Frustrations and the decade of worry

Joanne Adams

OVER A DECADE AGO, MONDAY EVENING TELEVISION in our house was dedicated to the American series *Thirtysomething*, an everyday tale of thirtysomething folk dealing with marriages and children, crises at work and ageing parents, friendship and social life. My husband and I, mere twentysomethings then, watched this with great absorption but also with what I now recognize as a significant lack of empathy. The characters seemed so intense, the crises so frequent; was this really what it was going to be like for us?

If the series were to be repeated now our empathy would be much more developed and there would be no amused detachment or alienation from our TV counterparts. Something happens to us in those years and this shift has an effect on our spiritual lives, not only the public spiritual life that we lead within a church community, but also our personal relationship with God.

Pivotal moments

What happens in this decade? Talking to friends of a similar age, no one seems to find it easy to articulate exactly what it is, although it is rarely one isolated change. Suddenly, from having led active, outward-focused lives, something arrives which causes us to question where we are and what we are doing. It can be a major incident such as illness, the death of a parent, difficulty in conceiving or the problems in a relationship. It may be no more than a growing sense of unease, a feeling of time passing with perhaps little of significance to show for it. Frustration is the result, both in the sense of general discouragement or dissatisfaction and, more importantly, in the sense of one's efforts being in vain or coming to naught.

David Hay, of Nottingham University, who researches into religious experience, writes of his growing certainty, based on detailed research with young children, that spiritual awareness, the religious instinct in its most uncluttered form, is innate and not a thing which needs to be taught or injected.[1] What seems to happen, rather, is that this instinct becomes squashed as children head towards adolescence and adult-

hood. Even where it is fostered and encouraged, the surrounding culture plays a decisive role in causing this innate faith to be left behind.

Spiritual awareness, however, like the ability to ride a bike, is never quite lost, even when under considerable pressure. The challenges which life presents, be they through happiness or adversity, loss and struggle or success, mean that the questions about mystery and purpose and the value of what we do reassert themselves. As we approach mid-life these questions become more and more frequent.

What's it all for?

In our teens and twenties we have our gaze fixed ahead of us: exams, job, relationships and 'settling down' stretch out before us with a myriad of opportunities to consider. Eventually, certain choices need to be made, opting for this means rejecting that, committing myself to this career or this location means that I cannot keep other options open. Part of the shift in this decade is the sobering realization that we are limited. At thirty-seven I know that I will never be a neurosurgeon or fly a fighter plane. I have run out of time to have eight children, and it is unlikely that I will emigrate to Kazakhstan. I may have had no intention of doing any of these things at eighteen either, but the opportunity was there and now it has gone. Although we may not feel it too keenly in some areas, in others there is a real sense of loss.

This sense of limitation is a cause of frustration and it affects all human beings. Becoming aware of our limitedness is the first real progress we make. We may find it easy to accept in certain spheres and give in gracefully, whilst railing against it in others. Holding on to our youth seems to be a way of protecting ourselves from acknowledging limitation. Fighting nature to remain thinner, fitter and less wrinkled than our age dictates can be a displacement activity, putting off the need to deal with the larger issues. We need a spirituality which can acknowledge this limitation and one which can make it productive. Our world offers so much in the way of experience, and our own culture seems to suggest that it is quantity, not depth of experience which counts. The Sunday supplements offer it to us in gluttonous helpings: travel, eating out, shopping, leisure activities. What are we pursuing? Is it that we long to be satisfied but we are relentlessly reminded that, however much we do and have, we are never sated?

Where next?

Discouragement and dissatisfaction describe some of the emotions we encounter in this period and these of course are common to all age

groups. What is perhaps new for thirtysomethings is a feeling approaching hopelessness, of all our efforts being in vain, and for those who would ask the question, a demand to know just where God is in all of this.

The majority of people in their late twenties and thirties will have a number of years of work behind them, and will know by now whether their career is 'on course' according to the expectations of their peers or not. Similarly in relationships, we may have committed ourselves to one person or made the decision to start a family, we may be contentedly single, or we may be experiencing a sense of hopelessness that we may never settle. All the enthusiasm and optimism of earlier years which did sustain us through smaller hiccups may not be equal to larger disappointments, or to an overload of the system where everything seems to go wrong at once. When this happens, the temptation to throw everything over and escape can be enormously strong, even if only temporary. The great challenge here is to find a middle way between resigning ourselves to the plausible and rational conclusion that all our efforts do come to naught, and succumbing to this temptation to flee, joining the 'go-for-it' culture.

Desolation comes to us all, whether or not we would use specifically religious language to describe the experience. The temptation to resign ourselves to such a desolate world-view is huge. It seems so convincing, so rational. Using an Ignatian metaphor, the destructive spirit in the guise of the army commander has planned a concerted attack against all our weak points.[2] We are tired, things may be going badly at work, the children are demanding and we feel inadequate as parents, neither one partner nor the other has the resources to be as supportive to the other as they need to be. The whole situation can look hopeless. If we are people who pray, prayer may dry up as we feel we have nothing to bring but complaint and bewilderment.

What we need to fight this frustration is not a ready solution. If such a thing presents itself we should beware, because, again, to return to the matter of discernment, the worst time to make a decision or embark on a new course of action is in the midst of a period of desolation. Why we need to be particularly wary is that the prevailing view on how to deal with a troubled situation seems to be to escape it using any means available. The phrase 'go for it' greets us whether we are watching television, reading the papers or magazines, or listening to the counsel of friends. Job a bit boring? You owe it to yourself to find something more stimulating! Go for it! Marriage gone stale? You can't allow him/her to hold you back. Go for it! Have all your ideals collapsed? Well,

maybe you had it wrong all along. You have to look after yourself. Go for it!

This is a very sad state of affairs. The alternative to 'going for it' seems to be to resign oneself to an unhappy situation, a grim duty, with nothing on the horizon but further disappointment. The positive side of sticking with something through difficulty is rarely advocated. The very real possibility that we can gain through adversity, and that we can only develop and mature with a certain amount of struggle, tends not to appeal. This is not to suggest that people should remain in abusive relationships, nor that they should submit to injustice in their work because somehow it 'does them good'. What I am saying, however, is that when struggle and adversity come, they are often hidden, if unwelcome, opportunities for growth. If we run from them constantly, it is highly unlikely that we will be happy for long in the place of our escape. God seeks us out, offering us the opportunity to grow and to share in his life. The pain we experience is not the final word on this life, but avoiding that pain altogether means that we cannot experience our life in him in all its fullness.

Christian frustrations

Thus far we have been looking at the general situation of men and women in this age bracket. Whether or not they go to church, they are likely to face similar challenges in their work and home lives. Christians will find additionally that this can lead to a change in their relationship with God and, optimistically, to a deepening and broadening of that relationship. How does the shift we undergo during these years affect our relationship with our own church communities and with the larger institution?

In our twenties we can choose to practise our faith, or not. If we say yes, it becomes our responsibility to find somewhere to worship and to decide how much involvement to have in that community. Sometimes these two matters alone provide the work of years. We need to find somewhere where we are comfortable, somewhere where we are accepted. We may also be negotiating how our faith fits in with our relationships and our work, both of which can seem so much more pressing. After all, if I am not very committed to my parish, no one will know whether I have been to church or not, whereas both my boss and my partner have a vested interest in my active participation. Many people become disillusioned with churchgoing in their twenties. If they had a religiously committed background, they have often left the cosy nest which was their old parish and cannot find anything to replace it. If

they have had a positive experience of Christian community whilst away at college or university, finding something which matches their expectations might prove impossible. If neither of these applies there seems little to encourage a secular post-Christian twenty-year-old to consider a life of faith as a real possibility. There seems to be no place for this particular age group in many church communities. They are too old to be 'youth', too young to have children of their own, too nomadic to be relied upon or to have important responsibilities. Cut off from participation and with no one taking an active interest in their spiritual journey, it is easy for the whole journey to be ignored. Ours is not a reflective age and the imperative to make one's way in the world is very strong. Often the signposts to the spiritual path only beckon again when there is a moment of stasis, of settling down and reorientation. But for those young people who are participating in a worshipping community, how do things look from their standpoint at the end of their twenties and into the next decade?

Grown-up enough for a grown-up church

When we get down to particulars it is easy to allow every instance of irritation with church life to surface. But to be objective, what are the main areas of discontent and what might be helpful to remedy the situation? Discontent surfaces readily in three main areas: church structures, acceptance or non-acceptance of church teaching, and the demands of living out our Christian vocation.

As we approach mid-life we have met and negotiated many new situations, confronted difficulties and taken responsibility for ourselves and also often for the welfare of others. What hits many of us, both clergy and laity, at this stage is that we expect grown-up structures in our church life now that we too are 'all grown-up', and it is disillusioning to find that many churches have lagged behind in this respect. Lay people who in their professional lives make important decisions daily, manage budgets and have responsibility for the welfare of their families and employees, are appalled to find that their participation in church life is often restricted to the most minor of matters for fear that without clerical input catastrophe will arise. Clergy have to put up with Byzantine administrative procedures which would shock any businessman or woman. Women in the Roman Catholic tradition soon realize that their contribution in any decision-making sphere is simply not required and, if they have aspirations to ministry, any success will hang on finding a sympathetic priest who is willing to give them some role. Laurence Freeman, in a *Tablet* article concerning

the malaise of institutional Christianity, writes of what people find when they look closely at the Church:

> Instead of discovering an inclusive vision, a comprehensive philosophy of life, a spirituality, they dismiss what they find as narrowness of mind, intolerant dogmatism, internal feuding, interdenominational sectarianism, medieval sexism and so on. It seems disloyal to reiterate it all.[3]

These issues are not new but suddenly they seem to acquire more urgency at this time of life. Perhaps the confidence of maturity promotes more questioning, perhaps it is the first time people have engaged with the institution sufficiently to encounter real difficulty. Whatever the reason, the sheer immovability of the obstacles is enough to make one question whether one wants to engage further, and many are content to hover on the fringes, making their religious journey privately or furtively. This is especially true where people are receiving little nourishment from their faith community. If the area of worship becomes simply one more list of duties and responsibilities, but gives little life, then it is only natural to question that commitment. If the Church as an institution could reflect on these questions and regard them as a valuable impetus for change, then we could all benefit. If however it reacts like the exasperated and disapproving parent of an adolescent, answering 'disobedience' with more rules and more stringent punishments, it cannot be surprised if the children decide to leave home.

Inner authority

At eighteen, it is possible to be idealistic and enthusiastic in a straightforward way. We become zealous in the promotion of a cause, and we do not let advice or caution, or even good sense, intrude. By thirty, more qualifications and disclaimers slip into our arguments and for most people this also involves a renegotiation of their attitudes towards church teaching and authority. We have to reconcile for ourselves what the Church teaches with what we know of certain situations from our own experience, whether it is divorce, abortion, homosexuality, Third World debt or the concept of the just war. If we have not thought through these things for ourselves and try simply to slip behind the protecting veil of church teaching then we will not be able to speak with conviction if we are put to the test. If we have thrashed out these difficult areas and found that what our experience

and conscience counsels is at variance with the view of the magisterium, then we have to live uncomfortably in that middle place, relying on an inner authority which may only just be coming to birth. If we have not already done so, this may be the point for many people where they need to separate their image of God from their allegiance to a formal religious commitment, especially if the two seem to be at odds with one another.

A bit of peace

Ask most thirtysomethings how they are and the answer will probably include 'tired', or 'worried', or both. Indeed the sheer demands of life in terms of work and family commitments are exhausting enough without adding to them the commitments which we see as implicit in having a Christian faith. There is good cause to worry about those who hover on the fringes of faith, afraid perhaps of not being made welcome, frustrated that they cannot change things which they feel must be changed. But we need to be concerned too about those who are right in the centre of things, participating, organizing, facilitating, and nurturing others on their journey. The plight of burnt-out Christians is rarely highlighted, but they seem to be growing in number. These people often joined upbeat, innovative churches in their twenties where the worship was lively as was the community life which fuelled it. They joined house groups, and then led them. They set up crèches and luncheon clubs, fostered outreach projects and managed Alpha courses. Now in their thirties something has caused them to burn out. Redundancy threatens or an elderly parent has become very ill; their child has behavioural problems or they suddenly find themselves in the GP's surgery, anxious and depressed. Their church, which relied more and more on them when they were active and full of the joy of the Spirit, does not seem to have a place or a message for them now, and is puzzled and let down by their disengagement. These individuals come away on retreat searching for something. They often cannot articulate what it is – all they know is that it is something which their spiritual life up to now has not provided. If often comes out as 'something more contemplative', or simply 'a bit of peace'. What it seems to say is that they want to know that God is there for them now too, when they are not achieving, not working ceaselessly in the vineyard, not able to produce. Does God still love them now, especially when they cannot feel it and all they are experiencing is failure?

This experience of wilderness, of darkness and desolation, can be the most productive of periods, and enormous growth can take place if we

allow it to be done through us. Mystics throughout the ages have spoken and written of the healing power of this darkness. It does not seem that we can will growth to happen, or hasten its completion. What we can do is to co-operate with the process by surrendering to it. For someone deeply committed to their faith, it is unlikely that escape would be sought in the form of an easy solution. It is much more likely and perhaps even more damaging that they would resist the darkness and convince themselves that this confusion cannot have anything of God in it. They tell themselves to try harder, pull themselves together and make a bit more effort so that all the doubt, or anger, or resentment will go away. God, I believe, wants to have the opportunity to show us how gentle he would be with us, and perhaps no time is better for this than this time of life, when the demands on us from so many sources are so great. The difficulty is in surrendering to it.

Sustenance and support

The decade between twenty-five and thirty-five is not all gloom and frustration and, whilst it can be helpful to examine the darker areas, we must not lose sight of the positive aspects. At this stage people are often at the peak of their abilities and it is a productive and fertile period in work and in relationships. Our capacities are tested and stretched during this time, and we hope to emerge stronger for it. We need only to be wary that this testing and strengthening does not lead us towards breaking point. In this, our goal-orientated culture has much to answer for, valuing as it does only what we produce and achieve. It is a culture of instant gratification which does not accord much value to commitment or to the long term. The threat of overload dogs everyone in this culture, trying to achieve or experience too much in too little time before rushing on to the next project. It is a culture where we avoid pain and difficulty at all costs and do not expect anything positive to come out of situations where pain is unavoidable. It is better if we can move on as soon as possible, leaving the pain behind.

When the churches have tried to speak on the modern dilemma, too often it comes across as scolding. Compassion is paramount if you would seek to change people's behaviour, but that necessary compassion can only spring from a real understanding of the pressures. Too often it is absent. For many individuals this is reason enough to steer clear of Christian commitment: it does not seem able to accommodate or understand the rest of their lives. On the other hand, diligent Christians can get caught up in the treadmill of producing and achieving in the faith-

sphere of their lives just as readily as in other areas, and churches often over-encourage this.

There is no magic wand and we have discussed at length the implicit dangers of any quick solutions. Churches, like individuals, are only healthy when they are rounded. Dead churches are not healthy, but neither are churches which only value activity. We all experience darkness and periods of bewilderment. If we keep God out of these experiences we lose our intimacy with him, because we are not allowing him to be with us in the present moment. We need our churches to be able to deal with all areas of experience, not to sort out the difficulties or minimize them, but to be alongside us as we discern what God is doing in our lives at this time.

A healthy faith community nourishes and sustains its members. They find life there and spiritual depth. Good worship alone will not guarantee this, but a community which encourages prayer, which is contemplative as well as active, where one is known, and where it is not only possible, but natural, to share one's faith and life, will help. Modern parishes are not naturally conducive to this sort of community life, but smaller, more informal groups do work. These groups might meet for formal worship, but they are just as likely to meet to pray in silence or to go to the pub. It is time spent together, time to get to know one another's lives and concerns, which becomes the sustaining force of the group. We gain companions on the journey, not just people we shake hands with once a week during the sign of peace, but people we have really talked to, prayed with, eaten alongside. In this way we can grow in our relationship with God as individuals, but also in relation to others. Supported like this, the numerous exasperating irritations of church life are easier to take and church life itself might even be reformed from within. Companionship, vision and spiritual depth are what we need to steer us through the difficult terrain of the decade of worry.

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NOTES

1 David Hay with Rebecca Nye, *The spirit of the child* (London: Harper Collins Religious, 1998).
2 St Ignatius, Exx 327.
3 Laurence Freeman, 'Let us pray' in *The Tablet* (12 February 2000), p 176.

HOPE
covers reality
but not truth,
truth that lives
in me,
your truth
turns my fear,
my anxiousness,
into joy
mysterious joy,
draws me into
your love,
despite horror,
murder,
death,
lightens,
disburdens,
draws me towards
you,
others,
gives me faith,
strengthens,
lifts up my heart
my hope is embedded in your truth.

Thomas Dewes