

## The Spirituality of Solidarity

*Norman J Shanks*

Twenty years ago I was not long out of New College, enjoying my probationary period as assistant minister at Murrayfield Church in Edinburgh. I would certainly not have envisaged then that I should be in the position today. I would equally certainly not have been able to predict the topic that I have chosen to explore. Indeed it is a topic that has almost chosen itself and that in a curious way sums up my own faith journey. To that extent what I offer in this paper is not an academic exposition that is in any way either original or definitive: rather it is to be seen as 'work in progress', better still 'a life in progress' without being either some kind of public soul-baring or '*apologia pro vita mea*'.

'The spirituality of solidarity' - with hindsight maybe the indefinite article would have been more appropriate: 'a spirituality of solidarity' sounds more modest but somehow does not capture quite so well the nature of this inter-relationship that I want to explore this morning. At any rate I do not recall much discussion or concern about spirituality during my time at New College. (Of course that may well have more to do with my powers of recollection than with what was actually happening. I am sure that it figured in Father Noel O'Donoghue's course on prayer, perhaps in some of the practical theology classes; but I do not think there were any classes specifically on spirituality and, so far as we thought about it, most of us would probably have associated it particularly with the Roman Catholic tradition.) Over recent years the upsurge of interest in spirituality has been remarkable: it is very much the flavour of the month and the decline in what might be described as traditional or institutional religion alongside this burgeoning interest in spirituality is a major challenge to the churches. You just need to look at the demand for courses or workshops in spirituality - especially Celtic spirituality perhaps - or the amount of shelf space that mainstream booksellers give to publications under the heading of 'mind, body and spirit' or whatever.

And solidarity too may just be a concept whose hour has come. In a recent issue of *The Tablet* there was a report of the Pope's address when he received the new British ambassador to the Vatican. 'He said that the building of a "global culture of solidarity is perhaps the greatest moral task facing humanity today", but feared that for Western countries this task would be particularly challenging because a "spreading individualism" had called into question long-held Christian principles and values.'

I am not going to attempt to offer a definition or even a description of spirituality. It is in danger of becoming one of those slippery Humpty-Dumpty words that mean what ever you want them to mean. There was also an article in *The Guardian* recently featuring an American writer, Alice Sebold, whose latest book *The Lovely Bones* has been top of the best-seller lists in the United States for some time. She is apparently an atheist, but the book is narrated from heaven by a young girl, and the article contained the statement that 'spirituality seems to cover everything from believing in kindness to thinking you're "giving something back" by having an aromatherapy bath'.

I prefer to see spirituality as part of our human identity, like our personality, our physicality or our sexuality. It is something that is given, innate and inherent, whether or not we acknowledge it. In terms of usage of the term, however, spirituality also has to do with how we develop and nurture this aspect of ourselves. So it has come to mean a technique, a discipline or methodology involving different kinds of approaches - Buddhist, Celtic, Ignatian or whatever. It has become a field of study, even an examinable subject.

It is a paradox, perhaps indeed a consequence, of the prevailing social ethos that spirituality should arouse such interest at this time. In the address mentioned above, Pope John Paul went on to criticise what he described as the 'indifferentism, hedonism, consumerism and practical materialism' that could 'erode and even subvert the foundations of human life'. In the face of the need for quick returns and instant gratification, the post-modern distrust of authority and objective truth, the tendency to treat everything as a commodity, to regard value as

instrumental rather than intrinsic, it is perhaps not so surprising to discover how widespread is the dissatisfaction with this kind of approach to life. There is evidence that increasingly people are looking for more meaning in life, deeper more lasting values than those of the market-place. What Teilhard de Chardin called 'the essential dream of the human soul... to become at the same time, in the same act, one with All... deeper than any ambition for pleasure, for wealth or power'. It is the age-old human longing for the ultimate, the yearning for connection with all that is, 'for the moment when God will manifest [herself]' - and be manifested by us - 'all in everyone' and 'all in all' - the experience of what Augustine (Confessions ix.x 23-5) described as 'an abyss of inward joy' to be touched even fleetingly 'for a whole heartbeat'.

Spirituality has to do with the deepest things of life, with what motivates and energises us, with our fundamental values and priorities, with our understanding and relationship with God. The most helpful insight and approach is possibly to see spirituality in terms of our connectedness - our connectedness with God, with other people and with the issues in the world around us. The familiar text in Micah can thus be taken as the foundational expression of this three-fold connectedness: *what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?* As my own interest in spirituality has developed I have found Donal Dorr's book *Integral Spirituality* particularly helpful; he describes spirituality as 'the vivid and explicit sense of the providence of God - being part of the web of life, cared for by God, called to be agents of healing and hope'. Spirituality has to do with authenticity and integrity, with being integrated, connected with all that is around us and thus 'all together' within ourselves and at the same time taken beyond ourselves into the awareness and experience of both the possibility and the reality of the divine in life - the point where, as has been said, 'light, glory, joy shatter the boundaries of our ordinary lives and transform our bodies into immortal diamonds' (J Keenan, *The Tablet*, 3 August 2002).

Rather more mundanely George MacLeod once defined spirituality as 'getting your teeth into things', as opposed, it might be said, to

getting away from things. Too often these days spirituality is understood and pursued in terms of escape from the pressures and tensions of life. Unfortunately this seems particularly true in relation to Celtic spirituality, too frequently misrepresented in an ethereal, precious form that appeals to nostalgic and romantic interests. A recent exhibition in the National Gallery of Scotland featured a series of imaginative works by Calum Colvin inspired by MacPherson's Ossian - the famous eighteenth century literary fraud, itself the product of the tendency to romanticise our Celtic heritage. It has been interesting and ironic to discover to what extent the Iona Community have somehow come to be regarded as among the primary 'experts' in or custodians of Celtic spirituality, when most of the sparse evidence that exists is to be found in Ireland, and the Community sees its task above all in engaging with the challenges of the present and the future, rather than looking to the past. Moreover those who pursue the Celtic spirituality trail from the comfort of their armchairs or libraries too often forget what it must have been to survive the rigours of a winter in the inner Hebrides or on the west coast of Ireland without the benefit of the shelter, clothing or public utilities that are available today.

Insofar as we have access to it, and the amount of contemporary material is very limited, the authentic Celtic tradition does have much to teach us: some of Ian Bradley's books are very good on this, particularly *Making Myths and Chasing Dreams*. There is an emphasis above all (and of course this is not peculiar to the Celtic tradition) on the presence of God in the midst of every aspect of existence, permeating 'every blessed thing', to be experienced and encountered in the messy hurly-burly of everyday life as well as in the natural world. There is of course a strong environmental concern that is salutary in times when ecological issues are the focus of so much controversy. But it is a thoroughly down-to-earth rather than an esoteric or ethereal spirituality, lived out, worked out in a communal setting and so about solidarity as well as solitude; not at all exclusively self-focused and self-indulgent in the way that the modern individualistic pursuit of spirituality so often tends to be, the spiritual equivalent of the regular visit to the gym or health club. It recognises that personal fulfilment is only achievable in the context of right relationships -

how we understand and experience God, how we relate and give priority to the needs of others. And that brings me at last to solidarity.

As I look back on my own faith journey, I can trace a clear pattern which has drawn me, almost inexorably I feel, to this subject. Church was a natural part of my growing up, faith an almost taken-for-granted aspect of everyday life: in a sense I suppose that reflected the culture of the 1950s and early 1960s. At university at *St Andrews* while I was involved in students' union and sporting activities rather than any of the religious groups, I now realise that my regular religious observance and interest then were more significant than I thought at the time. I contemplated then training for the ministry but was not sure enough, and benefited too from some wise advice; so I was fortunate to gain a graduate place in the civil service and came to Edinburgh to work in the Scottish Office.

The most significant occurrence, directly relevant to my theme today, was my becoming involved, soon after I came to Edinburgh, in church projects around the West End - a youth project called *Cephas* in the basement of *St George's West*, where my wife and I later became members, and, growing out of *Cephas*, a late-night coffee-house that some of us started in the crypt of *St John's - the Corner Stone*, which still exists of course, although in a rather different form. Both of these were ventures in witness and mission, open-ended and non-prescriptive, backed by the churches, operating ecumenically with lay leadership, grounded in a sense of common commitment and belonging together, rooted in shared worship, geared to service and social concern. Although I was not really conscious of it at the time, and few of us would have so expressed it, we were embodying an integrated approach to spirituality - a spirituality of engagement and solidarity. And for me the experience was of such personal significance that I decided to seek to become a candidate for the Church of Scotland ministry - not out of disaffection with the civil service, which I rather enjoyed (although it was proving pretty disruptive domestically with frequent visits to London, and it was becoming difficult to sustain regular church or other commitments), but simply because there was something else I wanted to do more.

After New College and Murrayfield, I moved into chaplaincy in this university, then turned into a kind of 'accidental academic' at Glasgow University for seven years, before in 1995 being elected Leader of the Iona Community, of which I had been a member since 1980, once 'liberated' from the Civil Service. And during part of this period, for eight years or so, I was involved with the Church of Scotland's Church and Nation Committee. I mention all this simply to provide some background to, even explanation of, the fact that over all this time, just as my interest in spirituality has grown and progressed, so also I have become more and more convinced, scripturally and theologically, experientially and existentially, of the significance of solidarity and hospitality as central Gospel themes, even divine attributes - resonating with generosity and grace, healing and hope, justice and joy.

Maybe I should try to say something of what I mean by solidarity - which may bring to mind for some particular associations with Polish trade unions! However I am using the term as an affirmation of the relational character of the Christian life, of the basic truth that human development depends on our interaction with and attitude towards others. It is a big step beyond charitable works: it is about living out the faith, walking the talk, being ready to put ourselves out - indeed to put our bodies on the line if necessary - for the sake of others, by standing alongside, expressing our belonging together in community especially with those who are marginalized, excluded or oppressed.

The incarnation can be understood as the ultimate act of solidarity, God's becoming human so that the divine purpose might be fulfilled, God in solidarity with his creatures, reaching out in love and risk and inviting a corresponding response of love and solidarity. Indeed solidarity, relationship, belonging together in community are essential to the Trinitarian understanding of God. In a recent article in the World Council of Churches' *Ecumenical Review*, the Jesuit theologian Thomas Scirghi argues convincingly 'that in the mutual relationship of the three persons of the Godhead we find the model for a human community. This relationship is characterised by kenosis and "inclusion". Kenosis connotes the emptying, or total abandonment of oneself for a higher good, as with Jesus emptying himself for the glory

of God and for the salvation of humanity. "Inclusion" refers to the acceptance of others, joining them with oneself while honouring the diversity among the many, in a unity that does not seek uniformity.' Such themes, of belonging, kenosis and inclusion, are marks of the spirituality of solidarity; more than that, they point to some of the key features, arguably the most demanding ones, of Christian discipleship. It is through the self-denying love, the hospitality that are at the heart of and emanate from God, through recognising our solidarity with one another, above all by identifying and engaging with those on the margins, even entering into their suffering, that we grow spiritually, we come closer to God and find the fullness of life that is God's promise and purpose for all, indeed we become God's goodness, as Paul puts it so strikingly in his second letter to the young church at Corinth (2 Cor 5.21)

The way of solidarity is counter-cultural. It flies in the face of the prevailing norms, the dominant priorities, preoccupations and prejudices evident in society today - the ethos of consumer individualism, each of us isolated in our electronic cocoon, sustained by an illusion of self-sufficiency; the insidious values of the market place that have eroded the ideals of public service and communal responsibility (we are no longer passengers, guests, clients, patients, even students - we are called and treated as customers in a world where the accountants reign supreme and the tyranny of balance sheets and profit margins holds sway); personal goals are set in terms of career and wealth acquisition so that individual worth depends on and is determined by what we do, what we have rather than who we are. The spirituality of solidarity represents the calling, as has been said, 'to an old way of life in a new day', to stand firm against 'the trend of our consumer culture... towards a disembodied community with a tenuous sense of belonging, individuals existing within a state of virtual connection. This culture, epitomised and encouraged by the internet and symbolised by the corporate brand, actually promotes uniformity while seeming to preserve an attitude of individualism.' With globalisation and its bundle of paradoxes - improved communications, increased knowledge, the effects of the activities of trans-national corporations on poorer countries, with the widening gap between rich

and poor and the corporate branding (the 'Macdonaldisation' phenomenon) that eliminates a healthy diversity - the need and opportunity for solidarity is greater than ever.

The call to solidarity is a call to commitment, to conversion possibly in the awareness that, as the Orthodox scholar Olivier Clement puts it in his wonderful commentary on texts from the patristic era, entitled *The Roots of Christian Mysticism*, 'in the crucified Christ forgiveness is offered and life is given. For humanity it is no longer a matter of fearing judgment or of meriting salvation but of welcoming love in trust and humility.' The spirituality of solidarity involves a form of discipleship that is both immensely demanding and deeply enriching, a life lived on the edge of risk and vulnerability. There is a sense in which the traditional view of the vocation of Christians as to be 'resident aliens' is accurate, as long as the danger of forming a pious ghetto is avoided and the dimension of witness through engagement and solidarity is not lost: so it is a matter of being both salt and light!

I would like to try to illustrate the inter-relationship between spirituality and solidarity from some aspects of my own personal experience. As I have already said these insights and themes first began to take shape when I was involved in outreach projects here in Edinburgh's West End. Not only was there a degree of trail-blazing in what we were doing, the group of us who were involved, younger and older, from different church backgrounds and none, as we pushed the boat out many a time, made mistakes, leant on one another in our uncertainty as to what joys and crises each evening would bring, worshipped together, coped with exhaustion, we were conscious not only that what we were doing was very precious (the kind of transfiguration experience you want to put on permanent hold or perpetual action replay) but also that, in a deep almost mysterious sense, we were part of something very much bigger. And it goes without saying that, although we have gone our separate ways since then, lasting friendships were formed, and many of the people concerned have continued, in different ways and places, to play significant roles in the life of the church and the cause of the kingdom.



I do not want to say too much about the Iona Community, if only because, having just completed my seven-year term as Leader, I am trying to stand back a little and disengage; and it would be very easy to spend the rest of my time examining the activities and concerns of the Community as a kind of case study in the spirituality of solidarity, which we try to express and embody in the life and work of our centres on Iona, in our mainland work in the fields of worship, youth and publications, in what our members do locally through their work and other commitments in their own situations throughout Britain and beyond. Our integrated approach to spirituality, our pursuit of a spirituality of engagement and solidarity, holding together a concern for the renewal of worship and a commitment to social and political change is summed up in the 'seamlessness' of our five-fold Rule; our personal devotional discipline and our action for justice and peace underpin one another and cannot be separated from our meeting together and our mutual accountability for how we spend our money and use our time.

The experience that has had most influence, however, in deepening my interest in the spirituality of solidarity, and extending my experience and enlarging my understanding was a month I spent while on sabbatical in the autumn of 2000, working as a resident volunteer in the Open Door Community in Atlanta, Georgia. The Open Door is a residential community that carries out a ministry to the homeless, the hungry and prisoners and their families. Although numbers have tended to fluctuate over the years, when I was back in May of this year, the community comprised just over twenty people - two of the people who founded the community twenty years ago, both Presbyterian pastors, another couple, fifteen or so people, mostly black, who were formerly homeless (some of whom have been there now for ten years and more) and six resident volunteers (students on placement or taking a 'year out', sometimes people on sabbatical). With the assistance of a large group of non-resident volunteers from local churches and elsewhere, the community serves breakfast and lunch several days each week, and provides clothes changes, shower, toilet and medical facilities. There is so much more to it than that though - there is the ministry to prisoners; political campaigning against poverty.

homelessness, racism, the death penalty and everything else that runs counter to the vision and values of the Gospel. There is the warmth of the hospitality and personal engagement: each person who is served is welcomed and valued. And above all there is the grounding of every aspect of daily life in scriptural reflection and prayer and the weekly Eucharist.

In a recent book, *A Work of Hospitality*, drawing together many articles and reflections about the Open Door, published in the Community's monthly newsletter, Murphy Davis, one of the founders, has said, 'In the eucharistic vision we are given the eyes to recognise and to love God's presence among us - Jesus Christ in the stranger's guise. It all of course becomes a joke without the Eucharist. It is incomprehensible to the rest of the world, to those who lack a vision of the holy in the ordinary. The table companionship and the eucharistic vision are the bases for our hospitality... Solidarity expresses the love of table companionship. By hospitality we are drawn into the mystical body of Christ.'

The life of the Open Door Community is inspired and sustained by the vision of Christian discipleship that is to be derived from Matthew 25 - the parable of the sheep and the goats with its unequivocal and fearsome message - and Isaiah 58: *Is not this the fast that I choose - to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free..to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless into your house...Then your light shall go forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly.* It is a very demanding situation, never free from challenges and problems, deeply enriching and full of fun and laughter. From commitment and experiences such as this it is irresistibly clear that the spirituality of solidarity is about much more than political attitudes and life-style choices: it is not enough to pay lip-service to ideas and ideologies about mutual interdependence and belonging together, not enough to be sympathetic to the needs of the marginalized and the oppressed, even to campaign on their behalf. Something more, a fuller continuing and consistent commitment is required without which words, even occasional actions are unauthentic, unconvincing, at the end of the day lacking in integrity.

We know how far we all fall short of our best aspirations and intentions, how dependent we are on God's grace to keep on keeping on. The Open Door Community for its part is well aware of its limitations and failures; it struggles perpetually with the need to set boundaries, sometimes to have to refuse hospitality and say no to those who are in need.

Murphy Davis' husband Ed Loring, co-founder of the Open Door, has strikingly stressed the essential inter-connection between the works of mercy and the political activism in saying, 'justice is important but supper is essential': without supper, without hospitality and relationship, without love justice can become a programme we do to other people. Band-aids, he has said, are wonderful; band-aids, charity helps heal the pain and suffering, but to stop with band-aids and not to address the need for systemic change is insufficient: band-aids alone hide the structural roots of injustice.

So solidarity demands more than an expression of support from one's armchair, more than the kind of 'drawbridge ministry' where the option of withdrawal is always available. It means a degree of identification that involves passion and compassion, self-surrender, even sacrifice; it means going to George Square or joining the buses from Scotland to London if we are opposed to the war against Iraq, and much more than that. It means a whole-hearted engagement, the commitment of heart, body, mind and soul. And few of us are up to it of course. So the spirituality of solidarity is not only about ends and means, the ways of keeping alive the vision, finding strength and energy to cope with adversity and the inevitable disappointments; it is about resistance and vulnerability, forgiveness and grace; it is about the 'outrageous pursuit of hope', as Mary Grey has called it: not merely 'dreaming the dream, but already living it out before it has come to pass, and embodying this dream in concrete actions'; it is about the possibility, the reality of resurrection, affirming, experiencing 'life in all its fullness, life able finally to absorb, reverse, and pass beyond death' (*The Roots of Christian Mysticism*, p. 307).

If I had had time I would like to have said a little also, specifically within the context of the life of the churches, about ecumenical

commitment as an expression of the solidarity to which we are called, and particularly about the significance of solidarity to the purpose, concerns and activities of the World Council of Churches; but time forbids...

The spirituality of solidarity, short of the coming of the kingdom, is inevitably restless and impatient, shot through with urgency and awareness of the need to be perpetually alert and awake. But paradoxically there is a sense too, in which it is a 'waiting-game' in the recognition that God's time is not ours and God's grace is sufficient. Above all the spirituality of solidarity is ever open to the surprises of the God who leaps beyond every limit and calls us to a life on the edge of risk.

Some years ago in one of these curious moments of serendipity, while waiting or looking for another programme, I saw a television interview with the actress Patricia Routledge, best known perhaps for her role in the comedy series *Keeping up Appearances* as Hyacinth 'Bouquet' - spelt 'bucket'. She was speaking about her faith and said, 'If you are prepared to risk everything, you can do anything'. This, it seems to me, is a fine description of faithful, graceful living, of the way of discipleship, of the spirituality of solidarity.

Indeed, as someone once said, there is no alternative! And if one needs a symbol for the spirituality of solidarity, how about the tortoise, patient and persistent, committed to the long haul, going nowhere without sticking its neck out, a sign of God's constant and utterly reliable love, of our calling above all to be faithful, not fickle, not popular, not necessarily even 'successful' by the world's standards. Through the spirituality of solidarity lies the way to the discovery and experience of God's transforming purpose, rounded, engaged, multi-connected lives that embody the vision and values of God's kingdom, the new community of hope in which lies the promise of flourishing and fulfilment for us all.

(This paper is a slightly revised version of Norman Shanks' Presidential Address to the New College Union given in October 2002)

## References

- Bradley, Ian, *Celtic Christianity - Chasing Dreams and Making Myths* (Edinburgh University, 2000)
- Clement, Olivier. *The Roots of Christian Mysticism* (New City Press, 1993)
- Dorr, Donal. *Integral Spirituality* (Gill and Macmillan, 1990)
- Grey, Mary. *The Outrageous Pursuit of Hope* (Darton, Longman and Todd, 2000)
- Gathje, Peter. *A Work of Hospitality - the Open Door Reader*. 1982-2002 (Open Door Community, 2002)