

CELIBACY IN ANOTHER TRADITION

By MICHAEL WOODGATE

ONE MAY WELL WONDER HOW MANY of those who have chosen celibacy sing the last line of J. M. Neale's translation of the *Golden Sequence*¹ with a certain desire and longing: 'And in heaven felicity', the latter word taking on a very human form. Each person who chooses celibacy doubtless has a different story to tell and therefore anyone writing about it will do so from a highly personal angle. Indeed, it is from this angle that I have been invited to write this article. I begin by asking myself a question which I have asked many times before: am I a celibate or am I simply someone who has never found anyone to marry – or indeed anyone who wants to marry me? I remain ignorant of the answer and do not expect to receive it in this world. If I am a celibate, then it might be truer to say that celibacy chose me rather than that I chose celibacy. The facts are that I have never taken any vows or made any promises even to God in personal prayer and I cannot say I have even prayed about it very much.

First thoughts

I suppose I began to take the possibility of celibacy seriously when I went to my theological college well over thirty years ago. In those days it was rare for a student to be married and all the staff were unmarried at my particular seminary. The principal himself lectured on states of life and began by stating quite emphatically that vocation to priesthood and vocation to marriage are quite separate and that many are called to the priesthood without being called to celibacy. At the time of the Reformation the Church of England not only allowed married men to be priests, but also allowed clergy to marry. Large numbers of priests did marry at that time, but not so many bishops, as they were often members of Oxford or Cambridge colleges and had to remain celibate for that reason. It was pointed out to us that a married priest could be a role model for both marriage and family life (remember this was 1960 or thereabouts!). On the other hand, we were told that there were parishes with a tradition of unmarried clergy who lived in a clergy house and it was important that this tradition continued as both the houses and the area were not very suitable for families. When I was ordained I accepted

a curacy in a parish with a clergy-house tradition and was expected to remain unmarried whilst there. For me at that time it was an ideal situation. I had the companionship of other clergy, meals were real community occasions and yet I had the privacy of my own room both for working and sleeping. By this time I not only understood that I should remain unmarried whilst there, but I had come to believe that it was the state of life God wanted for me. If pressed, I would call myself a celibate and was perfectly happy in that state. I must say that celibacy was and is 'no big deal' as they say, for me. Perhaps this is partly due to the fact that I am a fairly self-sufficient person, I enjoy my own company and as an introvert need it if I am to relax completely.

Solitude and a touch of loneliness

The clergy-house life was to last for a good many years as I became incumbent of the parish where I served as a curate and continued the same tradition, though it was becoming increasingly clear by the 1980s that most curates preferred their own house or flat to living with their colleagues. Even when my last curate moved on to another parish and I was the only priest in the house, I still had our housekeeper to look after me so was not living in solitude. A few years later I moved to my present parish where I have lived alone in the small flat adjoining the church and looked after myself entirely. I regard living alone as the real test for a celibate such as myself. Do I mind coming back after a time away either on holiday or on business to an empty place? Do I mind having to do all my own domestic work? Do I mind always being alone except on those occasions when friends come to stay? Do I mind having no one to share things with on a daily basis? The answer, quite frankly, is that sometimes I do mind. If I have spent an evening with a congenial and happily married (so far as I can perceive) couple or with an equally congenial and happy family, then I must confess that I have twinges of envy. If, on the other hand, I have been with a couple or a family where there is some turbulence or worse, then I thank God for my own state of life. In my last parish, a large and quite demanding one, I would tell myself that if I were married I simply could not do all I was doing without neglecting a wife and family. My present parish is a very different one with its focus of ministry in the middle of the day and very often a 'free' evening. If I were married I could probably spend a reasonable amount of time with a wife and family. However, I feel very sure now of my vocation to celibacy and have become used to living alone. I simply cannot imagine myself being married.

Creative energies

What are the strengths of celibacy? In the first place celibacy can bring a relief from certain kinds of stress. I do not have to be concerned about my sexual performance or indeed physical attractiveness. I do not have to be concerned about finding the 'right' person to marry or spend time seeking relationships with the opposite sex, hoping that one will eventually blossom and flourish, which can absorb a great deal of emotional energy. Put more positively and resonating with some remarks made by the author Susan Howatch in a newspaper article recently, I find celibacy empowering, giving me drive and energy. Susan Howatch has herself been married and seems to find celibacy the best state of life for her at least at this present time. Not a little of my drive and energy is spent on my monthly parish newsletter whose production I find a most creative experience. The very thought of beginning to write it gives me life and when it is completed I wonder whether I am sharing the same kind of feelings that a parent feels when its child is born, however reduced in intensity. Another strength, at least for me in pastoral work, is that I can have a single loyalty to those in my care and do not have to decide whether I should be spending time with the family or with the flock. The danger of this for me is that I may not spend sufficient time on myself and I am aware of this even if I do not always make the necessary adjustment. Coupled with this strength is, I believe, my natural sense of fatherhood. As a young priest, for example, I was put in charge of work with children and rather to my surprise I found this not only congenial but an area in which I was gifted. I still enjoy work with children and young people even though now it rarely comes my way and perhaps my tolerance level is rather lower than it used to be when younger. I feel that much of the energy that might have gone into being a father to one's own children was available for those in my pastoral care. Had I been married at the kind of age when most people are (say between twenty-five and thirty-five) then my children would probably now be in the same age-range as many of the business community to whom I minister in the City of London. Again, a little to my surprise, I seem to have the gifts and the energy to relate to them in a way which they appear to find helpful. This is not, as I recognize, a strength which comes necessarily from celibacy but confirms me in my innate sense of fatherhood. It has been said that one of the strengths of celibacy is a non-possessive love for others and that one is able to give a lot to each person without fear of a spouse or a friend being jealous. Ideally, this may be true, but celibacy has not freed me personally from the temptation to give more of myself to one person than to another because I find him or

her more attractive or congenial. However, I recognize the ideal and know that I fall short of it. A further strength is that once people know or perceive that I am celibate, I believe they find me unthreatening when it comes to counselling, spiritual direction or pastoral advice. I certainly find that they will often confide quite a lot and quite soon in any interview or session, though I am well aware that this may be because they find me an unthreatening person anyway.

Not quite a bed of roses!

What are the drawbacks of celibacy? People often ask me if I am lonely but this may be because they know I live in a part of the City of London where no one else does, though thousands work here by day. As I have said already, I am a fairly self-contained and self-sufficient person and can enjoy my own company for quite long periods. However, I have never felt the call to be a solitary and often find myself turning on the radio when doing jobs around the house because I want to hear a human voice. I must say I do find a certain conflict between solitude and loneliness and find myself alleviating the latter in a way that does not necessarily minister to the former, which I regard as an ideal quality for a celibate who lives alone. Another drawback of celibacy concerns the future, especially retirement and declining years. Much would depend upon my state of health, but I do fear being housebound and do not feel drawn to community life in a clergy retirement home. I would hope that while I had health and strength I would be able to visit family and friends and that they would be able to come to visit me, but if my friends are my contemporaries then that may be as impossible for them as for me. It is sometimes said that a drawback of celibacy for a parish priest is simply not knowing how his parishioners live because he does not have the experience of day-to-day family life. In fact, since living alone and trying to cope with all the household and domestic chores, my admiration for the way in which parents cope with family life has gone up by leaps and bounds. How working parents or a single working parent manage to do a full-time job and then come home to feed and care for a family, I just do not know. Personally, providing meals for one I find demanding enough! So far as other aspects of family life are concerned, I have my own experience, albeit many years ago now. Another alleged drawback to celibacy for a parish priest is said to be that it ill equips him in preparing couples for marriage. My response to this is that I believe the celibate can be all the more objective in his preparation, and his pastoral work, especially his parish visiting, should along with his initial training have equipped him sufficiently. In any case, these days it is often

recognized that marriage preparation is best done by a pastoral team of which the parish priest will be but one member. The other and perhaps most obvious drawback for the celibate is what he or she does with his or her sexuality or more specifically sexual desires. A celibate is not a eunuch! When I was a student we were told that all physical desire was to be sublimated unless and until we were married. Sublimation is not a word one often hears nowadays but I believe it still has substance. However, it must be carefully explained. From personal experience and from many hours spent in the confessional I know just how difficult it is to cope with sexual desire in a way that honours the body as the temple of the Holy Spirit. It is in this area perhaps more than in any other that the celibate experiences the sacrifice of his or her vocation and relies upon the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. Actually, to regard the need for continence as a drawback is perhaps to place it in the wrong column – it can be a source of strength.

Support and nourishment

In his book *Being sexual and celibate*,² Keith Clark, Capuchin friar, says 'Prayer is essential to the living of a celibate life'. This I wholeheartedly endorse and can hardly emphasize sufficiently. I am one of those people for whom prayer has always been a part of life and I cannot remember a time when I have not prayed, even if I blush to think of the selfishness of some of my childhood prayers. It is in prayer that I am reminded to whom I belong, for whom I have been asked to give my life, who has a prior claim on everything that I am or do. It is a tremendous privilege to reflect that God wants me for himself alone. I cannot say prayer has become easier as the years have passed and it is probably as difficult now as it has ever been. My commitment to the daily office sometimes feels like commitment to a spouse of long standing – sometimes a little irksome, sometimes delightful. My time spent in more personal prayer each day certainly strengthens and deepens my relationship with the Lord in a way that affirms my celibate calling. It is in prayer that I grow in intimacy with the Lord and it is intimacy that is a basic need for every human being. It is in prayer that I can reflect upon the purpose of my celibacy, which is not an end in itself. Our Lord said 'There are eunuchs who have made themselves that way for the sake of the kingdom of heaven' (Mt 19:12). That means that my celibacy is intended to be the way in which God wants me to dedicate myself to his kingdom and the extension of that kingdom and the way in which I can possess it more fully for myself. St Paul said that an unmarried man can devote himself to the Lord's affairs and 'all he need worry about is pleasing the Lord'

(1 Cor 7:33). This kind of single-mindedness is certainly an ideal but needs sensitive interpretation. I believe that my celibacy needs to be supported not only by prayer but by other dimensions of the spiritual life such as fasting and abstinence, spiritual reading, discipline of the imagination and emotions and other aids to self-control. Of course, none of these are unique to the celibate state, but I do find them particularly important for myself and am fairly aware when I neglect them. I cannot deny that trying to guard the heart from disorderly and self-expressive behaviour can be a struggle and I am well aware of the need for support. For many years now I have been an associate of an Anglican religious community and this has given me enormous support and done much to nourish my life in Christ. Even though I do not visit the monastery as often as I used to because of other commitments, I feel my life and prayer is caught up with theirs and this gives me a sense of belonging and also of encouragement. The section in the Associates' Rule dealing with 'Chastity in the Love of the Holy Spirit' contains these words:

Chastity therefore makes for the fullness of love and creativity in the Holy Spirit: for sowing and watering the seed of the word of God, for nurturing the children of God, and for re-creating the structures of the Church for her unity and her mission to the world.

Of course, not all associates are celibate or indeed unmarried and chastity is an ideal for every Christian to be worked out according to the state to which he or she is called.

How Anglicans see it

It is not easy to say how my own tradition, Anglicanism, views celibacy. It is a vocation which any bishop, priest or deacon is free to pursue according to choice and calling and, as I indicated earlier, there are parishes which have had a tradition of celibate clergy for many years and the people are usually well aware of this and respect it. However, in parishes where there has not been this tradition, it is often more difficult for the people to understand it when a new incumbent arrives who is unmarried. He is hardly likely to state publicly that he is celibate and the people may be left wondering. He could be unmarried for a variety of reasons, after all. If he is a natural ascetic, then people may conclude – the very faithful and regular attenders at church, that is – that he is celibate. At one time, Parochial Church Councils of Church of England parishes nearly always asked for a married incumbent, unless there was a well-established celibate tradition. Cynics would say that this was

because they wanted his wife to be an unpaid curate or to run the Mothers' Union! My impression is that nowadays PCCs are less concerned about his marital status provided he seems the right person for the parish. Throughout my years as a priest I do not recall anyone asking me, officially or unofficially, whether I am a celibate or not. There exists a small society in the Church of England whose members are required to be celibate priests, but I know of no other organization which specifically supports celibate clergy, with the possible exception of the Company of Mission Priests and the Oratory of the Good Shepherd, whose members live under rule. For those of us who do not live under such a rule, there is certainly no official support or recognition, though it is fair to say that some bishops value unmarried clergy in some of the tough, inner-city parishes where it is difficult for a married man to make a home for his wife and family. One of the anomalies of the Reformation, when it permitted clergy to marry in the Church of England, is that it made no special provision for wives and families and, until there were standardized stipends throughout each diocese, clerical families could live very near the poverty line in some parishes, as demonstrated by Mr Quiverful in Anthony Trollope's *Barchester Towers*. Even today, where a priest has a young family and his wife is unable to bring in an income, there can be great difficulties. It would probably not be unfair to say that many Church of England people do not view celibacy positively and one quite senior priest said recently that he thought there were very few if any genuine celibates in our Church.

Finally . . .

'And in heaven felicity.' Well, if so, I am prepared to wait for her! I said in the first paragraph that I found it necessary to write this article from a highly personal angle and this I have done. Others would doubtless write it very differently. I trust that I have managed to present a picture of celibacy that is both positive and affirmative. I do not regret the vocation to which I believe God has called me and I also believe that he will continue to sustain me in pursuing it.

NOTES

¹ *The English hymnal* (OUP/Mowbray, 1933).

² Keith Clark: *Being sexual and celibate* (Notre Dame, Indiana: Ave Maria Press, 1986).