of the light of God within us. 'The Word was the true light that enlightens all men' (Jn 1,9). This is the supreme fruit of self-knowledge, to know the light of Christ that is both the meaning and end of all life. Those whose path leads them towards a life alone are traversing a track through the desolation of human bitterness and the foothills of aspiration to the peaks of illumination from whose heights shines the light of God that transfigures the world and resurrects the dead.

When once the possible destination of a life apparently thwarted of a future productive relationship with another human being is glimpsed, a way forward is indicated. This way is a vocation to a life fulfilled in relationships of a very different scale to those originally

planned in the self-centred vision of youth. The life alone is, after all, not to be one of separation from human society into the seclusion of withdrawal, enforced resignation, and increasing bitterness, where the advent of attrition and death is stoically awaited. It is instead to be one of unconditional self-giving to all who are in need, a giving that proceeds from the centre within from which the divine light radiates its transfiguring glow. This change in direction from the usual self-centred type of personal relationship with a limited number of people to a self-giving relationship with an infinite variety of different people is not deliberately planned. It cannot be devised according to human design or the will to power. On the contrary, it requires a complete change in perspective in which the demands for personal recompense that characterize the ego-consciousness are put into abeyance. A new life is being born in which love is the supreme directive and service the glorious end. Personal recognition and material comfort are no fitting reward, for at their best they are ephemeral; the only reward worthy of its name is the witnessing of relief and new life being given to others. 'It was only right we should celebrate and rejoice, because your brother here was dead and has come to life, he was lost and is found' (Lk 15,32).

This change in perspective, a true *metanoia* or repentance, is a conversion experience in which the ego turns to the soul within, rather than to the powers that govern the world without. As it turns inward, so it confronts the light from which all illumination proceeds. The light from within never fails, whereas the world's glitter fades with the ending of the day. The apparent retreat from the world's requirements of conviviality and social compliance is in fact a withdrawal from a life of selfish demands, and an entry into a new life of self-giving devotion to all creatures. The basis of this change lies in the nature of the personality itself: the deeper we penetrate its recesses, the more do we discover that they are shared with our fellows. What we had previously believed to be a purely private domain is in fact a place held in common by all those who have had the enterprise to explore their own inner space and claim its riches; what is most sacred to any of us personally is found to be equally sacred to all others on the path. The closer we are to God, the nearer are we to each other in self-dedication, and finally, as in mystical illumination, the face of the other is seen to be oneself. It is the Holy Spirit who transfigures all souls, so that while retaining their identity, they become parts of the one body, whose name and nature are Christ himself.

Jesus spelled out these high demands for discipleship very clearly:

If anyone wants to be a follower of mine, let him renounce himself and take up his cross and follow me. For anyone who wants to save his life will lose it but anyone who loses his life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. What gain, then, is it for a man to win the whole world and ruin his life? (Mk 8,34-37).

This view of life is not unworldly, still less other-worldly. It is truly incarnational, seeing the life of Jesus as the quintessence of fulfilled living. Admittedly he chose the celibate way of unremitting self-giving to all in need rather than the sexually polarized relationship with another person that is the path for most of humankind. The importance of such a relationship is that it develops the qualities of commitment to someone other than oneself, loyalty and trust; at its best it removes the centre of attention from oneself to the other person, who should ideally embrace the whole world in its concern. But this ideal path usually has to penetrate the vicissitudes of a deep personal relationship which may be summarily terminated in the death of one of the partners or even more sadly by the processes of legal separation and divorce. Even if another deep relationship is to be granted in the course of time, little will have been gained if the springs of an enduring relationship with life itself have not been tapped during the period of isolation. Personal relationships will inevitably come to a stop at a point of mutual convenience until the universal source of all relationships has been encountered and acknowledged. This is the Spirit of God; once he is known a life-giving power is bestowed on all fellowship, which then ceases to be demanding and exclusive and becomes instead universal in service and open to all experiences and encounters.

The change in perspective that dawns gradually on the person who is obliged to live alone comes from God. It is a gift of grace and therefore cannot be manipulated. But there are attitudes that facilitate this change and accelerate its renewing effect on the personality. The first attitude is that of acceptance and to this is added a one-pointed attention to the moment in hand. That the mind should not meander lugubriously into the past which is beyond reclamation or project itself into a specious future of hopes and fears, it is important that it should be fully occupied in the present. We tend to take our present blessings for granted as we live our lives in past regrets and future speculations; to be rooted in the present is the basis of a truly incarnational way of life. To be able to bless the

present circumstances, inadequate though they may be, is to bring the divine essence into the most undistinguished of circumstances. Our menial possessions, the place where we live, the encounters we have with strangers in the course of daily life become sources of rejoicing and infinite thanksgiving. If we are fortunate enough to have some definite employment, uninspiring as it may appear, we begin to see it in a new light: as a means of service as well as a way to self-realization. The basis of all this is the ability to reach the depth of a situation or an incident, so that beneath the deceptively banal surface the presence of God may be known. In the atmospheric account of the appearance of the risen Lord to the disciples on the road to Emmaus, he showed himself to them as a common stranger. In more ordinary circumstances they would hardly have had the time, let alone the inclination, to notice him, but now, in their dereliction, they were aware because they had found someone who could listen as they unburdened their grief on him. And then they were ready to hear the words of life spoken by this stranger, so that their hearts were quickened as they proceeded towards their destination. He was admittedly a special stranger, and yet he is in all strangers if we have the patience to listen. Even in the criminal he is to be found provided we first allow him to speak through us in solicitude and respect: as deep is calling to deep as God's cataracts roar (Ps 42,7), so the voice of Christ within us evokes our Lord in the other person when we flow out in compassion to him.

The height of present awareness is attained in contemplation: the mind ascends in wordless communion to God as the whole personality is dedicated to him. Contemplation proceeds to thanksgiving and to intercession for all who are in need at that time. And so the burden of one's dereliction is shared with the whole world as its burden is assumed in the work of prayer. Prayer is not simply a special attitude of worship carried out for a limited time each day; it is a constant attitude of awareness to God that is integral to one's daily work wherever one may be. It is then that every moment is seen to be a sacrament: behind its outer, rather dense, façade there is an inner presage of the grace of God. In Christ that divine presence does not shrink from any human encounter, and as we progress on the way of awareness, so he is with us, unobtrusively yet constantly, wherever we may be. Whenever we encounter inner compassion towards another person, indeed any living thing, that is fructified in remedial action, Christ is very evident within the spirit of the soul and directing operations on a very practical level.

It is in this spirit of awareness that our personal interests find their most durable satisfaction. A person on his own may welcome this as an excellent opportunity to read books, listen to music, or to become involved in some private work that was previously impossible because of the pressure of outer events; time is certainly consumed at a vicious speed by the demands society makes on us. But if the person on his own takes refuge in such means of diversion simply to avert an encounter with the darkness within, he will eventually, and usually quite soon, come to a cul-de-sac. He will make the uncomfortable discovery that these ways of diversion are self-limiting and ultimately frustrating if they are not shared with his fellows. When hoarded or practised in privacy they soon cease to satisfy. And yet a person living alone cannot easily share them with anyone else; even membership of clubs and other associations of people with like interests is seldom really fulfilling until one can strike a friendship on a deeper basis than merely a common concern. It may be a love of music or the support of a political party that brings a number of people together, but until they can give freely of themselves to each other on a level far deeper than the common interest, their association will remain superficial and their fellowship transitory. Once they have explored their own depths through music, literature or philanthropic ideals — depths attained in undisturbed solitude when every aspect of the personality can come into full focus and be subject to direct scrutiny — then they can share that depth with another person, and a relationship begins that depends less on the common interest and more on the resonance of the two souls responding to the music of eternity.

Furthermore, this relationship will become less exclusive as it is found to be a common article of experience with a greater number of people. When Jesus conversed with the common folk, he was able to effect an instant relationship with them; he was a welcome guest at the festivities of the lowest strata of the society of his time, much to the distaste of more virtuous people. I have no doubt that he attained his easy rapport simply by entering his own depths and flowing out from them in loving concern to all those whom he encountered in a day's work. He did not put up any front nor preach urgently to them about the welfare of their souls — if he had, they would have turned away from him very quickly. But he simply confronted them as they were in that moment of time, and if they were willing to receive him, they were filled with a peace and warmth previously unknown to them. This was their first experience of the Holy Spirit in their lives.

But, as we know, not all received him because in his presence all deception and hypocrisy were laid bare. In this way Jesus effected a true relationship with those around him; many loved him but some hated him even to conspiring to kill him.

This is what a life of true relationships means: honest commitment and fearless confrontation first with oneself and then with others. One starts by relating positively one's own darkness and the situations and events occurring around one. As the surface fear is breached, so the infinite potentialities of the depths of one's being are unearthed. And so one comes to inner authenticity, making the discovery that one is infinitely valuable as a person who is a unique creature of God. One then no longer needs to adjust one's image to impress or attract other people, nor need one either envy or denigrate those who are different from one. Such a person can instead go freely and with confidence into the world, flowing out from the depths of his personality to whomsoever he meets in the course of a day's work. He no longer desires anything from the other person since he finds his support in God alone, who is to be found in the very Spirit that sustains him moment by moment. Therefore his relationship with his fellow beings is free and sincere, and he can give of himself in trust and ultimately in love. Such a person, being no longer afraid of the darkness of solitude, does not need to cling obsessively to any other person. The essential polarities of any relationship that has a chance of enduring — commitment and non-attachment — can now be established. Such a relationship has the fundamental requirements of durability inasmuch as no demands are made upon it as a necessity for its existence. It is simply an expression of warmth that does not wane and concern that does not waver. Death itself does not end it since its essence is spiritual; it transcends the bounds of mortal consciousness and flowers in eternity. 'Were a man to offer all the wealth of his house to buy love, contempt is all he would purchase' (Cant 8,7). Love comes from God, and is bestowed by the person who is empty of craving except to bring that love to others, that they too may know the love of God.

When one knows the depth and the glory of the inner life, one is never alone because God's eternal presence is a fact of immediate experience. And when we know him in the depths of solitude, we share him with the world in the common path of life. Our own uniqueness, precious and irreplaceable, is shared most effectively when God's manifest presence illuminates it with a radiance that far transcends mere personality. It then becomes a treasure shared

by us all. Our common situation on life's road is that of a stranger, because we usually walk heedlessly and blind to the reality of the glory around us; this failure of vision is induced by the meretricious attractions of the surface phenomena of daily living, such as obsessive conviviality and material prosperity, when they usurp the place of ultimate importance in the scheme of our life. But when the scales are lifted from our eyes, we see another stranger alongside us, whose presence inflames our hearts as he talks with us, explaining life's mysteries to us, as he did to his disciples on the road to Emmaus.

Then we proceed in his spirit to communicate the same truths to all who will hear, as we live among them and pour out the spirit of love to them. The life alone is indeed a wonderful preparation for a life fully dedicated to all the people around us, not only those in close physical proximity but also the multitudes we can embrace in the universal closeness of prayer.