Learning from Kannaki

Light, darkness, and the full meaning of life

Francis X. Clooney

EVEN A RELATIVELY HAPPY LIFE can become a dark place at times. As things happen to ourselves and those we love, or simply as we grow older, we find ourselves confronted with evils, sufferings and unsettling events which leave us in the dark, unable to see where we are or to find our way forward. Of course we try to understand this darkness with the eyes of faith. As Christians, we can find meaning in the mystery of Christ's suffering, death and resurrection, and many of us will be inclined to look no further. But it surely would be better if we did not narrow our attention too quickly. Some of us need to look more widely about us, to see how people in other cultures and religions have understood the sufferings of human life and responded to the darkness, for there is no reason to believe that only we Christians have managed insights into how humans can best cope with life and death. Another religious tradition may be able to teach us how to respond to life's troubles in a way we might not otherwise have envisioned.

In the following pages, I invite us to consider just one example, drawn from India's religious traditions. *Cilappatikaram* – henceforth, *The ankle bracelet* – is a Tamil-language drama from fifth-century South India by Prince Ilanko Atikal. Most basically and memorably this drama is a poignant, very human account of Kannaki, a young woman who suffers and is sorely tested by a husband who is unfaithful, who returns to her, but who is then unjustly killed. Concern about this woman's plight is an immediate point of entry we can all share. Yet as we follow Kannaki's story, *The ankle bracelet* also draws us into a particular way of thinking about human nature and the suffering humans are liable to. It skilfully displays and probes an ever-widening range of good and bad human experiences and responses to them, the inevitability of fate but also the power that makes us free when we see things just as they are. *The ankle bracelet* comes from India's ancient Jaina tradition, so it stresses the inescapability of one's deeds and the necessity of quiet

detachment, yet it also incorporates a much wider range of Indian social and religious viewpoints, including those of the Hindu and Buddhist traditions. It can be taken as a Jaina answer to questions about the meaning of human life that have been much more widely posed in India. Let us follow the story of Kannaki and see where it leads us.

The loving wife

In Part One, Kannaki marries Kovalan, the man she loves. For a time they enjoy married bliss with a great enthusiasm, in part spurred on by the realization that 'we live on earth but a few days' (2:117).[1] But their love is even more fragile than that, for Kovalan soon meets a renowned dancer, Matavi, and begins an extended affair with her. During it, Kannaki suffers patiently at home by herself, accepting the quiet long-suffering expected of her:

> Kannaki was heartbroken. No anklets sounded
> On her small, graceful feet. No girdle
> Blazed over her mound of love wound
> In a soft, white garment. No vermilion
> Rouge was painted on her breasts. Except
> For her bridal pendant, she wished for no ornament.
> In the absence of earrings, her ears seemed
> Pendulous and elongated. Her radiant moonlike face
> Was not beaded with sweat, nor did kohl accent
> Her wide fishlike eyes. Her forehead,
> Bright as coral, was without the tilaka,
> And the smile that revealed to Kovalan her pearly
> Teeth had vanished. No oil lit up
> Her thick, dark hair.
> Parted from their lovers,
> Women sighed like bellows puffing
> And blowing in a forge.
>
> (4: 61–76)

Her patient and long-suffering attitude fits the particular paradigm of love which *The ankle bracelet* inherited from ancient Tamil poetic literature; Kannaki fits the expected pattern of a woman who waits patiently for the return of a lover who is inexplicably absent. Throughout, Kannaki's psychological states are subtly explored from every angle. She, Kovalan and Matavi are carefully observed but not morally judged, though one gets a sense even from the start that

their deeds inevitably have consequences. In a way, Kannaki is simply the ideal wife who suffers for and with her husband, whatever he does; she never thinks of herself as separable from him. As we shall see, her total identification with the role of wife has great consequences; it is the basis even for her moment of self-assertion.

One evening Matavi and Kovalan are singing passionate and subtle love songs to one another, when unexpectedly the playful songs get out of control and raise real doubts about their fidelity to one another. This spoils their relationship, and Kovalan soon leaves her and returns to Kannaki – who is predictably forgiving and ready to receive him back. Everything seems to have returned to normal, and Kannaki is vindicated because she waited until her husband was ready to return.

A murder and a rebellion

Since their finances have been ruined by his lavish affair, Kannaki offers to sell her dowry jewellery, particularly her splendid ankle bracelets, to help restore their good fortunes. To do this, in Part Two of the drama she and Kovalan travel to the great city of Maturai. After they have reached the city, Kovalan goes off to sell the bracelet. But quickly he falls prey to a wicked goldsmith who has already stolen a similar bracelet from the queen. Seeing an opportunity to shift the blame, the goldsmith denounces Kovalan to the king. Circumstances speed ahead, and carelessness traps the king into hastily ordering Kovalan's immediate execution.

When Kannaki is told of his death, she is of course devastated, and she decides that she is confronted with the need to make a quick choice: either to step into the role of a grieving widow and accept passively what happened, or to rebel against this obvious injustice. Surprisingly, given her passive demeanour thus far, Kannaki chooses the latter course. While here too her independence is still a function of her devotion to her husband, nevertheless she emerges as a remarkably strong individual; she rejects the role of the docile widow and refuses to surrender and condone the violence done to her husband:

> Like the unhappy women who keep painful vows
> After their dear husbands vanished in the pyre,
> Must I suffer and be ruined
> Because I lost my husband through the fault
> Of a king despised by his own people?

Like the unhappy women who lost their husbands
With chests resplendent with fragrant wreaths,
And went and bathed in holy rivers,
Must I suffer and be ruined,
O foolish goddess of dharma, through the fault
Of the king whose sceptre is bent by evil?
Like the unhappy women drowned in the vows
Of widowhood after their dear husbands vanished
In the pyre, must I give up fame in this life,
Cry my heart out and be ruined
Through the fault of the Pantiyan
Whose sceptre turned away from dharma?
(18:36–52)

In her anger, she scorns the view (which later she will accept) that Kovalan's death is due to bad karma,[2] and addresses his dead body with these words:

Won't they say, 'This is the doing of your own karma',
That forced the king in his ignorance to cause
This grief? Is it right that on this amazing evening,
With no one to comfort me in my grief,
Your fair chest heaped with wreaths
Should lie clinging to the earth? Won't they say,
'This is the doing of your own karma',
That forced the Pantiyan's error the whole world
Condemns? Is it right that you should lie here
In the dust with blood spurting from your open wound
Before this weak, unfortunate one, her eyes
Brimful of tears?
(19: 53–64)

Her complaint grows even more strident and bitter as she turns on the women around her:

Are there women here, are there women?
Are there women who would allow such vileness
Done to their own husbands? Are there
Such women here? Are there good people here,
Are there good people who cherish and rear
Their own children? Are there such good people here?
Is there a god? Is there a god?
Is there a god in this Maturai whose king

Erred with his fierce sword? Is there a god?
(19: 67–75)

Kovalan appears to her and assures her of his innocence of the alleged theft; but even as he ascends to heaven, she remains angry, determined to confront the careless king:

Till the wrath that burns in me
Is appeased, I will not hold my husband
In my arms. I will confront the evil king
And demand an answer.
(19: 91–94)

Kannaki strides toward the palace, furious; everyone she meets is terrified, as if she were a Goddess come into their midst. When she is ushered into the king's presence, she easily proves Kovalan's innocence by showing that the queen's bracelet was only superficially similar to her own. This encounter with Kannaki and with the truth she reveals overwhelms the king; he sees the flaw in the system and his personal responsibility for it, and his life becomes unbearable. The mood here is not simply righteous anger or denunciation or penitence; it is the terror that comes from seeing everything exposed, the good and the bad, the light and the dark together. No longer is a comforting partial view of reality possible, now there is no place to hide. When the king hears Kannaki's story he is overwhelmed with remorse and fear. Along with his own faithful wife, he falls down and dies.

The terrifying face of truth

At this point we may recall the *Bhagavad Gita*, the Hindu classic in which the warrior Arjuna encounters Lord Krishna as Time and Death, in a vision of the totality. Arjuna's circumstances are quite different from Kannaki's. He is grieving at the prospect of fighting a bloody civil war in which either he and his brothers, or his beloved relations and teachers, will die. He baulks, asserting his individuality and refusing to play his part in the overall order of things. Lord Krishna, his charioteer, counsels Arjuna, frees him from his preoccupations, and pushes him beyond himself, to see the larger picture and to realize that life and death do not matter in the way he thinks they do. Arjuna has been looking in the wrong direction, at things that inevitably pass away, not at the true self which never dies,

which has no imaginable beginning or end. In the *Gita*'s climactic eleventh chapter Arjuna is given a vision which verifies Krishna's teaching but which terrifies him thoroughly, as he sees everything in God's mouth:

> When I see the many mouths and eyes of your great form, its many arms, thighs, feet, bellies, and fangs – the worlds tremble and so do I. Vishnu, I see you brush the clouds with flames of countless colours, I see your mouth agape, I see your huge eyes blazing – my inner self quakes and I find no resolve or tranquillity. Seeing the fangs protruding from your mouths like the fires of time, I lose my bearings and I find no refuge. (11: 23–25)[3]

Arjuna sees all of reality all at once, and his ordinary viewpoint is shattered. He cannot bear this sight and cries, 'Be gracious, Lord of gods, shelter of the universe!', for it is too much to see God and all of reality in one single view. Yet Arjuna is strengthened because this vision teaches him to see even himself as part of a whole that precedes him and is greater than he can imagine. Letting go of himself, he again becomes able to do his duty, to accept his place in the whole.

Though the details differ greatly, Arjuna's revelatory moment reminds us of Kannaki, since her stark and uncompromising fury reveals everything to the king who cannot bear all this truth, all at once. In *The ankle bracelet* and in the *Gita*, a religious and social crisis is resolved only through a confrontation with the totality of violence and life, everything joyful and painful, the human and the divine all together. By seeing everything at once, Kannaki and Arjuna are led to indifference, no longer swayed by love of light or fear of darkness. But others, less strong than themselves, continue to die under the stress.

Anger and quiet

Kannaki's rage culminates when she engulfs the city in the fire of her woman's anger, by tearing off her breast and hurling it into the city:

> In a rage she cried out: 'Men and women
> Of Maturai of the four temples! O gods in heaven
> And ascetics, listen! I curse this city. Its king erred
> In killing the man I loved. Blameless am I!'

> She wrenched off her left breast with her hand,
> And grief-stricken went round the city of Maturai
> Three times. And with a curse she hurled
> Her fair breast on its pleasant street.
>
> (21: 49–62)

This is the quintessential act of female anger, the furious power of a woman overwhelming society's defences by her refusal to accept its compromises. If the first part of the drama seems to vindicate fidelity, Part Two seems to vindicate righteous anger, a rejection of the idea that the darkness is inevitable.

But the remainder of the drama makes us think otherwise. It is dedicated to explaining the apparent injustice, to diluting Kannaki's anger and diminishing her new-found independence. This is achieved in three ways. First, Kannaki's rage is reinterpreted as the purifying power of righteousness, dharma. When she throws her breast into the city to set it on fire, the actual burning is delayed a moment, until Agni, the brahmanical Fire God, can appear to her. He speaks to Kannaki and offers his services; it is he who actually ignites the fire in a proper and controlled way which purifies the city while sparing those who deserve exemption: virtuous women, brahmins, cows. Kannaki's anger, which sought simply to destroy the city and all it stands for, becomes instead a tool for measured correction and maintenance.

Second, when the Goddess visits Kannaki, she explains that the death of Kovalan is really the fruit of his own karma (deeds) from a previous life. It turns out that he had once killed an innocent man named Cankaman.

Cankaman's wife had wandered for fourteen days and then thrown herself off a cliff, first bitterly cursing the man who killed her husband:

> She walked up a cliff to join her husband
> And leaped down with a curse: 'He who has brought
> This suffering upon us will himself suffer one day.'
>
> (23: 170–174)

Kovalan and Kannaki bear the weight of this curse:

> Her irrevocable curse is now upon you.
> Listen to the explanation. When actions performed

> In a former life by the wicked bear fruit
> No penance can reverse it.
>
> (23: 175–178)

Not only is the evil an imbalance which can be rectified; it is also only an apparent imbalance, since Kovalan gets what he deserves, based on his own deeds. While the poignancy of her suffering is not necessarily lessened, the murder is no longer imagined to be something inherently wrong, to be fought against; suffering is necessary and right, it is a fact of life as normal as the rising and setting of the sun.

The law of living and dying

Full explanation extinguishes anger. When the Goddess quiets Kannaki by explaining to her the full scope of how life really is, we are reminded of another suffering woman who was helped to see reality differently. Kisha Gotami was a poor woman who had one child, a little son. But when the boy was just a year old, suddenly he died. Desperate for a cure, Kisha Gotami runs everywhere, and finally is sent to see Gautama, the Buddha. Gautama does not raise her son from the dead, nor does he even teach her the meaning of death. Instead, he chooses a more practical route that gently guides her to review her own life:

> Seeing that she was ripe for conversion, he said to her, 'Go, enter the city, make the rounds of the entire city, and in whichever house no one has ever died, from that house fetch tiny grains of mustard-seed'. 'Very well, sir,' she replied, and she went off delighted in heart to look for that mustard seed. But in each house she entered, she found that someone had died: in one, a daughter; in another, a mother in childbirth; in a third, a man killed in war. When she had finished going through the city, she had found no house where death had not entered.

Without many words and in a way suited to her need, the Buddha skilfully guides her to look at the obvious, what is already going on in her own life: people are always dying, families are always experiencing loss, there are no exceptions. Once she realizes this, seeing how close, ordinary and pervasive death actually is, she stops looking for a personal exemption; her grief is transformed and she clings no more to her child: 'She exclaimed, "In the entire city this alone

is the way of things! The Buddha, filled with compassion for the human race, must have seen this!"'[4] She no longer clings to her son, but returns to the Buddha and takes refuge at his feet. There is no question of rectifying the loss she experienced, and no personally satisfying interpretation is assigned to the boy's death. Kisha Gotami comes to see the larger picture, the universal truth of being born and dying; her particular suffering ceases to be central even for herself. Kisha Gotami's realization may be quieter than Arjuna's and Kannaki's, but like them she too learns to put aside that rebellion in the face of darkness which seemed to distinguish her as an individual. She now knows too much to rail against life's dark side.

Restoring the way things must be

Kannaki's anger is reinterpreted as instrumental to the necessary purification of the city, and it is assuaged by the fact of Kovalan's just punishment. The third step in reinterpretation occupies the rest of the drama: Kannaki herself is revealed to be a Goddess, a Goddess of fidelity. Hearing the Goddess's explanation of Kovalan's karma, her rage is quieted; she goes to the temple of the Goddess Korravai, breaks her remaining bracelet, leaves the city all by herself, and goes out into the wilderness:

> Along the bank of the Vaiyai in flood, she wandered
> Unconscious of night or day. Sad
> And inconsolable, unaware when she fell
> Into a ditch or climbed a slope, she walked
> Step by painful step up the sacred hill
> of Netuvel who swirls the long, fierce spear
> That ripped open the sea's bowels, scooped out
> The mountain's heart, and routed the demons.
> In the shade of a grove of flowering kino trees,
> She cried, 'O! I am a great sinner'.
> Thus passed fourteen days.
>
> (23: 191–202)

She now becomes simply a widow, reconciled to fate. But as such – the faithful wife who was furiously angry and is now quieted – she can be held up as an example for all, revealed as a Goddess:

> Indra, Lord of the immortals, with other gods
> Thought that day to be right for worship,
> Praised the glorious name of this revered woman,

Rained unfading flowers upon her, and adored her.
In a heavenly chariot, by the side of Kovalan
Slain in the royal city, Kannaki, her hair
Thick as a forest, ascended to heaven.
(23: 202–209)

Now she is not the terrifying divine fury of the earlier scenes, but rather the very ideal of the glorious and faithful wife, the Goddess of wifely fidelity, Pattini. (The cult of the Goddess Pattini was popular even before *The ankle bracelet*, and has reappeared in different ways, even until today.) As this Goddess of Fidelity, Kannaki vindicates society's values, and reinforces the inevitability of the roles people invariably play in society. Her personal torment and rage become edifying, though in the end she must still let go of them as she comes to see things more completely.

The value of playing one's part perfectly

Part Three of *The ankle bracelet* is dedicated to telling how the neighbouring king Cenkuttuvan establishes the cult of Kannaki. To obtain a stone for her temple image, Cenkuttuvan travels to the Himalayas in the far north, asserting his kingly authority in all the lands he traverses. The manifestation of his regal authority and his promotion of Kannaki's divinity are taken as revealing the enduring order of things, where earthly events reflect how things ought to be: once again, kings are good and powerful, once again, faithful wives are everywhere revered. But even at this point there is no easy consolation, for this restoration lacks all romance. The battle scenes are ghastly:

Heads and shoulders flew
In all directions, as archers piled corpses.
Cut by swords, headless trunks
Danced to the music of ghosts with eyes
Like drumheads. Goblins clustered together, danced
And drank the blood spurting from corpses
Together with pieces of human flesh.
(26: 217–223)

Kovalan's parents and Kannaki's father die of grief; Matavi, Kovalan's lover, renounces the world and enters a monastery; another friend follows a revered Jaina practice and starves herself to death; a neighbouring king sacrifices one thousand goldsmiths to the

Goddess Pattini, apparently to atone for the wicked goldsmith's trickery. Even King Cenkuttuvan is reminded that his power too is frail:

> O just king! It is unnecessary to remind men
> Of wisdom that youth will not last forever. O guardian king!
> Laksmi resides in your chest though you see
> Your body covered with grey hair. Souls
> In divine bodies may be reborn
> In animals. Souls that leave the bodies
> Of animals may be reborn in the bodies of demons.
> Men are actors on a stage: they don't play
> One role forever. The actions of former births
> Determine life after death. No empty words, these.
>
> (28: 159–169)

The drama's final appeal supports the idea of a restored, renewed kingdom, in which people play their small parts, quietly and with detachment. There are no great issues, nothing which would unduly excite or distract us from the path of ordinary virtue, lived quietly each day. After all the passion and sorrow of the narrative, spectators are urged simply to do good and avoid evil, living within the established order. One must be detached, since life offers no sure alternatives:

> Youth, wealth, and the body
> Are unstable. Few are the days of your life.
> You cannot escape from your fate. Seek
> The best help to reach heaven. Follow these
> Precepts, O people who live on this good earth.
>
> (30: 194–198)

The message is simple: become quiet, do not become agitated, live as you have been taught, neither searching for the light nor fleeing the darkness. Much of life may be sorrowful or difficult, but it is all inevitable, everything for the better. Be like Kannaki, look beyond the obvious beginnings and ends of things, realize how life works when seen as a whole.

Dwelling in the whole, dark and light

The ankle bracelet is the story of one woman, her husband, their love and their troubles; it is an analysis of the states and moods of

love, though ultimately broken open in tragedy; it testifies to the right order of society, its values over against passing disorders, the responsibilities of kings and citizens; it reminds us starkly of the powers of woman, from whom the uncontrolled power of the divine erupts; it affirms the total explanatory power of karma, how nothing bad or good ever happens by chance, so no one need be disturbed by life, at all.

As Christians we may have great sympathy for Kannaki, and identify with her love, her anger, her sense of justice. But we are likely to find ourselves less easy at those moments when she submits her personality to refined and almost impersonal social roles, or when she quiets her grief in perfect detachment, becoming a Goddess beyond joy and sorrow. The tale may be compelling for us at first because we are willing to look into the life and experience of Kannaki; but it is powerful also because in the end we are asked to let go of Kannaki herself. It is not just her rebellion and cry for justice that gain approval, but also her submission to social and religious expectations. The very idea of 'being Kannaki' is to be surrendered before the larger and eternal realities of the way things are. We may respect her suffering enough to reject quick solutions to her problems, but deep down we may expect evil to be transformed into good, death into resurrection, darkness into light. But *The ankle bracelet* offers neither a hope nor a saving divine power which will redeem her suffering. Instead, it invites us to take another, broader view, to see what life looks like when we see all of it at once, our own little tale in a play of light and shadow which reaches far beyond us. In the end, Kannaki is every human being who tries to play her social role, who demands meaning for life and refuses to fit in with other people's violent expectations – and who in the end finally surrenders to the inevitability of a world not designed to satisfy her expectations. She is Kannaki, she is a Goddess, she is every human being.

As we see life reflected in the experience of Kannaki, we are invited to consider that this world cannot easily be changed, and need not be changed; things work out over time on a scale that is far beyond our comprehension, a panorama so wide that in the end we barely seem players even in our own dramas. *The ankle bracelet* invites us to dwell with that realization, to see a balance of the good and the bad, clinging to neither. Darkness and light will both always surround us, though at first we may resist the one and embrace the other. The goal is to let go of self, no longer swayed by joys or sor-

rows. *The ankle bracelet* does not offer a simple alternative: it is not supposed to change our perspective immediately; but however we may decide to respond to evil in the long run, Kannaki's story should at least get us to stop and hear anew, more attentively, the words of Qoheleth:

> Just as you do not know how the breath comes to the bones in the mother's womb, so you do not know the work of God, who makes everything. In the morning sow your seed, and at evening do not let your hands be idle; for you do not know which will prosper, this or that, or whether both alike will be good. Light is sweet, and it is pleasant for the eyes to see the sun. Even those who live many years should rejoice in them all; yet let them remember that the days of darkness will be many. All that comes is vanity . . . Remember your creator in the days of your youth, before the days of trouble come, and the years draw near when you will say, 'I have no pleasure in them'; before the sun and light and the moon and the stars are darkened and the clouds return with the rains . . . (*Eccl.* 11: 5–8; 12: 1–2)[5]

However we fashion our response to the darker aspects of life, if we listen to *The ankle bracelet* we may understand at least for a moment what it means to dwell quietly in the midst of life, watching even the shadows that mark the edges of faith's bright light.

Francis X. Clooney, a Jesuit priest, is currently Professor of Comparative Theology at Boston College, USA. During the past 25 years he has spent approximately five in India and Nepal, and recently finished a term as the President of the Society for Hindu-Christian Studies. His recent publications are *Seeing through texts: doing theology among the Srivaisnavas of South India* (State University of New York Press, 1996) and *Hindu wisdom for all God's children* (Orbis Books, 1998).

NOTES

1 All translations from *The ankle bracelet* are from *The tale of an anklet: an epic of South India*, translation by R. Parthasarathy (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993). I use his numbering of chapters and verses; 2:117, for example, indicates 'chapter 2, verse 117'.
2 Earlier it was suggested that Kannaki herself may have been to blame: 'In a previous birth you failed to keep a vow on his behalf' (9: 84–85).

3 As translated by Barbara Miller in *The Bhagavad Gita: Krishna's counsel in time of war* (New York: Bantam Books, 1986).
4 This version of the story of Kisha Gotami is slightly adapted from the translation by E. W. Burlingame, *Buddhist parables* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1922), pp 92–94.
5 I have used the New Revised Standard Version.