

From Action to Contemplation and Back
St. Mary's Iffley, Sunday 21st March 2010

May God who desires integrity in our inward beings give us wisdom in our secret hearts.

In the late 1980s I spent a day with some sugar cane cutters in the North East of Brazil. As we were talking, one of the women said to me: 'Baptism isn't about saving the baby's soul, you know. It is about giving him or her power to go out and change the world'.

It was the era of Liberation Theology in Latin America and this woman belonged to one of the grass roots Christian communities that had grown up in that part of the Catholic Church that had fully taken on board the promises of the Second Vatican Council of 1968. From now on their church would make a 'preferential option for the poor'. These communities of lay people existed almost exclusively among the poorest sectors of society – peasant farmers, some factory workers, coffee pickers, sugar cane cutters and so on.

For the Peruvian theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez, who was probably the first to articulate this theology, at the heart of the Bible is God's relationship to the poor and the oppressed. The two vital dimensions of faith – contemplation and history, or mysticism and politics if you like, are inseparably intertwined. It cannot be a question for Christians of merely declaring that God lives among us and loves everybody. To be a Christian means taking practical action alongside those who are suffering poverty and injustice or are in any sort of need, in order to change their situation. The Bible, said Gutiérrez, has always been interpreted, taught and explained by the ruling classes or privileged people with a formal education. Now it was time to let those to whom it is addressed find out for themselves what it and what the Christian faith is really about.

Was Liberation Theology a Marxist movement? The later popes thought it was and tried to do everything they could to bring it back under control. Liberation theologians were certainly strongly influenced by Karl Marx's social analyses and above all by his passionate defence of those who were exploited, alienated and oppressed by economic structures. It wasn't difficult to see, for example, that the cane cutters in North Eastern Brazil were working long hours while the landowner was spending on a single trip to Europe far more than they would ever hope to earn in a whole life time.

Helder Camara who was then Bishop of Recife in Brazil, once said, 'If I hand out charity to the poor, everyone calls me a saint but if I try to remove the causes of poverty, they call me a communist. I think most of us who were influenced by Liberation Theology actually understood rather little of Marxism, as I found out when later on I made a fruitless and no doubt highly pompous attempt to read *Das Kapital* in German.

Far more importantly Liberation Theology was a movement that took Jesus seriously when he said in the synagogue of Nazareth 'The spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free ...' This has sometimes been interpreted in purely spiritual terms but we only have to read the gospel we have just heard about the sheep and the goats to know that Jesus meant what he said literally.

Jesus wasn't, a political revolutionary. His aim was not to replace those in power by another set of people with the same sort of power but that he was a social revolutionary cannot be doubted. He was crucified because he stood out so courageously against the hypocrisy, false values and injustices of his time. He was not, as Paul says, conformed to this world.

Being amongst those Christians in Latin America – and those today who, in very different circumstances, carry on the same struggle for justice – it is impossible not to be inspired, not to experience the Christian faith as an invigorating, life-giving force that propels one to take sides.

These Christians were and are borne up by the belief that things that humans deem impossible can happen. Their actions are imbued with an energising spirit of commitment and faith: 'una mística' is what they call it.

On Tuesday it is the thirtieth anniversary of the assassination of Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador who was shot as he celebrated mass by members of a death squad linked to the richest 14 Salvadorean families. Romero had called for justice and respect for human rights and for the United States to stop funding and training the military in El Salvador.

In Chile during the time of the military dictatorship of General Pinochet, torture was used systematically keep the people under control. In the 1980s a small group of Christians who had been meeting secretly moving from house to house for several years began to question themselves. 'People are being tortured here. What are we doing about it?' And they decided to take action.

On 14 September 1983, they went out into the jaws of the repressive regime, to the street called Borgoño in Santiago and in front of the doorway of the Villa Grimaldi, one of the most notorious prisons of the secret police, they unfurled a banner. It read: 'Here someone is being tortured'. Each participant stood with their arm stretched out, pointing at the place, while they sang at the tops of their voices so that the victims incarcerated in the cellars, would be able to hear their solidarity. Blood was shed that day, but this small group became the leaven in the dough which rose to form the movement against torture in Chile. My friend Rosa Parissi was among them.

Or how could I fail to have been moved by the way of life of another friend of mine, Juana Maria, one of those T shirts and jeans types of nun. All through the armed conflict in Guatemala she stayed as a companion and a witness to the indigenous Mayan people in the mountains of El Quiché, the area where most massacres took place. Eventually she was told she would be killed unless she left the country within three days.

And there is Alvaro Ramazzini, bishop of San Marcos. When I was in Guatemala he was always accompanied by three hefty body guards. He has been attacked on several occasions. Once he was ambushed on a lonely mountain road at night as he was returning from a remote coffee plantation. He had celebrated mass there for the workers who were claiming their right to the land. No-one knows really how he escaped. But he has never ceased his steadfast struggle for justice for the peasants and indigenous peoples.

But action of this sort can very easily go extremely wrong if the people involved forget to wait for God and lose their roots in the stream of water, as the first psalm says. Then their own self interest takes over and they – or we – I speak from bitter experience – become bossy, quarrelsome, self-righteous, know-allish, dismissive of others and incapable of listening. We lose our long-term vision and altogether make a dog's breakfast of what we are doing.

Apparently altruistic and even heroic actions are all too often vitiated by unconscious motives. As a Hindu doctor friend of mine who works with tribal people once said, 'It is essential constantly to explore our inner depths. We need to know ourselves and to surrender ourselves to God. Only then can we truly serve other people'.

I think this is what a life of contemplative prayer is about. In the words of the medieval German mystic known as Meister Eckart, it is about getting to the Source of our being, the Root, the Ground, about entering the silent Desert within us. Then action arises freely and spontaneously and we are able to let go of our own aims and ambitions and do our best, as Ignatius Loyola, the founder of the Jesuits used to say, 'as if we were in charge but knowing all the time that everything is actually in the hands of God'.

Meister Eckart speaks of 'going out and yet remaining within' as the key to a spiritual life. To learn to give to others while remaining inwardly detached, to be in movement but at the same time always in repose. On those occasions when contemplative prayer generates a deeply felt peace and contentment at the same time it generates extraordinary energy – wait for God and God will give you strength and you will rise up on wings like eagles.

For me faith is now no longer a battle to achieve a rationally worked out belief in God but more an orientation towards trying to let my own self go in order dwell in the Holy Spirit. It is very difficult just to sit and wait – no words, no thoughts – and realise that you don't have to be trying to do anything but even glimpses of what is possible give me the encouragement to hang on in there.

We aren't facing torture centres or murderously inclined landowners nor are we in the midst of an armed conflict in Britain but we are being challenged to strive to be true to our faith in a world where these things still go on and in our own society too. Here we are up against things that are perhaps more difficult to confront, such as superficial values and carelessness about the sufferings of others and about the destruction of the natural world around us.

Every week we remind people in our pew sheet of the things we would like to be known for as a church. The first two of these are the depth of our spiritual life and our commitment to bring life to others. There are plenty of people – Christians and non-Christians – who we can work together with to change the world. Let us wait for God to give us each the power to go out and do so.