

## 'GLIMPSES OF HEAVEN UPON EARTH'

Teresa White

**A** PART FROM BREATHING AND SLEEPING, most of the things we need to do in order to keep ourselves alive and healthy demand energy, even, at times, a struggle: feeding and clothing ourselves, washing ourselves and cleaning our homes, taking exercise, making ends meet. The relentless daily repetition of routine chores can render aspects of our lives tedious, especially for those of us who have to count the pennies. It is heartening to realise that, if we are prepared to face the banal reality of the human journey, unwilled change begins to happen. The message of poets and artists is perennial and undeniable: the extraordinary can strike us in the midst of the most ordinary situations and occupations; an extraordinary thought can come into the mind, unbidden, when we are contemplating the most mundane objects.

Reflecting on this interplay between the ordinary and the extraordinary, little by little, the believer becomes aware that it is the Spirit of God who helps us to look beyond outward appearances; we learn to see unexpected interconnections, hear deeper resonances, in what happens to us. As this awareness sharpens, we find the monotony of the everyday broken by what Seamus Heaney calls 'glimpses of heaven upon earth'.<sup>1</sup> If we open our ears, we can hear amid the sounds of nature and restless human activity the music, sometimes sad, sometimes joyous, of life being lived. If we open our hearts and minds, soul-stirring insights will sometimes come to us.

John V. Taylor once said that Jesus, filled with the Spirit, 'saw all commonplace things with an artist's intensity of apprehension'.<sup>2</sup> To be met by the Spirit, liberating us, helping us to grow, is to enter the eternal Now, where things are no longer dull or humdrum or uniform. When our

<sup>1</sup> Seamus Heaney, 'Secular and Millennial Milosz', in *Finders Keepers: Selected Prose, 1971–2001* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002), 445.

<sup>2</sup> John V. Taylor, *The Go-Between God: Holy Spirit and the Christian Mission* (Oxford: OUP, 1979), 93.

eyes, like the artist's, are purified, we see that everything shines with a beautiful light that is all its own. In that light, the colour, shape, texture and structure of created things, aspects of those things which, in the seeming chaos and jumble of existence, had previously escaped us, become more clearly visible. And we begin not only to see things differently, but also to hear sounds we had not noticed before. When our ears are unblocked, harmonies and rhythms beyond our imagining are discerned. Our eyes catch only glimpses of heaven, our ears only snatches of the melodies of the divine, but these glimpses and snatches summon us to look with pure eyes, to listen attentively, lest we should unwittingly neglect 'the many-splendoured thing' of Francis Thompson's poem, with our lives the poorer as a result.

This awareness of the divine in ordinary daily life was especially marked in Madeleine Delbr el, a twentieth-century French convert from atheism who became a respected Roman Catholic author, poet and mystic. Delbr el was born in 1904, and her early years were spent in Mussidan, a town in the department of Dordogne (part of the historic Province of Gascony; Madeleine always proudly referred to herself as a true 'Gasconne') in south-western France. Her middle-class parents were determinedly agnostic, and religion held little importance in the upbringing of their precociously intelligent daughter. Over a period of about fifteen years, the family moved to different parts of France, owing to Monsieur Delbr el's numerous promotions in the upper echelons of the French railway service. For this reason, and also because Madeleine suffered from delicate health throughout her childhood, she never attended a regular school. Instead, her parents arranged for her to receive individual tuition at home. In the course of the family migrations, she met one or two priests who appear to have awakened her dormant faith. One of these prepared her for her first communion at the age of twelve, and a short period of religious fervour followed.

It was not long, however, before the adolescent Madeleine succumbed to secular influences. In later years she declared that, at fifteen, she was a 'strict' atheist. Even at this young age, however, it was clear that she was naturally philosophical, and her musings on life led her to see the world as increasingly 'absurd'. When she was seventeen, the family moved to Paris, where she began attending philosophy lectures at the Sorbonne and soon became deeply involved in the intellectual life of the French capital.

At the age of twenty, she underwent what she herself and those who knew her regarded as an astonishing conversion. In spite of her love of

logical reasoning, in spite of her questioning nature and her strong rejection of faith and the trappings of religion, the conversion of this articulate young non-believer was not primarily intellectual. Her own words, simple yet profound, point to the mystical depth of her experience:

By reading and reflecting, I found God; but by praying I *believed* that God found me and that he is a living reality, and that we can love him in the same way that we can love a person.<sup>3</sup>

These words do not simply mirror the enthusiasm of a recent convert. Those who knew her testified that the vibrancy of this initial encounter remained with her for the rest of her life. For her, Christian faith was an all-or-nothing endeavour, a covenantal relationship with God through Jesus Christ, and her desire was to proclaim 'God's eternal newness' by her words and in her life.

After her conversion, Madeleine thought seriously of entering Carmel, but she was an only child, and she saw that her mother needed her. Instead, she discerned and followed another vocation: to live among the 'gens des rues' (people of the streets) in a tough Paris suburb. Not only was her inner vision clear and uncluttered, but her ear, too, was attuned to the silent music of the people around her. She lived by faith, which she described in *We, the Ordinary People of the Streets*, as 'the science of eternal realities ... the art of knowing how to do God's will' (176). Faith, she held, is given to us in order that we might 'choose God with human acts' (177). She recognised and consciously entered what she called 'the poverty of a banal life'.<sup>4</sup> In the predominantly Marxist Paris suburb of Ivry-sur-Seine, where



Madeleine Delbr el

<sup>3</sup> Madeleine Delbr el, *We, the Ordinary People of the Streets*, translated by David Louis Schindler (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 10 (subsequent references in the text).

<sup>4</sup> Madeleine Delbr el, *The Joy of Believing*, translated by Ralph Wright (Sherbrooke:  ditions Paulines, 1993), 40.

she lived (as a member of an experimental community of professional women, founded by herself after her conversion) from the mid-1930s until her death in 1964, her desire was simply to be present, unassumingly and unobtrusively, among her poor and working-class neighbours in that depressing *banlieue*. She wrote:

Set out on your journey without preconceived ideas and without anticipated weariness, without a plan for God, or even a memory of him; leave without enthusiasm, without a library as you go to meet him ... Let yourself be formed by him in the poverty of a banal life.<sup>5</sup>

She grew to love her near neighbours, and from personal experience, discovered the truth so beautifully expressed in a line from the musical *Les Misérables*: 'To love another person is to see the face of God'.<sup>6</sup> Making no conscious effort to see ordinary human life against a background of the transcendent, she believed that the divine comes alive in us in the kindness of care, given and received, in sharing what we have, however little that may be, and in gratitude for small, unexpected, unmerited gifts offered to us. Madeleine Delbr el was a prolific writer, and she gradually became involved in the major social, political, cultural and religious movements of twentieth-century France. But she is remembered, above all, for her solidarity with those who lived in her own neighbourhood, for her sensitive and loving concern for the people she met in the streets and the caf es, in the m etro and on the buses of Paris.

Madeleine was prepared to face the banality of the everyday without flinching and without looking for an escape. In doing so, she came alive not only to the people of her drab neighbourhood, but also to the reality of herself, to her responsibilities in society, local and worldwide, and to the glory and tragedy of the world in which we all live and move and have our being. She learnt that we need one another in order to become ourselves. Above all, she came alive to the scriptures and the life of prayer, alive to the presence of Jesus Christ and to the vast, all-encompassing joy of God. She believed that the Christian life 'must be lived in the immediate, in the moment, in the particular'. And so, instead of passively accepting life in the dreary streets of Ivry-sur-Seine, she embraced the hard grind of that life, discerned its hidden beauty, perceived its inaudible music. Without setting out to do so, she embodied the message of Christ, and

<sup>5</sup> Delbr el, *Joy of Believing*, 39–40.

<sup>6</sup> Alain Boublil and Claude-Michel Sch onberg, *Les Mis rables*, English lyrics by Herbert Kretzmer.

became a source of hopefulness in a town that believed it had rejected Christian values.

Madeleine Delbr el died not long before the end of Vatican II, but in the way she thought about and lived her Christian faith, she anticipated that Council’s spirit of openness to the presence of God in all human affairs. She may never have read the Pastoral Constitution on ‘The Church in the World’ (*Gaudium et spes*), in which the Church consciously put itself at the service of humanity, but her personal theology and approach to Christian living were solidly based on the principles contained in that document. She saw the mission of the Church as being in engagement with the world rather than anti-Modernist estrangement from it, which had been so strongly emphasized by the Roman Catholic Magisterium in the early years of the twentieth century. She would doubtless have agreed with John V. Taylor that,

***The mission of the Church as being in engagement with the world***

Christian activity will be very much the same as the world’s activity—earning a living, bringing up a family, making friends, having fun, celebrating occasions, farming, manufacturing, trading, building cities, healing sickness, alleviating distress, mourning, studying, exploring, making music, and so on.<sup>7</sup>

The difference is, the same author continues, that ‘Christians will try to do these things for the glory of God’, sustained by their common faith in Jesus Christ, by the ‘communion’ that brings them together as God’s people.<sup>8</sup> Madeleine would have shared that view, too. She believed that life in the Spirit is essentially human and ‘worldly’, that what matters is not what the Church does as the Church, but what Christians do as human beings, both individually and collectively.

Instead of becoming dispirited and demoralised by her surroundings, Madeleine was filled with the Spirit, led by the Spirit. She sought and found meaning in the ordinariness and untidiness of the human journey. Her life was changed by being with poor and powerless people, and she became aware of a depth of tenderness and compassion in herself she had not known she possessed. ‘We are’, she wrote, ‘destined for the eternal love of God. But we can only come to this love in our human life, in the time that belongs to us and others, in the world here and now.’<sup>9</sup> A promise

<sup>7</sup> Taylor, *Go-Between God*, 135.

<sup>8</sup> Taylor, *Go-Between God*, 135.

<sup>9</sup> Delbr el, *We, the Ordinary People of the Streets*, 177.



*Madeleine Delbr el's home in Ivry-sur-Seine*

kept, a hand raised in greeting or squeezed in solidarity or genuine sympathy, an affectionate glance, a sincere word of unqualified praise—these common marks of human companionship not only touch us but can somehow put us in touch with the God beyond ourselves and our immediate concerns. It is the Spirit who moves us to do these things.

After the baptism by John, we are told in the Gospels that Jesus, before beginning his public ministry, ‘was led by the Spirit’ into the wilderness. Although the wilderness episode, as it has come down to us in the gospel accounts, is anything but banal or monotonous, the phrase ‘was led by the Spirit’ is the origin of the phenomenon which, in theological circles, is sometimes called ‘the divine passive’. Interestingly, even in non-religious language, we often refer using the passive voice to things, people, events and words that affect us deeply without any conscious word or action on our part. It seems to be a familiar human experience to ‘be drawn’ to see things differently, to ‘be called’ to do things we never imagined we could do. It can happen that suddenly we find ourselves comforted, cheered, touched, stirred, changed, encouraged, enthused, inspired. These moments are perhaps what the Jewish Midrashim (collections of homilies) describe as ‘divine sparkles’, by which God’s people are illuminated from within.

In the Christian tradition, it is the Holy Spirit who transmits and bestows these ‘sparkles of the divine’, who awakens us to the radiance

of God. In the Sequence for the feast of Pentecost, we ask the Spirit to act on what is passive in us: 'Lava quod est sordidum' (*wash what is soiled*), 'Riga quod est aridum' (*irrigate what is dried up*), 'Sana quod est saucium' (*heal what is injured*), 'Flecte quod est rigidum' (*make flexible what is hard-hearted*), 'Fove quod est frigidum' (*warm what is frozen*), 'Recte quod est devium' (*make straight what is false-hearted*).

'Blackbird Comes', written by my brother Ian, poetically captures the role of the Spirit in moving us from passivity to vitality, from banality to freshness.

In the kitchen, at the back of the house,  
The voice of the News is speaking. Muted  
But unignorable, it reaches me  
In the cool gloom of this room at the front,  
Delivering its latest summary  
Of misfortune, mischief, and misery.

Meanwhile (noting how many are feared dead,  
How many more starving, homeless), I spy  
A blackbird in a flooded roof-gutter,  
Taking a dip, after the rain. Handsome  
He is, sparkling up there in the sunlight—  
A prince, flinging wet diamonds about!

O unguessable God, somehow I guess  
You do not deal out suffering, loading  
This one down with sorrow, leaving that one  
Carefree. But, still, suffering is; and since  
You never have been one for explaining,  
Happy I am that Blackbird comes, shining.

Happy I am—for me and for all those  
The radio will not let me ignore—  
To see him frolic in the sun. Blackbird:  
Explaining nothing, while he yet proclaims,  
With a glitter or raindrops from his wings,  
The divinity at the heart of things!<sup>10</sup>

When we are caught up in the banality that is intrinsic to every human life, the Spirit offers, not constant companionship, but fleeting 'glimpses of heaven', sudden flashes of inspiration, bright but ephemeral 'sparkles' of God. Glimpses and flashes and sparkles are by definition

<sup>10</sup> Ian White, 'Blackbird Comes', *Review for Religious*, 54/5 (September–October 1995), 722.

transient: they come and go. But though they do not stay with us all the time, they influence our thoughts and words and actions, they shape our lives. What Abraham Heschel wrote of Awe (one of the gifts attributed to the Spirit of God in the Old Testament) is also true of the sure signs of the presence of the Spirit in our lives of which Madeleine Delbr el became conscious in her unprepossessing Paris suburb: they enable us,

... to perceive in the world intimations of the divine, to sense in small things the beginnings of infinite significance, to sense the ultimate in the common and the simple; to feel in the rush of the passing the stillness of the eternal.<sup>11</sup>

They also encourage us to stay alert and mindful, to keep our eyes and ears open, in the hope, in the knowledge that, when the time is right, the gentle or challenging Spirit, ‘finger of God’s right hand’, will touch us again.

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<sup>11</sup> Abraham Heschel, *Who is Man?* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1965), 89.