

HOPE AND ANXIETY

By MARTIN ISRAEL

WE LIVE BY hope; hope, indeed, is anterior even to faith, for without it, there can be no living faith. The famous definition of faith in the Letter to the Hebrews says that only faith can guarantee the blessings we hope for, or prove the existence of realities that at present remain unseen. To the simple mind the object of hope is projected into the future, and the movement towards its fulfilment is the work of faith. Faith in itself is proved by action, since it does not validate itself automatically. As St James says, if good works do not go with faith, it is quite dead. Whereas belief can affect a detached intellectual stance, faith moves actively in the world of the living, where it finds its justification in the change in character that it produces and the work that proceeds from that renewed person. But all springs from a prior hope, that we do not labour in vain and that there is a destination in front of us.

The father of faith in the Semitic religions is Abraham: not only does he leave his country of birth to settle in an unknown land, but he is even prepared to sacrifice his beloved son at the command of God. But in all this act of supreme faith, there is the voice of God telling the patriarch what he should do. Abraham could have disregarded the divine voice, as Jeremiah often wished he had done in view of the terrible sufferings his prophecy caused him, and as the fictional Jonah actually had the temerity to do, but in the end they were guided by a force far beyond human reason, though in no way irrational, to enter a new dimension of human experience. Their hope lay in the ultimate fulfilment of the word of God, initially for the chosen people and eventually the whole human race. Admittedly the prophets of Israel may not have been totally imbued with such a universalistic vision of salvation, but in their more illuminated moments I have little doubt that the greater understanding was vouchsafed them. It is, in the end, a wonderful privilege to be chosen as a special prophet of God, no matter how terrible the sufferings may be during the intermediate period of waiting with its test of loyalty and courage. And so we read in Psalm 146,5: 'Happy the man who has the God of Jacob

to help him, whose hope is fixed on Jahweh his God', a theme reiterated in the Psalms and the Wisdom Books especially.

But what happens when the primary source of hope, the divine presence himself, goes? There are traces of this calamity in the Psalms also, especially the first verse of Psalm 22, repeated, according to the tradition of Mark and Matthew, by Christ on the cross: 'My God, my God, why have you deserted me?' Many try to soften these terrible words of dereliction, an almost complete loss of faith in his prior mission in his moment of unbearable suffering, by remembering that the psalm eventually ends on a note of triumph, and that Jesus was repeating the whole psalm in this frame of mind. Personally this view cuts no ice at all; the intense drama of this part of the crucifixion, at least to me, belies any such comfortable exegesis. The horror of disillusion was total, and the Lord hung on, as it were, by the skin of his teeth and not a warm armchair theology. Indeed, had this not been so, there would have been something unreal, almost theatrical, about Jesus's suffering, which would not have placed it in the context of human anxiety and dread. If he did not partake fully of the human condition there is something faulty about his humanity, and therefore he cannot speak to us with that urgency that is the basis of the Christian revelation of God becoming human and dwelling among us, thereby showing us the glory of a fully realized human being.

I personally believe that all people have an inner knowledge of God however much they may deny this intellectually. It is this knowledge that is our promise of attaining something of the stature of a full person, feet on the ground and head aloft in the atmosphere of the divine reality. Usually our feet determine our metaphysic, but when things go wrong a deeper, higher consciousness asserts itself. A veteran of the First World War once said that there are no atheists in the trenches. When calamity is close at hand the reason yields to a higher authority, and the person is somehow imbued with a strength foreign to his normal situation. But sometimes this God-awareness appears to be obfuscated by a dark pall of anxiety with tinges of an even darker hopelessness. This is a typical experience of depression: all sources of hope are occluded and a cloud of sheer terror envelops the sufferer. The whole question of personal mood is fascinating, especially to an emotionally sensitive, self-aware person. In the normal state the mind is open, alive and filled with the prospects of the immediate future.

It plans ahead with firm resolve, and looks forward to the fruits of its intentions. The inner source of identity, conveniently called the soul, is well protected by a consciousness that diverts the person away from himself to the outer world where he is to achieve his ends. These are just as likely to be artistic as materialistic, as easily involved in the aesthetic or scientific creative process as in building, money-making or political action. And none is, in this respect, to be exalted above the other, for all are equally important in the maintenance of a civilized society. The power that gives momentum to the forward-looking perspective is provided by the Holy Spirit, the lifegiver who gives us the capacity to grow into mature individuals. In the ongoing thrust of life we have scant time to look deeply into ourselves; the extravert action of world-building diverts us from any consideration of our ultimate destiny as we seek to influence the situation around us. We tend to take life for granted, including its Author, whom all but the most spiritually aware so often take for granted in their exciting journey onward. Like Pharaoh, we may have our quota of fertile years, but seldom do we heed the inner Joseph warning us to use the time profitably in anticipation of the lean years to come, when the divine presence is apparently no longer with us, and we have to see ourselves naked and unprotected by any distracting projection of our imagination into the future.

This is a moment of truth, in my opinion in store for us all in our special way. As Proverbs 14,10 puts it, 'The heart knows its own grief best, nor can a stranger share its joy'. In other words, our own particular descent into hell is unique and not to be compared in its intensity with that of anyone else, so special is individual sensitivity. But when this moment of descent comes upon us, the insulation afforded by the presence of the Holy Spirit seems to be withdrawn, and with it goes the buoyant hope that sustains us each day, as we, like growing children, plan our enterprises with a firm faith to be fertilised by appropriate action. And now suddenly we find ourselves in a barren land with nothing to move us onwards. The soul's outer protection is removed and our inner emotional sensitivity is scarcely bearable. The guilt that we all know as part of the inconsiderate life we have previously led is magnified to such a degree that our self-esteem is shattered. All we can see is our worthlessness and past misdemeanours, while before us there is an unending vista of loneliness and oblivion. Likewise, whatever we may, through negligence, have omitted to

do in the past now looms up as an intolerable judgment against us as we descend into the pit of our private hell, sure only of our wickedness and the hopeless vacuum lying around us extending to eternity. Concomitant with this feeling of total self-abnegation there is also an inexplicable, but very pervasive, anxiety that interferes disastrously with the capacity to sleep. Even when the person feels quite tired and would normally drop off to slumber for a little while, now a peculiar lack of confidence in the power of life itself seems to inhibit him from letting go. Even if, after going to bed, he is able to sleep, he soon awakens and then has very great difficulty in going back to sleep once more. The condition I have described is called clinical depression. The tendency is probably inherited, but it is often precipitated by some outer event such as childbirth, a surgical operation, or more obvious psychological factors like disappointment, retirement from active employment or the loss of a loved one.

The full explanation of the condition is still unknown; there is almost certainly some dysfunction of the brain, because specific antidepressant drugs often produce a striking amelioration of the condition. But probably in addition there are more definitely psychological factors at work. The person is often over-conscientious in his work, sensitive to pain in himself and in the world around him, and unable to give vent adequately to anger. Psychotherapy aims at making the person aware of this unconscious residue of anger so that he can let it out of his system. But none of this therapy, whether medicinal or psychodynamic, usually cures the condition fully, for the tendency remains. I personally believe that it is meant to remain, and that such people have a special vocation in bearing the pain of the world in humble imitation of Christ and the saints. The Gethsemane experience of Jesus, when, in a state of complete vulnerability, he was assailed with the totality of human, and indeed cosmic, disorder, seems to me to be experienced, albeit much less intensely—for no ordinary person could bear it and remain alive in the flesh—by the depressive subject. The two Christian saints that come to mind immediately are the Carmelites St John of the Cross and St Thérèse of Lisieux. The latter was assailed by the powers of darkness right up to the time of her death, having known the terrible night of non-existence and also having eaten the bread of unbelievers. To one so closely attached to the blessed Trinity, this spiritual obfuscation was the very realm of hell.

Of course, much depression in everyday life does not touch these appalling depths. It shows itself as a feeling of meaninglessness in a world that drifts by aimlessly to a chorus of satanic unbelief joined not only by the heedless masses but also the professional classes who have nothing to offer but shallow academic advice or, even worse, trite religious comfort. For it must be acknowledged that many ministers of religion keep clear of such a terrible involvement in the depths of existence while they peddle panaceas of scripture or dogma with great gusto. Let it be said at once that both scripture and dogma are vitally important in our salvation, but they fall effortlessly and uselessly off the lips of all except those who have suffered and can understand and describe the deeper implications of what is preached. In this respect it is noteworthy that the crowds heard the unknown Jesus of Nazareth with joy because he spoke with an authority that moved their hearts, whereas the professional religious teachers of the time left them untouched. The openness of Jesus to the suffering of the masses, later to be dramatically manifested in the period of his passion, was already there when he started his ministry; the suffering servant never loses his capacity to take on the pain of those around him so that by his wounds the world is healed.

And so the depression of everyday life continues. If only there were a spark of hope, the cloud could be lifted. The heart of depression is fear, like the fear of falling asleep. We cannot perform this simple act, indeed it is done for us if we are quiet and composed, if our minds are not clouded with fear about not being able to fall asleep. The little child falls asleep effortlessly because his innate faith is grounded on a unspoken hope that all is well and will be well when he awakens. When we grow to adult stature and our lives show the corruption of experience on the clean slate of innocence, our hope is no longer fresh. Sleep is less easily attained as a troubled conscience gnaws at the soul, reminding it that the law of cause and effect cannot be contravened forever. When the material prizes of life have been enjoyed, if indeed they are to be attained by the person, they depart with the years and leave a threatening hiatus. If the person has lived a life of decency and service, the fruits of love will never leave him, but many people are selfish and inconsiderate. Then the fruits are a depression with a strong awareness of a life misspent even if there have been great material rewards at an earlier period. The only prize worth anything at all is love, and this is earned by giving love to others

even as Jesus did. If our treasure was our work, our social position, our personal gifts and achievements, and even our personal relationships, these will all depart, and nothing of substance will be left. There will be no hope because there will be nothing for which to hope. We make our old age in our youth, but few see this at the right time. God is eternally with us, but we so often are far from him. When we need him, he is still there, but we cannot come to him until we have come to see the type of life we have led. Then humility may show itself for the first time in our lives.

When all this is seen in perspective, it would appear that there are two levels of depression: the common type in which the person is brought to face the enormities of selfishness and inconsideration for others in his life, and the truly spiritual type in which a great servant of humanity takes on the sin of the world for its healing. He may not know what he has taken on, but the marks of the cross are very apparent to others. Such a person was the prophet Jeremiah, whose life, from the beginning of his spiritual career to his tragic end among renegades of his own countrymen in Egypt, was a long saga of unrelieved suffering and gloom. He often rebelled against his fate, for God did not seem to care very much for the material well-being of his servant, but somehow he kept alive: God sustained him sufficiently to do his work but gave him no extra encouragement. Yet his prophecy of the new covenant to be written in the hearts of believers, no longer dependent on outside teaching and exhortation, was the great point of his life. He taught a religion of the spirit which was to inaugurate the advent of the Semitic triad of later times: Judaism, Christianity and Islam at their best. The God who so often apparently deserted Jeremiah was, through his witness to the truth, to show future generations the real meaning of deity and the place of God in the hearts of mature people. Isaiah speaks of God hiding himself, and many ordinary believers battling with the insuperable problems of everyday life would heartily endorse the prophet's wonder and anxiety. But somehow life goes on, and our own problems are embraced in the greater enigma of the universe as we continue day by day until the time of our transition, when younger generations follow on.

How does one live without hope? In the end a study like this is of little use if it does not point to some way ahead, some amelioration of the anxiety of the person apparently drifting to annihilation. I have found, paradoxically enough, that the answer lies in

faith. At the beginning I noted that the faith, following the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews, that leads us on is the guarantor of the blessings we hope for, and that the ultimate hope is based on the divine presence, without which we might as well eat and drink like our animal cousins, for death alone awaits us all. But with God near us, we are directed to our noble calling, which is to be children of God in the likeness of his only son Jesus Christ. If our hope lies in God, so that without his presence there can be no effective hope of anything other than a transient animal existence, how can we have faith in the apparent absence of the divine reality? This is the ultimate question that has to be confronted and solved by all who are in a state of depression, whether frankly clinical or simply a normal reaction to such overwhelming bereavement that there seems to be nothing left for which to live.

Even when God hides himself from us, our fellow creatures are still very much in evidence. Provided we have a great enough sympathy with them, or rather, have had such a sympathy in the past, it is their presence that keeps us on the barely visible path. And so, at least to the spiritual seeker, the second great commandment, loving our neighbour as ourself, leads us on into the invisible realm of faith even when the Source of all is obscured from our view. To the person who has lived entirely for himself, and has, almost unconsciously, used other people for his own pleasure and without any regard for their own welfare, this second commandment is virtually meaningless. And so when the anxiety of depression with its threat of total meaninglessness strikes, he has little to fall back upon. One of the usual reactions to this crisis is morbid self-pity, one of the most destructive of all emotional outlets. It has a static quality, so that the victim wallows in it instead of moving courageously onward along the obscure path, and it also can lead quite deliberately into suspicion and hatred of various alien elements in the vicinity. To project the cause of one's despair away from oneself onto an innocent, helpless scapegoat affords great emotional release, but it leaves the fundamental problem unsolved. The hatred eventually peters out, and then there is nothing left except perhaps self-destruction. On the other hand, when the hopelessness of a depressed state afflicts a spiritually orientated person who has tried to serve his fellows with devotion, he may find to his surprise that these same people come to his aid in a most unexpected fashion. To be sure, they are unlikely to be of direct spiritual comfort—only those who have somehow emerged

intact from the ordeal of depression can be of real comfort to those still labouring in the pit—but nevertheless their presence is something of a challenge to the depressed one to look beyond his own pain to the greater pain of the universe.

In my own encounter with severe depression it was my constant periods of intercession for both the living and the dead each day that kept me on the path to recovery. In these spiritual exercises I felt absolutely nothing at all, the usual glow of the divine presence I know so well during periods of prayer and when I am administering the laying-on of hands being completely in abeyance. I was as it were praying to an unseen presence in a fog of confusion, but my concern for my living and deceased friends somehow kept me on the unlit path. I must acknowledge the value of an antidepressant drug also—and there is no need to feel that orthodox medical treatment in such a state is an unspiritual transaction with the powers of this world of darkness, as some religious enthusiasts sometimes believe—but I have no doubt that the turning-point in my condition was signalled by the advent of a spiritual power during the periods of prayer that brought me back to the times before the illness had struck. Indeed, for this reason alone I am grateful that I had to undergo this painful experience; in addition, of course, the experience has served to deepen my understanding and broaden my compassion for all mentally ill people, and not only depressive subjects. Until one has known something of this first hand, one's sympathy, genuine though it may be, has something of the intellectual ivory tower about it. And so, when we think of the three theological virtues, faith, hope and love, so perfectly graded by St Paul in 1 Corinthians 13,13, it may well be that on occasions faith may indeed have to precede hope. It was my obscure faith in the efficacy of my prayers that kept me going during my depression, even though I probably needed more prayer than most of those for whom I interceded. And even this situation is not uncommon in the spiritual life: sometimes very severely afflicted people, usually indeed by physical rather than mental illness, are remarkably fine intercessors. Once they learn to get themselves out of the way, they can be really effective instruments of God's grace, as Jeremiah had to learn during the painful course of his ministry. When things became more hopeless so did the strength of his prophecy increase.

I mentioned my belief that depression, a multidimensional state of mind, can also have demonic overtones; Gethsemane is the

prototype in this respect. It is by no means improbable that in this state one is especially open to the pain of the world, and it is a privilege as well as a duty to bear it so as to aid in its healing. The dark night of the spirit written about with the precision of a sufferer by St John of the Cross, described by him as dark contemplation, seems to be a contribution of the blessed ones to the salvation of the world. They assume the horror in order to transfigure it. When a saint has traversed the path of Gethsemane, those of us of lesser sanctity have a reliable guide in our own period of hopelessness. Only when the darkness of the universe has been lifted up to the light and fully illuminated thereby can the kingdom of God come fully on us. This is the final hope, and its attainment is a supreme action of faith. The peak of that action is selfless love, the love of him who called out so terrifyingly on the cross to the Father who had absented himself in that moment of unspeakable evil. But without it there would have been no experience of resurrection.