

But the cost of being human leads inexorably through the thirty silent years, through the time at the carpenter's bench, through the public life of healing and teaching, through the quiet reserves of reflection alone, to the public challenge to the men in power in the city. All there conspires to crush humanity – the humanity of the Son and his open life; yet, exposed to the world, he dances before the world a dance of death in joy. And that death and that joy is the only condition of the life that goes on and on without end.

*Dance then, wherever you may be;  
I am the Lord of the dance, said he;  
And I'll lead you all wherever you may be,  
I'll lead you all in the dance, said he.*

## 5] 'Stop the World, I want to get off'

*Brian Frost*

from "Beware the Church"  
edited by John M. Waterhouse  
for the Methodist Renewal Group  
published by Epworth Press 1968

I WAS eating my supper, having just got in one evening through London's traffic. There was a flash on the television screen – 'President Kennedy shot in Dallas. More news later.' Breathless we waited, riveted in our chairs. The news came. None of us had the courage to say it – 'death'; but it was the thought in our hearts. The tears in our eyes expressed the rest.

It was soon over. The medical men tried their best but Kennedy was dying. All that was left was the cry of the widow – 'God, they've shot my husband' – to haunt us and all men down the years.

Kennedy for me, as for many others in Eastern and Western Europe, in Latin America and the new nations of Africa and Asia, had symbolised a new age: an age when a man in politics had not only flair and courage but wit and grace and a *joie de vivre* in every present moment. His wife had given the American woman back her femininity. And now it was all over.

I couldn't bear it. Next day, in the afternoon, I stalked to the end of our mile-long road out into the fields, away from the houses, away from the town in which I've always lived – away. I wanted nothing more to do with the bitterness and the glory of life as experienced by the Kennedys. Anthony Newley's cry in the West End play – 'Stop the world, I want to get off' – was mine. As I walked, I almost shivered with a sense of cosmic evil overshadowing me, overshadowing the people of America, the whole world. For months, perhaps years, I knew that I would want to cry when I mentioned the word 'Kennedy'.

God, how I hated that assassin, how I wondered again and again how such a small-time man could have committed such a big-time act. The bitterness stayed with me and I justified it. Yes, the assassin had committed a brutal act of aggression against a defenceless man.

And then, suddenly – in a moment – the bitterness went. I was kneeling to receive the body and blood of Christ at the Eucharist in our church and as I received the bread and the wine a certain passage in the New Testament floated back into my conscious mind: 'Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they are doing.' I prayed, as I always do, for the leaders of the nations of the world, for our own Prime Minister, for the leaders in Russia and China, for the Secretary-General of the United Nations, for the new leader in America. But I prayed too for someone else who had for one brief moment in his history been caught up in the fears and hopes, the anxiety and grief, of all of us, whether we went to the American Embassy and signed the visitors' book (as the Russian leaders did) or phoned Washington (as President Tito did). Slowly and deliberately and not without some resistance I prayed for the assassin, offering his life to God and linking him and the act he had done to the Christ who had spoken those words of such

the Church when its vision of a common humanity makes it fight for the release of the political prisoner, for the equitable distribution of wealth; when it attacks the flagrant denials of humanity in whatever form they come. Beware the Church when by the quality of its life and its love it can accept people whom society wants to make outcasts because of a difference of outlook or psychological diversity.

Such a Church has within it a power of love and a quality of living which neither life nor death can destroy and which even in a war-tattered, scar-scattered world has within it the seeds of the new creation. Beware indeed of this Christ who is sharper than a two-edged sword, who divides as well as unites all in his humanity and urges all into one world community, who dares to challenge our comfortable assessment of our roles and claims, with the conviction that we can become yet more human and more open. Beware indeed of the Christ who even dares to question the business of our activities and the solemnity of our very desire to serve and be thought well of, as we progress from one new triumph to another.

Yes indeed, that Christ weeps over the tragedy of life – the Lazarus situations with which we are daily confronted. He weeps too over the life of the city and its problems. But he laughs also.

All he needs is that like David we should learn to dance before him in joy and creative power so that when we speak about the resurrection life it shall be evident in our lives. The freedom from anxiety about our message and its effect may indicate that open love towards the whole creation which God so perfectly disclosed in dwelling among us, a man among men, showing the splendour of the God who is human. In the end it is on the degree of our humanity that we will be judged rather than on the brilliance of our insight, the degree of our religious attendance, or the scholarship of our leaders.

agreed to play at an experimental folk service 'I am the world's surplus man' (Who is this surplus man in our time but Christ, who in Bonhoeffer's memorable words is 'edged out' onto a cross?). The clergyman – how could he do it? – takes the beat group into the vestry from the kitchen where they have been nervously smoking and chatting before the service. He explains to them that it is normal to pray before the service. All the group look horrified. We pray. The boys want to giggle and look distinctly embarrassed. The traditional Methodists in the room see nothing amiss. After all – it's always done like this. What am I to say, who am genuinely fond of both groups? In the end, quietly – as the minister goes into the church, sidling up to the boys from the group – 'Sorry about that' in a half-whisper. The look of astonishment on the part of the traditional church mind is complete!

Oh yes, of course, the person who is a member of the church is worthy of respect; but can it be any longer at the expense of the person for whom traditional patterns of Christian behaviour and piety have no meaning or significance? Surely the art of loving is different and deeper than that? I cannot fail to remember that conversation with an actress, in a pub near St Martin-in-the-Fields, on the meaning of prayer as we sipped our wine together.

Beware the Church indeed that cuts your link with all men and by so doing shuts Christ up in a tight little straitjacket. Beware the Church that can stifle your creative power as it surges through you and the whole of creation as the continuing act of the living God.

But beware, too, the Church with a eucharistic life so powerful that it challenges the centres of personal power and political and racial power in the world. Beware the Church when black and white share its life and threaten the delicate balance of power that frightened blacks and frightened whites have worked out. Beware

dramatic power at another moment of time when the foundation of all that he believed had been severely shaken.

I prayed for the assassin – not asking for vengeance, not trying to understand what complicated sets of influences had played on him and made him determine to shoot dead the President of the United States. I prayed for him as a fellow human being with whom I was linked in a chain of events, who needed the mercy and love of God here declared at the Eucharist as much as I did. The bitterness went and I saw that man in a true perspective – with compassion.

So the most holy moment in my life – as Christ comes to renew his people as he breaks bread, man with man – had been linked with a time in my life when everything seemed brute irrationality and despair. In one splendid moment of time, worship and life had been so mixed up with each other that I would never again be tempted to cry with Anthony Newley, 'Stop the world, I want to get off.' The centre of world history in its secular form at that time – Washington D.C. – and the centre of Christian history – the death and resurrection of Christ – had become intermingled as Christ became present to us in worship and took into his ministry that vortex of events surrounding the killing of the President.

There are times, of course – and there are still times – when it would be nice to believe that our worship could take us out of this world. There are times when we wish that our prayers could stem from a glorious vacuum of spirituality not hewn from the flesh-and-blood realities of the modern world and the tensions, frustrations and hopes in which we are all caught up.

Yet how unlike Christ can we want to be! For him the work of the Father and the work of the Spirit in the world, summing up all things and uniting all people to

himself, were always so inextricably intertwined that he can hardly ever have been tempted to use the word 'secular' about any event or situation which confronted him. He could mix with all kinds of people. He didn't need those petty little barriers around him which we need to give us cosy protection from people of other races, beliefs and outlooks, or from situations of pain or grief. His praying and his worship stemmed from the everyday. For him the pressures of the present moment were not a point for flight but a point of contact with God and man as, under cover of those very circumstances, good and bad, he was met by the presence of a love which grasped and edified and cajoled and enlightened him. And the people, good and bad alike, who confronted him, gave him the opportunity of finding that God was already at work in their lives summing up all things in himself.

Now I saw it all clearly. Communion and community were inter-related. The desire for a 'private' life or a 'private' communion, the striving after a 'peace' not of this world, were dubious in the extreme. If the breaking of bread did not teach me that the Christian community has the secret of the shared loaf which it needs to teach the world of affluent and poor nations, then it meant nothing. If I did not get up off my knees and seek the political means to secure economic justice for all men I had missed the subtle unity of Christ's teaching. If I did not go from Christ's meeting with his people through bread and wine and see that he was interested in all things—poster advertising, egg marketing, the warp and woof of creation itself—I had committed sacrilege. And if the unity of heart and mind among the people of God, as they were taken into the unifying activity of Christ, did not unite us with a God already united to the Mandy Rice-Davieses and Christine Keelers of the world, then the unity we claimed to possess and understand was the

rehearsal now of the life of that God in the humanity of Jesus makes sense as we make our desperate strivings towards humanity. Sent out from his own town into exile at birth, living often among people whom he did not know and who could not understand him, receiving with gratitude the hospitality of strangers, bringing healing to those whose demented and twisted spirits cried out for integration, this kind of Christ discloses the amazing diversity of a human God. But he goes further. He dies not with pretty flowers or comforting friends around him, but way out beyond the city walls. Here, if anywhere in history, the perfect outsider has appeared. O ye homosexuals and lesbians, O ye racial outcasts and call-girls, bless ye the Lord, for he knows more than you do of the loneliness of ostracism. He alone has experienced the full diversity of the human condition.

But how such a God made man attacks the conventional structures of prayer and worship! How frightening mission had become, when God in humility received what the world had to offer and answered back through the neighbour! Yet even Christ's integration had come through rubbing shoulders with the flotsam and jetsam of life, and, through that dialogue with men, had been able to draw out of them and intensify all that was good and true and loving.

Yet how delicate this new mission was, how complicated it was, really to care, really to pray for other people and hold their life as an offering to God even if they were unable to pray for themselves. And how even more difficult it was to care both for those in the church who had erected a wall round themselves and those 'outside' the normal definitions of church life whose vitality and enthusiasm was often the one thing which kept one going in a world of greys. What tensions such a position could engender.

Picture a beat group with no church link who have

the eyes of normal churchpeople, who, when I had a nervous breakdown, gave me the job of looking after his garden and restored me to sanity by his worldliness, the peak of which was his comment that at death he wanted buried with him only a copy of the *Daily Express* and a pint of beer! These and many others had been given me as companions, already united to me by our common humanity, already with Christ reigning over them by that cosmic act of death and life when he claimed all the world as his sphere of action.

Now at last I had grasped Bonhoeffer's point that the Christian is the worldly man *par excellence*. He carries in him the tensions, the strains and stresses, the joys and successes, of the world in which he lives. But he is that part of the world which has understood the hidden disclosure of God's humanity in Jesus – that the Christian God, unlike all others, dares to be human. The Christian man is not set apart against the world but thrown into it from the time he first erupts out of the womb. And it is there in the world that he sets forth the praise of the living Christ, even now fashioning him in a love that encompasses everything.

Beware the Church that prevents people from learning the worldliness of Jesus; beware the Church which would ring God round with its nice little hymns and its devotional meetings and money-raising events instead of talking about a living God who in daring humanity, stripped of all power and status and pretence, dares to stalk the public life of the world. For such a Church has already become the supporter of a religion, the stifler of life; such a Church has never stood in marvel and wonder at the daring of the Christian schema which dares to proclaim a vulnerable God, hidden under cover of a particular culture and time and place, at the crossroads of the world.

Such a God can indeed still take the breath away. A

greatest myth of all time and had better be destroyed before God breaks it into pieces himself.

The outcome of all this was clear. Worship and life would always be related, and the drive for mission, the drive for service, the drive for the preservation of our common humanity, would stem from the Eucharistic life of Jesus. This might not be happening in many of the churches where I worshipped; but I would nonetheless find it increasingly difficult to be associated with a form of cultic activity which had become divorced from reality. And I would find increasingly that many of the hymns – including some of the best writers in Western Europe – were asking me to escape from a world which I had painfully learnt God had loved graciously, which even now he was wooing as a gentle lover determined to bring his love to fulfilment. If the Church's life and work could not start and end with God and his love for the world, if the Church as an organised community was stopping God's love from flowing through the world, then maybe it was ripe for renewal. If its hymn singing and its prayers were unrelated to what went on around, then perhaps it was time for them to go, and new forms to emerge. Keep the Eucharistic reminder of Christ and discover his risen presence in the middle of the world, but let the rest become obsolescent. Remind me at worship of my neighbour – in the pew and in the factory – and remind me again and again that the Eucharistic community exists not for a 'private' communion but for a world community to embrace all men. That was all that was needed, for was not God in Christ already reigning over the world of events and the world of things through the present work of the Spirit?

The startling impact of this disclosure made prayer more and more concerned with what people call the 'secular' – for instance, the experience of organising a Beat and Folk Festival in Trafalgar Square at which

28,000 people became tinged with 'adoration' as the whole assembly listened silently without a movement to a folk singer singing 'We shall overcome', the civil rights song from America. Who would have said that that song could have the power and penetration to catch up 28,000 young people in an act of silent agreement and listening? Certainly not the police!

Thanksgiving too stemmed from events of the world rather than from the embattled bastion of the local church. How good to thank God quietly for the skill and talent of a Marlene Dietrich so gloriously appealing even in her sixties and still resolutely aware of German longings for a false power. How good to be glad over the banalities and the jingles of a Billy Cotton band show or the accurate characterisation of 'Coronation Street'. How good to be able freely to lapse into spontaneous thanksgiving at the end of Brubeck's Jazz Impressions of Japan or Shostakovich's violin concerto. And how sad, after that experience, to feel cramped and confined by the scope of the preacher's thanksgivings with their loss of immediacy, sensitivity and power. Why is it that these churchy prayers stifle me? The words of that great Jewish philosopher, Dr. Martin Buber, come to mind: 'it's their deadness that stifles.'

How good too, to go from that experience of thanksgiving to intercession as, on the London tube, I look out quietly at all the races sitting opposite me. Here intermingling are Ethiopian and Jew, Indian and Pakistani, American and Chinese, Frenchman and Russian. As silently I offer the lives of those people opposite me to God (and with them the nations they come from) I am reminded, in the hustle and bustle of the tube as it stops and starts over and over again, that Pentecost is supposed to be about the gathering in of all nations. I wonder if the church in the city sees the great opportunity it has for re-discovering this great truth as all men flock to

the city's industrial life, its educational institutions, its political power and its centres of entertainment. Alas, the churches for the most part have all fled to the suburbs where a cosier and more domestic Christianity can be perpetuated, free from the complications of power and race and sex and slums. The pilgrim people of God stalking the centuries on the move as God sets each generation new tasks and discloses new powers have been replaced by the God of the semi-detached, the God of the outer fringe, the God of the very middle classes.

But that pilgrim God, restlessly wooing the centuries and perhaps the very disturber of the peace that all men seek, disconcertingly pushes me back and back into the heart of the city. How good it is that he reminds me, as I feel jostled by my neighbour in the traffic jam or at the Trafalgar Square rally, that I need him as much as he needs me. How good to pray for patience as my long-developed individualism makes me want to rush through the traffic of Hyde Park Corner and Knightsbridge instead of allowing myself to belong to a community where each has a time and a place for starting off when the lights go green.

But better still, how good to learn to receive from the world what God is offering. I ask to be made whole to become an integrated personality, and I am confronted with an African whom I need to understand. How good to remember the sparkle in his eyes as he came up to speak to me at the end of a meeting in which I had said that his presence in England challenged the Englishman to make his land an open community. And he is but one of hundreds whose lives have impinged on mine and against whom my edges have been rubbed off as I seek to understand their motives and respond to them. The agnostic actor who raised the question of his fear of death without my forcing it on him as an evangelical point; the old man down the road, so utterly 'pagan' in