# THE PAIN AND POTENTIAL OF POWERLESSNESS

By DERMOT POWER

JUST AS IN AN older piety, there was a reliance on the language of ascent to express what holiness might possibly mean for Christian reality, there is to-day an emphasis on a language of descent, a going down into the depths of human experience and of the depths of God, as an equally authentic way of describing Christian holiness.

In the old days, we were constantly encouraged to climb the ladder of perfection, to work at virtue and to attain holiness. Now we are asked to accept our poverty, embrace vulnerability, to become powerless, to let go and to let God. As the very theme of this issue of *The Way* suggests, failure and powerlessness have a vital place in Christian spirituality. Furthermore, as even a fleeting glance at bookshelves of contemporary spirituality will show, we are now beginning to talk and write about this dimension of personal spirituality with the same facility and freedom as once we spoke of virtue and perfection.

And for this reason, it might prove helpful to stop and to reflect on what this new and exciting language in contemporary spiritual theology is actually saying to us. This article is an attempt at outlining what shape powerlessness may take in our lives and some of the ways in which we try to resist it. At the same time we shall explore how Christian tradition helps us both to interpret and to integrate the experience.

*There from the very beginning*

Whatever else we might want to say about the language of powerlessness in Christian spirituality, we are certainly engaged in and with a language that unfolds from the very heart of Christian consciousness and is operative in Christian interpretation from the very beginning. In recapturing the language of powerlessness for Christian reflection, it might at first seem that we are involved in

creating a cult of failure or despair, a kind of shadowy Christian surrealism in which somehow everyone must fail, as dramatically as possible! A 'more broken than thou' spirituality! This, however, would be to misunderstand the function of this kind of language for Christian experience. Essentially we are involved in a language of transformation and resurrection, but one that takes seriously and embraces the cares and tragedies of human experience. As Von Balthasar writes,

> the language of the cross, the pain, renunciation and abandonment, are translated into the means of expression and effective signs of the love which overcomes death: the love of God, of course, but in the man Jesus Christ.[1]

The whole Judaic-Christian tradition is one that recalls us to the truth that our greatest nobility lies in the fact that we cannot, of and by ourselves, fulfill our deepest potential. The story of Israel's journey of faith is one of continually being drawn into the depths of the experience of God, by way of naked faith. The moments of desert and exile in her journey are moments of profound disclosure, at first glance appearing restrictive and even destructive, but ultimately to be experienced as liberating and graced. For Israel this process never really followed any clear lines of development; the contours of grace were often hidden from sight. It also happened at the cost of having to abandon old securities and treasured foundations, many of which, like temple and cult, were good and beautiful in themselves. Experience as such led Israel to have no other option but to doubt in her own strength and wisdom to see her journey through. There was no other alternative but to accept her powerlessness—to let go and to let God.

In the New Testament, the economy of divine love in which everything is grace is disclosed to us as a foolishness which is greater than any human wisdom, not subject to our manipulation or control, and freely given to the poor and to sinners. The mystery of God in our lives, the revelation of his love and our surrender to it, is not a matter of the attainment of perfection or wisdom, nor a greater or better *gnosis* but, as Jesus tells us, a mystery 'hidden from the wise and understanding and revealed to mere children . . . All these things have been delivered to me by my

Father: and no one knows who the Son is except the Father, or who the Father is except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him' (Lk 10, 21-22).

Jesus himself, we are told, 'although he was a Son, learned through what he suffered, and offered up prayers and supplications, with loud voices and cries to him who was able to save him from death' (Heb 5,7.9).

And Paul, describing not only his own experiences of life but also, at another level, universal and permanent characteristics of Christian living, almost joyfully affirms, 'I will all the more gladly boast of my weakness that the power of Christ may rest upon me . . . for when I am weak then I am strong' (2 Cor 12, 9-10).

It is therefore not surprising that living out of the experience of faith, of Israel, of Jesus and of Paul we too are led to the crucible of vulnerability, and there in the place of our powerlessness and weakness, we discover the place par excellence of the encounter with God.

*Something we resist*

That this is so, however, does not necessarily make it any easier for us to understand its dynamic in our lives. We are not alone, either, when we recoil from the pain that is involved in our experience of transformation and resurrection. St Thérèse of Lisieux, as she experienced a profound helplessness in the face of her approaching death, says with deep poignancy, 'Our Lord died in anguish undoubtedly, and yet his death is the most beautiful the world has known. To die of love is not to die in ecstasy'.

As Christian spiritual tradition constantly points out, the experience of transformation does not often 'feel' at all mystical, is not always a matter of heights but, more often than not, one of depths. It is often experienced as a disintegration and as loss. So much in our lives that could be interpreted as destructive becomes, in the light of this vision, the raw material of transformation: what looks like an ending the promise of new beginnings. And what is required for this vision to become praxis in our lives, is the acceptance of powerlessness. True powerlessness means that we no longer depend on ourselves, on our own strengths, but in a power greater than ourselves, accessible to us only when we are convinced of our own powerlessness and need. And it is experience as such that leads us to doubt in our own capacity to fulfill ourselves and experience for ourselves, at whatever cost, this saving and beautiful truth.

Allowing our lives to be shaped within the dynamic of powerlessness is ultimately to allow ourselves to become broken. Moltmann experiences this beautifully when he says,

> It is not a matter of our becoming masters through believing that practice makes perfect. What happens is that in and through our opening and suffering God becomes our master. Often he leads us where we do not want to go and breaks the form of our lives . . . so that his form may come to expression.[2]

This can happen in so many different ways in our lives: it is always a miracle of grace and so often not exactly what we would have wished for ourselves. It may be true for most of us that we spend much of our lives, our motivations and energy protecting ourselves from both the pain and the potential of our poverty and powerlessness. But ultimately we cannot escape its truth. In the meantime, however, we can try and anaesthetize the pain.

*The hidden addictions*

And it is here that it becomes necessary to recognize the whole role of addiction in our lives, the subtle and not-so-subtle ways we have of avoiding the depths that we are ultimately called to experience. There are of course the obvious escapes, the addiction of alcohol, of drug abuse, reliance on tranquillizers, the unrelenting compulsions for sad and anonymous sexual encounter, the more explicit and public manifestations of what can be present in all of us in varying degrees. There is no need to elucidate the never-ending facets of helplessness and agony that the obvious addictions bring. What there is need for, however, is to clarify how addictions in the less narrow sense of the word can operate in our lives. Because they are so subtle, they are nonetheless for real.

At the heart of our addictions is the fact that we try to live without having to suffer the pain of our frailty and vulnerability. When our addictions are so sure, so available, there is no need to search for something as tenuous as vulnerability. Power and ambition can so 'control' our lives, distancing us from others and indeed from ourselves, that in our wanting to play 'God' we have failed to be truly human. For some of us our skills and strengths have subtly become the criteria by which we distance ourselves from others not so gifted, our seriousness of intent and hard work

part of our protection. Often we use religion to anaesthetize ourselves from the living God, living in a make-believe world of ecclesiastical goings-on that protect us from the risk of naked faith and the vulnerability of love, which is what the 'real' world of Christian living is all about.

If deprived, however, of our addictions, if our worlds of make-believe were ever to fall through, then we are forced not only to return to the pain of our true and fragile selves but have to face the additional distress that comes from withdrawal. This applies not only to the world of alcohol and heroin addicts but also to the less dramatic worlds of addictions that all of us inhabit, worlds, both personal and communal, that so easily fall apart.

We can see it clearly in the pain we suffer when the Church loses its status in society, when society no longer upholds the rights or privileges of the Church, when, as Karl Rahner said, the gospel can no longer be thundered through loudspeakers, media etc., but must now be whispered. For many a powerless, statusless Church means the end, a coming to disaster. We lose our strength, our position, our numbers, our schools, our clout, and we salvage whatever resources we have and hold out at all costs. At a more personal level, people in our communities and parishes break, their lives become fragmented and we do not know what to do with them. Their weakness and vulnerability threaten us; if we were really to embrace and reverence the broken among us we might have to face and embrace the brokenness within ourselves.

Holding on to what we blindly believe to be successful living—and that includes ecclesial living—we tend, in the idolatory of our subtle addictions, to hold on to our own dreams and strategies. Because they are not enough and cannot fulfill our deepest potential, we become frustrated and discouraged, we become people, we become a Church that has lost heart. And it is precisely at this moment, the moment of recognition of our powerlessness, that we break the vicious circle of addicted living, holding on no more to facile equations, success and failure. We hold out against the living God no longer, we learn to let go and to let God.

*Dependence on God*

In some sense this account of powerlessness and failure is autobiographical; on another level it unfolds from the experience of ministry with and to broken people. What this experience has taught me is that much of the absence of resurrection in our lives

has to do with our resistance to our essential powerlessness, in particular the powerlessness of our dying into new life. We so want to short-circuit the process, for ourselves and indeed for others, expecting a wholeness before its time has come. Put simply, we want resurrection, we want Pentecost on demand. The denial of this wholeness in our lives, the fact that God withholds from us the perfection we crave, is itself the deeper grace. What we cannot achieve by dint of effort we learn to wait for and, in the waiting, we become, almost in spite of ourselves, receptive to the gifts we had longed for but could not give ourselves. There is a sacredness to life when it unfolds ever more clearly as a life of dependence on God. Failure and disappointment need never again be understood as experiences that undermine personal integrity nor the validity or vigour of one's education as a Christian. In becoming a new creation, we are not involved in a merely passive transference into a new identity in Christ. This transference is experienced as a surrender from ownership of one's own life to a radically new fullness of self in Christ. This loss of ownership of self is not experienced as a dimunition of personal identity, but as a freedom to become truly oneself.

And that is why Mary could rejoice in her nothingness, and Paul boast in his weakness. It is why Julian of Norwich could tell us that all manner of things will be well and why John of the Cross could call the dark night of faith a night of love. Why Peter in the gospel had to discover it by way of humiliation and John was to have known it all along by way of love, it is not for us to understand. Or indeed why Augustine was to find late in his life a beauty and grace that little Thérèse knew all along was within her.

Some of us need to be driven to the limits and indeed the dregs of human experiences so as to have no other alternative but to let go and to let God. For most people, however, it happens in the vulnerability of living within the limits and untidiness of life's journey. The realization does not usually come as a definitive moment: it is a process, and experience of life itself teaches us to doubt in our own strength, accept our powerlessness and to let go and to let God.

## NOTES

[1] Von Balthasar, Hans Urs: *Engagement with God* (London, 1975), p 67.
[2] Moltmann, J.: *The passion of life: a messianic lifestyle* (Philadelphia, 1978), p 53.