

*These are four extracts from a little book of 'Writings'
compiled by Frank Stevens in 1999 and circulated
privately*

RECOLLECTION

Recently I read an article about the homeless in London in which the author describes his evening walk to work (he is a journalist) part of which takes him past the recumbent figures of those who spend the night in the open in the vicinity of Waterloo Bridge. He wrote that although he had become hardened to those who begged, he always felt guilty about the young people who are so desolate and hopeless. This reminded me of an occasion when, a few years ago, I accompanied two friends on a very pleasant outing in London.

We started after lunch, first visiting a gallery specialising in Chinese paintings, where one of my friends bought a painted scroll. We then crossed the road to the British Museum to see an exhibition featuring angels, and to see some newly discovered music manuscripts by Haydn. Afterwards, as I was seeking a secondhand copy of 'Pilgrim's Progress' we sauntered down Charing Cross Road and browsed in various book shops until I found the book I wanted.

By this time we were hungry and decided to have a meal in the pleasant restaurant in the crypt of St. Martins-in-the-Fields church. It was late October, so darkness had fallen when later we emerged into Trafalgar Square. We had booked seats for a concert at the Royal Festival Hall so, as we were early, we decided to head for the South Bank via Hungerford Bridge.

On the way I saw for the first time, some of the homeless settling into doorways to shelter from the cold and to prepare for the night. None pestered us for money, but having mounted the steps to the bridge, I noticed standing almost obscured, the tall emaciated figure of a middle-aged man who was clutching a plastic cup to his chest. His intelligent face, as he stood silently there, expressed the sorrow and despair of one in limbo. I was about to give him some money when I noticed that my friends were far ahead and, afraid of losing them, I hurried on. Half way across the bridge lay a young man wrapped in one or two blankets. A bitterly cold wind was blowing up-river and he was completely in the open. Once again I hesitated, searching for coins in my pocket, but not

having yet caught up with my friends, I walked past.

Reaching the Royal Festival Hall we spent time in the book shop and the craft shop where I bought a small item for a Christmas present. We then went into the concert hall and heard some music played superbly by a trio of Russian sisters long separated by the 'Cold War'¹ but now reunited. Thence we travelled home.

My whole expense for this outing including fares, book, food, present and concert amounted to about £24, and yet I, who had been surrounded by visions of angels in the exhibition, and had bought Bunyan' s book on the progress of Christian, had not spared one penny for the homeless people I had seen. Like the author of the article, I felt useless guilt. The face of the man on the bridge still haunts me.

PRINCIPLES AND PRACTICE

Whether we are, or are not, still a Christian nation is now debatable. However, our laws in the main, are based on Judo-Christian principles, many of which are shared by Islam. To what extent are these ideals practised in our personal lives? Although we may aim for the highest, the fact is that sometimes we blur the issue by the use of 'situation ethics'¹ involving either immediate or short-term compromise.

In the present state of our culture, society makes it increasingly difficult for high principles to be practised; regarding those who endeavour to live as God would have them live, as eccentric, naive or insane. However, conversely and confusingly, when people are being judged, high ideals are considered to be attainable. Perhaps it was ever so.

The implementation of principles can be very costly. For example, in the last resort, a conscientious objector might have to be prepared to lose his or her life. To what extent should we take action to save our own soul if this brings suffering to others? Perhaps this is now thought to be a matter of little importance? Jesus seems to indicate that we should be prepared to relinquish everything - family, goods and money, in order to follow his teaching.

But is it right when, in support of our Quaker principles, we refuse to sanction the use of transport of food to starving people because we do not approve of armed guards accompanying the food convoys?

Should a family be reduced to poverty because the bread-winner refuses to relax his conscience on a matter of principle? Although we may be ashamed of doing so, many of us in such circumstances would agree to compromise. Sometimes choice is limited to choice between two evils rather than choosing between right and wrong. What do we do in that situation? Turn to God for guidance, I would hope.

A different aspect of the picture is illustrated by the following incident. I had as a friend, a man who was true to his high principles and who was once described to his wife as "a saint." She replied, "Yes, but perfection is difficult to live with!"

So, if in certain circumstances we do compromise are we to be damned? Certainly once we compromise, our stand for the highest can be regarded as hypocrisy. If we are honest we have to admit that in order to live in present-day society (or probably in any society at any time in history) compromise is almost a necessity although most of us do have a sticking point beyond which we will not act against our conscience.

This is not a plea for compromise. It is an attempt to face up to the dilemmas we may have to experience when we try to live up to the principles we hold dear. It certainly raises the difficult question of whether in support of our principles we should cause harm to others, and whether we consider principles to be more important than people.

A SOLILOQUY, MEANT TO BE HEARD

Why is it that when we need you most, you disappear? That when we despair, you remain silent, and the terrible cry from the cross echoes down the years to haunt us?

Answers will come from those who seek to help, but unconvinced, like Job, I feel deserted.

What God, to prove to the Devil that he had at least one faithful believer, would subject that believer to such torment?

Even if we accept, with Buhhda, that suffering is inherent in life, and with Penn 'no cross, no crown.' we have to ask, "What father would inflict upon his children, the grief of earthly tragedy?"

I am reminded. Inside, a jar of formaldehyde contained a kippered lung. Outside, a young mother with new-born babe was smoking.

I have learned that to become fully adult, one must realise and accept that one is completely alone within one's own personal experience. But some sign of your presence would be of help.

So, in my darkest hours I have to ask these questions. And yet, and yet, the holiest of human beings assured us that you exist.

If so, then perhaps you were not the creator of the universe, and therefore of great sorrow, but you are a spirit within it, and in ourselves. And we, like a patient on an operating table, are unconscious of what is being done to help us.

So in stillness you work silently, and response to prayer, although not heard, may be healingly provided. Once again I thought of what Jesus taught, and am reassured.

But insidiously, the niggling, the niggling doubt returns. Like Thomas, I need your help

I ONLY ASK

So what is prayer?
That opening of the heart to whom or what?
That feeling of being one with creation.
That pleading to relieve the pain.
To hold in care one's dear friend.
To thank and glorify.
To ask for wisdom and understanding.
To be still, in the silence of worship.
To cry in anguish, "Help me, help me."

Is that prayer?

And are the prayers of a multitude
more powerful than those of one alone?
How often must prayers of intercession
be said, and is reiteration more effective?
To whom or what should they be addressed?
So, what is prayer? I only ask.
"Do not ask," the Sufi told me, "just pray."