ATTENDING AND TENDING

By ANNE PRIMAVESI

SCANNING AN ADVERTISEMENT for the job of leading a group of refugees on a perilous trek to freedom and safety, one might expect to find some of the following qualifications listed: personnel skills, medical skills, languages, military training, readiness to delegate responsibility, ability to manage resources, etc. However, a different kind of selection process operates in the following story:

> While Moses was feeding the sheep of his father-in-law in the wilderness, a young kid ran away. Moses followed it until it reached a ravine, where it found a well to drink from. When Moses reached it, he said, 'I did not know that you ran away because you were thirsty. Now you must be weary.' He carried the kid back. Then God said, 'Because you have shown pity in leading back one of the flock belonging to a man, you shall lead *my* flock, Israel'.[1]

When God looks for someone to lead his people from oppression to freedom, say the rabbis, he looks for someone who is consistently compassionate, whose attentiveness to the world and especially its smallest creatures can be taken as guarantee of the attentiveness needed for the great task of leading Israel. Clearly Moses possessed this qualification, according to the rabbis, since the first thing recorded of him when he grew up was that he noticed the burdens of his fellow Israelites (Exod 2,11).

Martin Buber extends this logic when he says that the bright edifice of community, built in the rabbinic story upon the relationship between Moses, his animal and his human flocks, cannot be raised other than on a foundation in which our attentiveness to God is indistinguishable from our attentiveness to the world. The same force is alive in the relation between us and the world around us as between us and God. One cannot divide one's life, he says, between an actual relationship to God and an inactual I-It relationship to the world—praying to God in truth and utilizing the world. Whoever knows the world as something to be utilized knows God the same

way. Similarly, it is mistaken to think that whoever steps before the countenance of God has moved away from the world. When we step before that countenance, the world becomes wholly present to us. There is no longer any tension between the world and God but only the one actuality.[2]

Such thinking presents us with a model of attentiveness and tending based on recognition of the interrelatedness of all being. Whether it is our own being before God or our being in the world, there can be no movement wholly away from one into the other. There can be no essential difference either between the kind of attention we pay to one and to the other: whatever its degree of particularity, its wholeness is determined by the actuality of all our relationships.

For the rabbis and for us this wholeness is determined primarily by the actuality of all God's relationships with the world. The doctrine of the oneness of God teaches the same lesson as the rabbinic story. The God of the thirsty kid is the God of Moses. The God of his pagan father-in-law is the God of the flock Israel, a truth soon forgotten in battles for possession of land (Num 25,6ff).

This battle was and is often fought with one side claiming possession of the one God, whether to justify the acquisition of actual territory or the surrogate land of promised salvation. Those who battle for these ends claim possession of the 'one' God in opposition to the 'false', 'pagan' or 'many' gods of their opponents. The battle raged before and during Jesus's life, not only through the Maccabean wars and their aftermath but, at a more pacific level, by claims of unbroken allegiance to observance of certain laws. After his death it was waged in his name against those movements of the Spirit where charismatic leadership, often exercised by women, lost out to patriarchal power structures. This victory was ratified in every way by Constantinian hierarchical institutions which still prevail in the mainstream churches.

In the matter of observance, Jesus came up against some of its harsh and excluding tendencies while practising another kind of attending: attending synagogue on the sabbath. Among the many stories recorded of his attendance at synagogue there is one very short one, found only in Luke's Gospel (Lk 13,10–17), in which he notices a woman in the group, bent over, unable to stand upright and praise God with everyone else. In contrast to other healing stories, she makes no request to be healed. Jesus, however, is attentive to her plight, calls her and lays hands on her. She is straightened, lifts up her head and praises God.

The leader of the synagogue objects that it was not necessary to break the sabbath law; there are six other days on which she could come to be healed. Jesus does not argue with him on the basis of saving human life. Rather, he says that just as it is permitted to care for household animals on the sabbath, so can one act toward a fellow human being. As in the rabbinic story about Moses, the point of comparison for one's conduct toward others is one's behaviour toward animals. As we behave toward them so should we behave toward each other. The ruler of the synagogue, however, operates on a different basis, for he sees the sabbath as devoted exclusively to one's relationship with God. This, he believes, supersedes all natural relationships. Therefore he paid no attention to the woman's plight, to her inability to praise God, or to any prior claim this might have on his attention.

Before we get too self-righteous about this, we should notice that Jesus assumes that the ruler would attend to a beast on the sabbath bound as the woman was. What Jesus is drawing attention to is the ruler's failure to be consistently attentive, and above all, his sacrifice of compassion to observance. What kind of God is honoured by such observance? If attendance at the synagogue precludes attention to human need, then what kind of God is worshipped there? If, as the ruler agrees, an animal can't wait to be loosed from its bonds, why should a woman wait? Jesus is saying that neither should wait, for the acceptable sabbath is one in which all creation praises God.

Whenever attendance at synagogue or church is used as a way of opting out of the demands of attentiveness to our fellow beings, human or not, then the consistency of attention to God is broken. An ecological consciousness, which takes for granted the interrelatedness of all being, presupposes the kind of relationship with God which our attendance at church is supposed to epitomize. Unless it does, it is in vain that at Mass a little water is mixed with the wine.

This was brought home forcibly to me by a true story told in a group reflecting on Luke's account of Jesus healing the woman on the sabbath. A member of the group told of her experience of attending parish Mass and seeing the offertory procession joined by a woman, in worn-down shoes and shabbily dressed, who was carrying carefully some broken leaves and stalks taken from the flower room at the back of the church. She recognized this woman as an out-patient from the nearby mental hospital. When the procession reached the altar, the priest and the altar boys came down the steps, took the bread, wine and money from the appointed bearers and then

returned to the altar, ignoring the woman. She stood at the bottom of the sanctuary steps until after the Sanctus, when she knelt down. She stood up again with everyone else to recite the Our Father, and then crept away down the side of the church, leaving her offertory on the step to be swept up by a cleaner.

No one hearing this story failed to be moved by it, some of us to tears. In the context of this article, it speaks volumes about the break between attending and tending sanctioned by blind observance of rules, whether in church or synagogue. It says much about how little attention is paid to the practice or ethos of Jesus by those who attend church in his name. The woman who told the story welcomes these out-patients into her home as a matter of course, inviting them in for coffee, tea or advice whenever they call. She bitterly regretted the fact that all her usual compassionate responses fled from her in a church setting, so that she found herself unable to leave her seat in the congregation, go up and put her arm around the rejected one and walk away with her. Her awareness that conduct well below the norm of ordinary kindness is sanctioned, indeed inculcated by church rituals, raised questions for us all about the perception of God conveyed in them. Not least of these is the covert message that rituals are more acceptable to God than looking after the people who attend them. This notion was supposedly scotched once and for all by Isaiah (Isai 1,10–17).

Especially significant to me is the way in which this story acts as a model for the perception and self-perception of women in a patriarchal Christianity. This is one in which scant attention is paid to what is female and natural; in which woman and nature are kept out of the sanctuary, the area of transcendence, and are therefore seen as excluded from immediate or unmediated relationship with God. Hierarchical understanding of ministry not only keeps women 'in their place', that is, at a distance from the altar or in the pews, but keeps all of us, clergy and laity alike, from attending to obvious needs.[3]

Such an understanding has a deep impact on our perception of attending at church and tending the needs of others, one which breaks the thread of connectedness between liturgy and life. The kind of feeding we do in churches at eucharistic celebrations is supposedly related to the feeding we do naturally in our homes. Ideally, in both settings we *eucharistize*, give thanks for and with the whole of creation for the gift of life and its sustenance. We thank God for different levels of nourishment within creation which are seen as part of our tending

by God. As human beings, ecology teaches us to include in our thanks our tending by the plant and animal worlds, since by ourselves we cannot photo-synthesize the sun's energy and rely on non-human species to do it for us. The nourishment of some requires the death of others, and our lives are sustained daily by the deaths of numerous plants and animals.

Within this nourishing matrix the life and death of Jesus, envisioned by him, so we are told, as that of a seed, is intimately connected to its nourishment and its tending by the whole of creation. Yet church rituals stress only his death, and only the last meal before it in isolation from all those which sustained his life. The 'bright edifice of community' within which he grew up is thereby reduced to the shell of a memorial chapel in which men only officiate. His nourishment by his mother's body, by seed, sap and flesh of non-human species, by the work of women's hands in preparing food and by the joy and companionship of his family meals are discounted. Yet this is a significant part of his message about understanding the kingdom of God.[4]

This separation of Jesus's death from his tending by human bodies, by human hands and by the rest of creation is paradigmatic of that presupposed between our own nourishment by that death and the tending of our bodies outside church rituals. Those who do the tending in church are normally male; those who tend to others' nourishment outside the church are usually female. The daily work of tending a family is then perceived as separate from the divine tending done in church. Women's work of cooking and feeding, at the same time ordinary and most profound, is seldom seen to provide opportunities for sacramental experience, either for them or for those they feed. Similarly, the ceaseless labour of the earth which processes and re-processes the chemical components of plant and animal life is not seen as sacred. Neither women nor the earth are recognized as daily channels of the gift of life, of the sacred flow of life-giving nourishment through the community. None of women's life-sustaining roles in tending their families are declared by male religion to be worthy of attention and reverence, to be manifestations of the sacred Feeding Hand of the universe.

Yet not only do women in developed or industrialized countries plan the meals, shop for them and prepare and cook them: in the developing countries of Africa, Asia and Latin America women in addition actually tend the crops and harvest them so that their families can eat. It is also forgotten that the vast majority of us world-

wide were breast-fed by women during the first year or more of our lives. None of this receives any attention in mainstream religious theological meditation. If it did, we would be able to recognize the sacred ministry of all the women who 'make' the bread of life in the fields, at home and in their bodies, and honour this making as we honour those who 'break' the bread of life in church.[5] If it did receive attention, we would be taught to recognize the sacred ministry of the earth which tends our needs unceasingly while receiving scant reverence for this labour in orthodox religious celebrations.

In an unorthodox one, it is given due reverence by Teilhard de Chardin:

> Since once again, Lord, I have neither bread, nor wine, nor altar, I will raise myself beyond these symbols, up to the pure majesty of the real itself; I, your priest, will make the whole earth my altar and on it will offer you all the labours and sufferings of the world.
>
> Over there, on the horizon, the sun has just touched with light the outermost fringe of the eastern sky. Once again, beneath this moving sheet of fire, the living surface of the earth wakes and trembles, and once again begins its fearful travail. I will place on my paten, O God, the harvest to be won by this renewal of labour. Into my chalice I shall pour all the sap which is to be pressed out this day from the earth's fruits.
>
> My paten and my chalice are the depths of a soul laid widely open to all the forces which in a moment will rise up from every corner of the earth and converge upon the Spirit. Grant me the remembrance and the mystic presence of all those whom the light is now awakening to the new day.[6]

While Teilhard does not connect the earth's travail or relationship with the Spirit to that of women, this is now being done not only by women themselves but also, I am glad to say, in Section I of the Report from the World Council of Churches' Seventh Assembly in Canberra this year. Under the heading, 'Giver of Life—Sustain Your Creation', it says that the sacraments of Christian worship use the elements of the created world to manifest the Triune God present among and in us, and that this sacramental perspective influences our approach to creation in general. This rather vague statement, in the light of what I have already said, must be seen at the moment to be more honoured in the breach than in usual church observance.

The report goes on to expose theological failures of the past, among them the fact that Nature has been subjected to human ownership and unqualified manipulation. It will come as a surprise to many

Christians to find the concept of human ownership of Nature classified not as a theological truth but as a theological failure. Such a classification reminds us that the sabbath tradition is based on the unequivocal assertion that the land does not belong to us but to God, and that the acceptable sabbath year, the jubilee year, is one in which all the inhabitants of the land are liberated from the oppression of rent, slavery or work and can freely praise God. There is an ominously contemporary ecological note in the warning that if the human inhabitants of the land do not make amends for their iniquity, then the land will be devastated, they shall be scattered and the land shall enjoy its rest and its sabbaths while it lies desolate without them (Lev 26,27-35). In this tradition, the God of the sabbath is attentive to the needs of the broken woman, the thirsty kid and the barren land, and is prepared to tend them however scandalously or at whatever cost to their oppressors.

Another theological failure singled out by the report is the prevalence of dualistic thinking about spirit and matter, male and female and the relationship among races; of ideologies which separate subject from object, mind from matter and nature from culture. This has resulted in structures and patterns of domination and exploitation of women found in a patriarchal Christianity which sanction a parallel domination of nature.[7] While the report repudiates these consequences, it confesses that they belong to life-styles and power structures which have received theological support and sanction. The examples I have given, of the assumed separation of one kind of attendance from another, of one kind of nourishing from another, of one kind of relationship from another, show that dualistic thinking, its ideologies and its consequences are embedded in our liturgical and ecclesiastical thinking.

Women worldwide, the report goes on to say, have told of the parallel ways in which they and the land have been imaged and treated, and of the work of the Spirit in healing the wounds of both. Therefore women's experience is indispensable, it says, for understanding the relationships of humans and the earth, and for healing them. This is a comforting assertion in that it presupposes an immediate relationship between the Spirit and those women excluded from the public ministry of the Church, either as subjects or objects. It also asserts an unmediated relationship between the Spirit of God and the earth. It is, however, difficult for women to believe that their experience is indispensable for understanding our relationship with the earth if they belong to churches where it is consistently

excluded by ordinance and/or observance. The woman bowed down and silent on the sabbath or the woman's offering of gifts ignored or rejected at the altar are the actual experiences which give women solidarity with the earth's silent cry.

It is, nevertheless, a sign of hope and of the presence of the Spirit to hear its role in women's lives acknowledged as a force for healing our wounds and those of the earth. The relationship between us and the Spirit, between the Spirit and the earth becomes the basis for a new kind of self-perception. It makes it possible for us to be quite explicit about the power and place of the Spirit in the world. We can speak of it from our own experience in a non-exclusive way as the same breath of God which hovered over the waters in Genesis and still gives life to every living soul brought forth in the birthings of the skies, the womb, the waters and the earth. We can name it for everyone as the energy for life made available gratuitously to us in the interaction between sun and plant. With Hildegard of Bingen, we can sing of the Spirit as 'root and crown of the world tree and wind in its branches'.[8]

In our healing role of attentiveness to bodily needs, we can embody in a new way the mystery of God's attentiveness to the world. No place is hidden from it, no form of life too small, no need too unimportant and no cry unheard. Through the power of the Spirit we are all called to this mode of attentiveness at every level of our being, and so experience the Spirit as the convergence point of our attention to God within the whole of creation. *L'attente de Dieu*, Simone Weil's phrase for waiting in patience on God, can then be taken to express the attitude of heart in which the Spirit moves us towards tending the world while attending to the presence of God.

NOTES

[1] Montefiore, C. G. and Loewe, H., eds: *A rabbinic anthology* (New York, 1974), p 45.
[2] Buber, Martin: *I and Thou* (Edinburgh, 1970), pp 155–7.
[3] See the lengthy discussion of this in my book: *From Apocalypse to Genesis: ecology, feminism and Christianity* (Tunbridge Wells, 1991), especially Chapters 7 and 9.
[4] See an extensive discussion of the effects of this emphasis in Primavesi, Anne and Henderson, Jennifer: *Our God has no favourites: a liberation theology of the Eucharist* (Tunbridge Wells, 1989).
[5] See Dodson Gray, Elizabeth: *Sacred dimensions of women's experience* (Wellesley, 1988), p 170. For creative thinking about the response to this imbalance, see Radford Ruether, Rosemary: *Women-Church: theology and practice* (San Francisco, 1988).
[6] de Chardin, Teilhard: *Hymn of the universe* (London, 1961), p 19.
[7] See the detailed discussion of this in *From Apocalypse to Genesis*, Chapter 3.
[8] See Hildegard of Bingen: *Symphonia armonie celestium revelationum*, tr B. Newman (Cornell, 1988), p 141.