AND WHO LIES BROKEN AT MY GATE?

By LAVINIA BYRNE

WE ARE BROKEN PEOPLE; human life is inevitably fragmented. And Christianity is matched to human need. Of its essence, it is a religion for broken people, for people who own their need of salvation. Over the past twenty years, the 'universal call to holiness' offered so enticingly to all Christians by the Second Vatican Council, has led us forwards and sidewards in turns. Often it has led us away from the lessons our own simple truth before God would have us learn. Instead of calling upon God from the depths of our need for redemption, we have been side-tracked into presenting a shiny-bright version of ourselves to God, the Church and the world. The call to holiness offered to all has led us to claim holiness too quickly; we are in danger of losing our sense of sin and our sense of God's saving, redeeming love. Once upon a time our projections were at least contained within the body of believers: priests and bishops were good, the rest of us were bad; the saints were saintly, we were sinners. Now we risk being unable to do this containing; a tidied-up Church looks with distaste at an untidy world. Where has compassion gone? When the place of sin is denied within our Christian rhetoric, we soon lose the ability to name our personal hurt and pain and ambiguity; we begin to grow cold.

There are moments when the hydra-headed monster of religious perfectionism seems to have gained a new lease of life and sprouted a couple of new heads at that. We may talk in contemporary vocabulary about wholeness and integration but at heart we still seem set to redeem ourselves. Perfection has always had a tendency to rear her ugly head and nowadays she woos us ingratiatingly with fresh wares. Today's onwardly mobile Christian is in as great a risk from the desire to be pleasing to God as ever our unenlightened pre-conciliar forebears were. If anything the mechanics of our cult make this lure more enticing than ever. The monster no longer lives in convents; she is out there in the world at work in ordinary homes and workplaces with a whole new battery of charms.

And so spirituality and psychology have lain down together like the lion and the lamb and promised us the healing of total integration. With each vogue in turn, from Myers Briggs through magical mystical byeways to the Enneagram, we have danced and prayed and sung and massaged our way to wholeness. We have given up meat and taken up yoga; we have cut down on eggs and butter and learnt to like skimmed yoghurt and decaffeinated coffee; we have prayed on little stools to the refrain of Taizé chants; we have burnt joss sticks and candles. We have joined the justice and peace group and been on retreat; we have burnt our rosaries and destroyed our confessionals. And yet we remain the same riff-raff bunch of odd-balls we ever were. There is no harm in this. The only harm is that we pretend we are not.

What happens to what frightens us?

It could be that we have missed the ways in which the Church's dialogue with the world has given a particular tone and resonance to the conversation we all need to have within ourselves. When I was a child the greatest term of abuse I could use was to call the other children with whom I played on the beach at my grandmother's house in France 'crétins'. This was wrong, the adult world explained, because the word was a bastardized form of the honourable word 'Christian'. We were not reproached for cracking jokes that denigrated handicapped people or foreigners. Racist language was part of our everyday culture and stared out at us each morning from the 'golliwog' label on the marmalade jar. We played at climbing Everest and put on our best clothes to watch the Queen's coronation on television, but equally we went on fighting the war armed with decaying Mickey Mouse gasmasks; our enemies had names, they were Germans and Japanese and we hated them. We chanted the refrain 'Linger longer, Queen of Tonga', but the newspapers stirred us with racist feelings as well by warning us of dangers of unrestricted immigration. As a Roman Catholic in the heart of Non-conformist Birmingham, I had no idea of the irony concealed in attempts to make me throw the first stone. My face is white but I am the grandchild of immigrants. Every afternoon I was taken for a walk to the Botanical Gardens. There we would press our noses against the monkey pens and laugh at them for being so stupid; not for being playful or cold and wet or full of fleas, but for being the stupid ones who had got caught. There were other oddities too—like 'non-Catholics'. I had

to wait until I was well into my thirties before I first began to question the version of history on which I had been raised; one which presented them as 'the people who took away "our" churches' and lost the true faith. In spite of all Newman's fine intentions, the Birmingham Oratory was making a statement in stone that confirmed every prejudice lurking inside my little ultramontane mind.

Only the liturgy gave me pause, and this is a theme to which I will return. For the Roman Catholic liturgy and sacramental practice and domestic piety of my youth gave me a context in which to say I was personally a sinner. The baptismal font was huge; I could imagine myself sheltered in it and immersed in water that really would get rid of original sin. The hymns I most enjoyed were 'Soul of my Saviour' and 'Lord, for tomorrow and its needs'. They kept me on tenterhooks. I hovered on the brink of the 'stain of sin' and only just scrambled to safety thanks to Our Lady, my guardian angel and going to confession. I could get into the mood for going to confession by thumping my skinny little chest at the *Agnus Dei* and feeling wonderfully solemn during Advent and Lent. At its worst liturgical practice fed my sense of guilt; at its best it exhilarated me and taught me that I was amazingly complicated and that God knew me and cared about me. It threw up shadows and light in my soul.

I was perfect raw material for the trends of the sixties and seventies. I hungered to hear that wholeness and holiness belonged together; I needed to have my body redeemed by liberalism, my mind expurgated by the faith/justice link, my conscience transformed by concern for the handicapped, the deprived and the dying. The eighties have continued to feed me with good things; I am losing some of my convictions, however, and regaining my sense of ambiguity. The dialogue which the world has set up in the Churches—a dialogue to which we are committed by the injunction to be open to the signs of the times—is a dialogue about the place of minorities. How do we cope with the person who is different from ourselves? What do we do with what frightens us? As a child I lived in a whirl of projections but somehow the Church enabled me to go on naming the sin within the community of believers and within myself. It allowed me to feel bad, to know myself as a fragmented person. Mistakenly it also made me feel guilty.

Over the past twenty years, in the attempt to undo the connections that led us to couple sin and guilt (as opposed to sin and the knowledge that God is a saving God), we have stopped talking about sin. We have begun to invalidate our own experience. Nowadays I believe the balance is being redressed. For the reality is that this rhetoric cannot bear the strain of the facts and our dialogue with the world is leading us to new insights. A world that contains the arms race and apartheid and Chernobyl and child abusers and ayatollahs and fallen evangelist superstars challenges our wishy-washy liberalism. Equally a world that is beginning to imitate the Churches by pursuing deviants with all the enthusiasm of an inquisition is a world that demands that we be very clear about what we mean by sin and what we mean by fragmentation and ambiguity.

This is a conversation that threatens to wipe the smile off the hydra-headed monster's present-day face; she can feel the heat is on her. For the past couple of decades she has played the 'caring game'. Whereas in my childhood, religious perfection was about doing the right things in order to be pleasing to God so that, incidentally, we should avoid mortal sin, over the past twenty years religious perfection has been about doing the right things to other people in order that they should know that God is pleased with them, and we thereby avoid social sin. Human fallibility, our own personal need of care, our own inherent sinfulness, our fear of death are nudged out; they no longer belong. Hence I believe the helpful stirrings by which we are being asked to listen again to what the Spirit is saying to and in the Churches. Ordinary Christians are reclaiming what was best in the tradition and theology is taking up the cause of sin. The 'happy fault' is back in our midst. Over the last year I have heard people asking or demanding to reflect upon the place of sin in a way that was inconceivable even five years ago.

What I am saying, I believe, is that the real enemy is about to be revealed. Religious perfection is being uncovered for the tyrant she is. She is the Leviathan who swims through our own personal seas and flicks us into power games with a mere swish of her tail. And suddenly we are unmasking her, we are demanding that she stop playing games and start being honest. This cramps her style. I heard the other day of the cutlery drawer in a religious community's kitchen. The knives and forks are stacked there in perfect order, all the blades facing in the same direction. This is

behaviour which we would call obsessive if we met it in our own homes . . . Where our human quest for God is reduced to straightening cutlery, I find myself driven back to reflect on the shortest verse in the scriptures, 'Jesus wept'. People who erect the shelter of a neat and tidy front are tempted to find anything untidy intolerable, particularly when it lurks inside themselves. Yet the gospels are good news for obsessives as much as for the rest of us who may only be neurotics.

For the Jesus whom I meet in the pages of the gospels is bent on undermining our assumptions about good and evil. He enables us to own the dark. He brings us up short when we try to become perfect and exposes the mechanics of projection. His stories speak of the presence of the dark and the light within; they are about pairs of brothers—the nameless rich man and Lazarus who lies bleeding at his gate, the elder son and the prodigal, the pharisee and the publican. His own story likewise was lived out in the presence of ambiguity; Martha and Mary, Peter and Judas. He died somewhere crucial, in the place where all Christians receive their identity, between a believing and a blaspheming thief.

Naming the dark within

Earlier this year I had a revelation on a London bus. The number 12 takes an hour to go from Oxford Circus to the outer darkness of Forest Hill. I caught it on Regent Street and scrambled up to the last remaining seat on the top deck, at the back on the right hand side. After a while I heard a voice calling me, 'Madam, madam'. I turned round and saw behind me on the left a woman in her twenties. Her face was puffy and bruised; her bottom teeth had been knocked out; she was drinking from a can of beer and was asking me for a light. She had left hers on her pitch she explained and so, incongruously, I imagined she had been to a football match. I looked at her with total recognition, with a degree of identification that would have astonished our fellow travellers. I saw all my own pain and hurt in her face and in her battered mouth; I heard the polite institutionalized voice saying, 'Madam, madam', knowing all the right words, the mechanics of survival; I saw the outward signs of personal weakness and need, the beer can and soggy cigarette. Inside myself I wept. I wonder what she saw when she looked at me? I wonder if I will ever understand the extent to which I need to learn the lessons of darkness that she imaged for me as she asked me for light.

The story has a follow-up. In a sense it had to because it was so shockingly apposite and well-timed; my shadow appeared to me with human features at a moment when I could recognize her and look on her with love. I needed her and need her still. The following day when cycling down Bond Street I took a slightly different route from my usual one and found myself drawing up at some red traffic lights in Mayfair. Then I heard her voice, rasping out the words, 'News, evening news'. She was selling newspapers from her 'pitch'. The odds against our meeting again, our meeting again the next day, our meeting within half a mile of where I work must be extraordinarily high. She can come to me for light and I can go to her news, for information. And so we can find that each of us lies broken at the other's gate.

Naming pain and hurt and ambiguity like this is easier when there is a picture or an event to attach it to. This is why the rich man went to hell. He failed to recognize the place of poverty within his own story. He could not own the parts of him that lay bleeding within because he ignored them at his gate. He did not know he needed saving. His culture and value system had taught him to despise failure and to be rigorous in pursuing success. His religion backed him up by giving him theological hooks on which to pin his assumptions. Only in the afterlife did the reversals take place and from Abraham's bosom Lazarus was powerless to help in a way he had never been on earth. For the poor are powerful and it is a myth to pretend they are not. There is immense energy in claiming the power of our own personal poverty, in owning our weakness and our pain. It is the energy of conversion.

Naming the world's dark

This is true at the level of our inner experience, at the level of our domestic experience but also at international level. I am reminded of this by a remarkable passage from the novel *Downfall people* by the Canadian author, Jo Anne Williams Bennett. Her North American hero, Likki, faces Ibn Sinna, her native lover:

> Likki was uncomfortably aware that she had wanted him to say he believed in witchcraft. And not just Ibn Sinna. She wanted all of Africa to believe in it, to remain in a cradle of savage belief, a state of primitive purity, as a kind of monument to the white man's nostalgia and regret—a place where he might wander for an interlude of archetypal quiet when the chaos of his own busy

> centuries grew intolerable. She wanted Africa to be a kind of psychic tourist resort; to be taken, pressed firmly into the past, and held there, because in her own time and place she could not be master. These ideas, of course, were not peculiar to Likki but were general throughout her culture; the price of them now was paid by, among others, the undernourished children of Segou, who died needlessly of a preventive disease in a squalid, waterless village because Africa had been equated with the unconscious past and what happened there was not real.

In this passage the dynamics of projection are exposed and revealed as the cultural heritage of the rich: 'in her own time and place she could not be master'; our inadequacy, our vain attempts at wholeness are doomed to make us ignore what really needs attention. And the people who die are the little ones, the 'undernourished children' of our unfullfilled dreams.

For there are whole nations that lie bleeding at our gate. They carry the 'treasures of darkness' (Isai 54,3), and they call us to conversion or change. Our collective human and ecclesial experience is of fragmentation and it is within this mess that we are asked to be holy, not apart from it. In the name of religious perfection we too easily attempt to short-circuit the process by sentimentalizing poverty, by idolizing the 'primitive purity' of whole peoples who live more simply than we do in the first world, by appearing to crave for low-tech 'archetypal quiet' because we exaggerate the strain of hi-tech living. In the name of religious perfection we set ourselves up as the healers and the carers, the ones who can crack the problem, unconsciously adopting a superior tone and position in our dealings with the weak. I have always been haunted by the story of Damian the leper, the priest who dropped his bowl of shaving water onto his feet one morning and felt nothing and went out into his leper village able to say 'we' for the first time. In the name of religious perfection we fail to see the blindingly clear message that there is a middle ground, a place where the strong and the weak can talk to each other and that it lies within each one of us. In this place, which is holy ground, we learn the importance of dialogue, of talking to each other about our needs, of sharing our common treasures—whether they be those we have learnt in the day or in the night. In this place we learn to lose our fears of each other, our projections are quite disarmed. The fragmentation remains but we are no longer bleeding from neglect, we pour oil in each other's wounds and bind

each other up. The gate is no longer a barrier or a hurdle; it has become the place where we are open with each other and welcome each other in, the place of mutuality.

For this reason too we need women ministers—ordained and unordained. This is not my main thesis in writing this article, but I find that it makes a significant afterword. Women can help us because the cultural scripts they carry have constantly put them in a place of weakness. They know their way round it and, while it is painful for them, it is not a place they fear. Biblical and theological scripts have put them, with Eve, in the place of sin. In the new language women are learning in today's Church they have discovered that they are not guilty of this sin. Their mistake has been to believe the messages that made them feel guilty. In this they misnamed their sin. The irony is that they are ideally placed to help us learn that we need be afraid neither of weakness nor of sin, only of our vain attempts to avoid either. They are throwing off the mantle of guilt and learning the song of freedom. In this song words like sin and failure and weakness can be used without fear, and so the words joy and love and forgiveness be rediscovered with fresh force: 'my soul rejoices in God who is my Saviour' (Lk 1,47).

Bringing the darkness into the light

I have suggested that within the Christian Churches we have a ready-made context for attempting to effect this resolution or conversion, a ready-made gate. Liturgy—the words and music and silence in which we dramatize our condition before God—must name human brokenness. The creeping sickness which is beginning to afflict our collects and prefaces—where even Lent is now called 'this season of joy' and despair no longer has a voice—must be unmasked. Every liturgical celebration has a teaching function; it sets up ideas and reactions in us by informing our thinking and our feeling. But what theology informs our practice? Who is the God we come to worship in church? A God who cannot bear the sight of sin and who despises human pain? A God who is terrified of weakness and whom we should not risk approaching with our own? A heavy God who reads the political weeklies and only likes ideologically-sound prayers of intercession? Or a God who delights in us as we are; the God of compassion who allows us to stumble and grope our way forwards, asking questions and owning our doubt, uneasily seeking the union of all our personal and collective

broken bits by allowing them to talk to each other and listening to the wisdom they bring together into the light? Only in the name of this God can we safely minister within a broken Church and a broken world.