The Right to Fullness of Life

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That the Church of Jesus Christ, confessing its faith in the God of the Bible, must be on the side of the oppressed ; that it must fight tirelessly for the rights of those who are marginalised by society ; that it must uphold the right of every human being to fullness of life ; all this is part of the generally accepted teaching of Christians today. Dr. Russell Chandran has been one of those who have most powerfully impressed this upon the Church in India. But I confess that in recent years I have found myself forced to raise some questions about this consensus, and I welcome the opportunity, in joining in this tribute to Dr Chandran by some of his many friends, to raise and discuss these questions—questions, which I believe will evoke his cordial interest.

Briefly, I find myself forced to ask the question: what is the relevance of this consensus for the millions of human beings in every country for whom it is a mockery to talk about the right to a full life ? I am thinking of the victims of incurable diseases, the permanently maimed and crippled, the blind, the deaf, the mentally sub-normal. I am thinking also of those living in chronic poverty and bondage, in the slums of cities and in famine-stricken villages.

Now it is, of course, perfectly possible to argue that if society were properly ordered many of these evils would be removed, that we can hope that medical science will find cures for diseases now incurable and ways of alleviating the pains and disadvantages of their victims. But the fact remains that this does not and cannot alter the situation of these people now. All our scientific optimism and our revolutionary rhetoric cannot alter the fact that the vast majority of these untold millions will live and die with their ills unhealed. To talk about the future possibilities either of a new social order or of new technical achievements is—as far as these people are concerned—useless. It does not even perform the function which Marx ascribed to religion—the function of a

drug which can ease present pain by future hope. All of this talk offers no hope at all to these people. It merely mocks the sufferer with irrelevant chatter.

What are, we to say about these millions of people? How does the Church regard them? What is their place in its life? When I ask these questions I find myself astonished that so little thought

is given to them in contemporary Christian writing. I want to ask, then, what is the place of the handicapped (using this word in a very broad sense) in the life of the Church?

'He saved others; himself he cannot save.' In that mocking phrase, flung at the crucified Jesus, there was expressed—all unknowingly—the central paradox of the Gospel.

Jesus had come to the world as Saviour. The message of his coming is the power of God for salvation. In the Gospel records we see him portrayed as the mighty warrior who has robbed the enemy of his power, and who comes forth victorious to set free his victims, to make the blind see, the deaf hear and the lame walk, to heal the leper, to raise the dead to new life. No human bondage is beyond his relief. Never in the stories of his ministry do we read that the victim of any affliction came to Jesus and was advised to accept the affliction as the will of God. Always and everywhere his response to human bondage of any kind was to break the fetters and set the prisoner free. He saved others. He was and is Saviour.

And yet he cannot, or will not, save himself from the hostile powers that close in upon him as his ministry proceeds. The net that his enemies contrived is steadily tightening around him. Finally he is bound, nailed helpless to a cross and left to die. The Saviour cannot save himself.

The same paradox is present in the words with which Jesus (according to the synoptic Gospels) sent out his disciples on their mission. They are given authority over the powers of evil to release men and women from all that holds them in bondage; but they themselves are promised bondage, imprisonment, rejection and death. The saving power of God is to be carried and communicated by those who have no power to save themselves.

So also in the writings of the apostle Paul. He is the bearer of a commission which carries the power and authority of God to subdue all the powers that oppose it. Yet it is the characteristic mark of that commission that it is discharged in weakness, fear and trembling. (I Corinthians 2 : 3). This is not accidental. It belongs to the character of the message of the Cross that its bearer reflects the weakness and helplessness of the Crucified. The authenticity of the messenger is certified by the fact that he shares in the sufferings of the Christ. It is by the endurance of affliction that Paul and his fellow workers are recognizable as/ servants of God (II Corinthians 6 : 4 if). There is a specially sharp example of this general rule in the ` thorn in the flesh ' which afflicted Paul. What exactly this was we do not know ; we know only that it was an affliction from which he prayed to be delivered, but which he was called upon to suffer in order that the power of Christ might be revealed precisely in this weakness.

What is true for Christ and his messengers is true also for the whole Church. The life of the Church is expounded—for-example in Romans 8—as a participation in the afflictions of Christ through which we share in the travail of the whole creation as the new creation struggles to be

born. It is precisely in the midst of affliction that we are filled with the hope and are enabled to know that the whole creation works together for good to those who love God (Romans. 8 : 2 ff, and 28). It is therefore as the bearer of affliction that-the Church is a sign of hope for all men and for the whole creation. The strange truth about the Church is that when it can claim to be strong it is weak, and that when it shares in the weakness of Christ it is truly the bearer of the power of God for the salvation of men.

The question of the place of the handicapped in the life of the Church raises sharply the question whether or not the Church is being true to its fundamental character. Is the presence of the Cross as a sign on its buildings, and on its altars and in its worship an empty sign by which the Church is condemned? Does the Church in fact try to display to the world a kind of power to which the Cross is really irrelevant or contradictory? Does the use of the sign of the Cross express what we truly are? Does the Church know that all power is ultimately deceptive except the power of the Cross?

We shall be on the way to answering that question when we have answered the question of the place of the handicapped in the Church. Does our doctrine of the Church provide an essential place for these? Or are they rather those about whom we do not speak, the exceptional, the marginal? Do we see the churches essentially the Church of the strong and the well, and are the handicapped simply those who are, unfortunately, not yet strong and well? Do we, even at our best, see them as those towards whom we have a duty? Or do we recognize in them as members of the Body Christ without whose gift we are maimed? It must be confessed that during recent decades, especially in the period which has gloried on the discovery of the secularity of the Gospel, the Church has given little thought to the role of the handicapped as an indispensable part in the full life of Christ. We have lived through the period of the ‘revolution of expectations’. Flushed with the astounding achievements of science and technology, we have been led to believe in the possibility of a world without limits and with no handicaps, a world in which wealth, health and plenty would be the achieved right of every human being. Our emphasis has been on the right of every human being to a life free from every kind of handicap. We recognize that for thousands of years the majority of human beings have accepted poverty, hunger, disease and high infant mortality as part of the fixed order of creation which had simply to be endured. But we know that today millions in every-

continent have - at least in their hearts - rebelled against these tyrannies. We have turned eagerly to those parts of Scripture and the Christian tradition which proclaim God's word of liberation from these hostile powers. We have seen the Church as the place where the sick are healed, the lame walk and the oppressed are set free. And. who can deny that this vision is in line with the Biblical and Evangelical message of salvation? No summary of the Christian message is more frequently quoted today than the brief message delivered by Jesus at the outset of his ministry in Galilee: ‘The spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives, the recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those that are oppressed and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.’

If the Church is the bearer of this message how are we to regard the handicapped, the crippled, the blind, the deaf, the illiterate, the hopelessly deprived—except as the bearers of our failure and our guilt? How, then, can we deal with them except by keeping them in the background, out of sight and, as far as possible, out of mind? Or—if we cannot do that—shall we see them as those who are to be pitied, whom we look down upon as the unfortunate, the stragglers of the human march ? From this it is a short step to something much less humane—to an attitude of contempt and even

resentment. Our resources of pity are limited and soon exhausted. The appeal of the hopelessly crippled, the incurably blind, or the starving child for whom relief will come too late, can evoke for a time our pity and compassion. But not for ever. We cannot allow the image of our own sufficiency to be too deeply threatened so we do what we can to hide the threat from our eyes. If the handicapped are our neighbours we lock them away in institutions and pay others to guard them ; if they are far away we merely turn our television sets to another programme.

And so we try to safeguard our image of ourselves, the image of man as he ought to be-healthy, strong and free from all defects, the pagan image of man. We thereby reject the image of man as he truly is in Jesus Christ—the one who bears the karma of humanity, who is wounded for our transgressions and bruised for our iniquity, the man of sorrows who is acquainted with grief.

But to evoke this other image is at once to call up a whole series of memories which must cause us to hesitate. One thinks of the Christ of the medieval crucifix—a limp pain-drenched figure, crushed and defeated by the power of evil. One thinks of the centuries in which the Church has advised men to accept suffering, poverty, exploitation and disease as the will of God and not to rebel against them. One thinks of all the sorry story that gives credibility to the gibe that religion is opium, a drug which enables the exploited of the world to accept their lot and not to rise up in rebellion against it. One remembers with shame how the Church

has permitted the rich and the strong to oppress the poor and the weak with the comfortable assurance that Christ is specially near to those who suffer. And we turn again to the stories of the Gospel to see Jesus as the mighty Saviour who never asks those who come to him to accept their illness as God's will, but treats it as the work of the devil and with words and deeds of power puts the enemy to flight and sets his captives free.

Here then we have two contradictory images of man and of the Church. There is the image of man as healthy, strong, free, and of the Church as a society which rejects every sort of sickness, weakness and bondage and fights for the abundance of life for all. And there is the vision of man suffering and in bondage for the sake of others, and of the Church which accepts this role and seeks to help its members to accept suffering and bondage and to find the presence of Christ in that acceptance. Each can produce its own horrible caricature of humanity; yet both can find a basis in the ministry of our Lord himself.

How are these apparently contradictory images related—in the ministry of Jesus, in our own experience, and in the life of the Church?
(a) The ministry of Jesus begins with his baptism in Jordan, in which he accepts total identification with ordinary men and women in their bondage to sin and their estrangement from God. In that baptism he accepts proleptically the weakness and God -forsakenness of the Cross. Immediately he is driven into the wilderness where he is exposed unarmed to the full spiritual power of evil. He comes forth from that trial having totally discarded all the weapons with which men seek to subdue the forces that threaten human life. In this also he is faithful to that calling which has its completion in the Cross. But he does not go straight from his temptations to his death. On the contrary he throws himself into a mission of teaching, healing and exorcism which is directed to the task of recalling Israel to its vocation as bearer of the covenant of blessing for all the nations. He moves through the towns and villages of Galilee and up to Jerusalem, accomplishing works of power which he interprets as the breaking into history of the mighty sovereign will of God. To this end he is mighty to heal, to cleanse and to save. Even at the moment of his arrest in the garden he stretches out a hand to heal the wound inflicted by Peter's

sword. To the very end he saves others. But he does not act to save himself. The traps set by his enemies close upon him. He goes forward knowing but not seeking to evade what they have planned for him. The hands that had been stretched forth to give life to others are stretched forth in helplessness in his own death. Even on the cross, when only his lips can move, they are active to bring absolution to a penitent thief and comfort to a desolate mother. But finally there is the great cry ‘Father, into thy hands I commit

my spirit,’ and the lips are still, his ministry is complete, his battle won. And he—the weak, the defeated, the forsaken—is manifested as the power, the wisdom, the righteousness of God in his resurrection from the dead.

To the very end his relation to the powers that enslave and oppress men is that he rebels against them, breaks their power and releases their victims. But at the end there is a cry of acceptance. He accepts death and commits all—himself, his disciples, his mission—into the Father's hands. And this is because he is the agent and witness and bearer of a final victory, and eschatological liberation, of which his resurrection is the first-fruit and pledge. That final liberation cannot be replaced by the liberations which are possible within human history. It can never be wholly enjoyed within the present age. It can nevertheless be tasted, known and exercised now, a foretaste which points forward to the accomplished freedom of the children of God. Until that final and blessed consummation, the dichotomy, the paradox remains: he saved others, himself he cannot save. The resolution of that paradox lies beyond history.

(b) Here is the clue to the paradox of the Christian experience of strength in weakness. It is spelled out in many passages of Paul's letters. Let me take only one example, typical of many. In the Colossian letter the apostle speaks of his own suffering as a prisoner in chains. He does not rebel against it but accepts it as the current form of his apostolate. It is thus, as a helpless captive, that his Lord has called upon him—for the present—to serve. And yet this is no supine or passive acceptance. It is the context for an intensely active ministry of caring, of praying, of preaching, in which—as he says—' I toil, striving with all the energy which Christ mightily inspires in me' (Colossians 1: 24-29).

A faith which surrenders and a faith which fights—in a normal perspective these two would seem to be contradictory. Here they are fused together in a single discipleship which is modelled upon and made possible by that once-for-all victory-in-defeat upon the Cross of Jesus, a victory which points beyond itself to that which is now hidden but is to be made manifest (Colossians 3 : 1-4). How is this paradoxical character of the life of Christ to be reflected in the life of the Church?

If the Church is to be true to him whose Cross is the central sign of the Church's life, it must be a place where there is both the faith that rebels against limits and the faith that accepts limits a place where there is a courageous and relentless battle against all that enslaves men—whether the bondage be physical, mental, social or economic—and also a trustful acceptance of that bondage. It must be a community that knows the time and place to fight and the time and place to surrender, which does not surrender where it should fight, and does not fight where it should surrender.

To be more explicit -

(1) The Church cannot be *only* the society that fights and rebels. If this is the whole of its understanding of its calling, the inevitable consequence is that those for whom deliverance is *at this moment* impossible are marginalized, ignored or exploited. They may be marginalized: they are treated as material for 'mere ambulance work,' 'palliative measures'. Their existence is recognized, but they are seen as irrelevant to the real business. That business is to ensure that—for the future—such bondage is made impossible. They function primarily as illustrations of the task to be completed rather than as living human beings, to be cared for now. Or, secondly, they are ignored: they simply disappear from the picture, which is full to the limit with battle-scenes in the struggle for liberation. Or, finally, they may be exploited. Action to bring relief and comfort to the sufferers is treated as not merely irrelevant but as positively harmful. It is considered as merely serving to patch up the rotten system. Rather let things get worse, let people suffer, until the suffering becomes intolerable and the violence of resentment destroys the whole system. As I write this paper I notice a typical example from a recent Christian writer: ` In this situation, welfare measures are positively harmful because they help to preserve an unjust *status quo*.'[1] It is sad to find in a Christian statement such a combination of moral cynicism and political naivety. Truly 'revolution' is the opium of the well-fed intellectual.

(2) But, equally, the Church cannot be only the society that preaches resignation that seeks to comfort the sufferer so that affliction becomes bearable. If this is its whole role, then the Church becomes the tacit accomplice of cruelty. The injustice which ought to be destroyed is condoned. The sickness which could be prevented by proper programmes of public health and medical care is accepted as the will of God. The Church becomes a pedlar of sedatives when surgery is needed.

(3) To be faithful to the Gospel, the Church must be the place both of the faith that rebels and of the faith that accepts; and it cannot be this unless the handicapped are, and are seen to be, an integral and indispensable part of its life. This is an insight which is urgently needed at a time when the dominant theological currents have been towards the celebration of its role as liberator, healer and champion of justice. The handicapped, the oppressed, the deprived are utterly indispensable in the Church's authentic life, not simply as those on behalf of whom the Church is called to labour in healing and in action for justice, but as those who

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[1] Urban Industrial Mission News, National Christian Council of India, March-June, 1976.

now, as the deprived and handicapped within the membership of the Church, have a part to play, and a witness to give without which the Church will simply not be fully Christian. This part and this witness include both what they can teach of faithful courage in the overcoming of appalling obstacles, and also what they can teach of faithful obedience in humbly accepting from God the limits within which he has called them to work out their discipleship. Without that witness from within its own membership, the Church's witness is distorted and deceptive, and the Church's discipleship is irrelevant to the real world in which men and women live and suffer. For it is only when the witness of the handicapped is an integral part of the witness of the whole Church, that this witness is true to the Gospel of the crucified Lord who is risen, the risen Lord who is the crucified. Only with this witness as part of its total message does the Church's message measure up to the heights and depths of the human situation. Only so can we offer men a hope which embraces the generations still to come and the multitude in the generation now living who must—whatever happens—live out their days within the narrow limits set by their affliction.

At this point I can only move to the language of personal testimony, but I am sure that as I do so I echo the experience of count-less other men and women. It has been my great privilege to

minister in places where there are extremes of deprivation—in the slums of Madras, among the Harijan-communities of our South Indian villages, among the victims of leprosy and among many who—even iii the poorest village or slum—were at the very bottom of the heap. In my relations with them I have always felt that I have received more than I could give. In contact with them I knew that I was in contact with Jesus himself. No doubt there were things which I could do and which I tried to do for them. But when I came away from the meeting I knew that it was I who had gained. I am saying something which most of my readers will probably recognize as true without further comment. If comment must be made, one might simply say that in such a meeting I am delivered from the illusions and anxieties which assail me when I live in the midst of my own programmes, my own achievements, my own capacity for getting things done. I am—for the time at least—placed in a world where the Crucified is known as the Lord, where I knew that there is no way to live except by grace, the grace of him who gives freely to the beggar but is hidden from the man who has made himself secure. The poor,. the deprived, the handicapped are not primarily a problem to be solved by the rich, the comfortable and the strong. They are the bearers of a witness without which the strong are lost in their own illusions. They are the trustees of a blessing without which the Church cannot bless the world. Their presence in the Church is the indispensable corrective of our inveterate tendency to identify the power of God with our power, the victory of God with our success. Because

they keep us close to the reality of the Cross they can bring to us also, if we are willing to see, the light of the new day which dawns from beyond our horizons and which is close to us in the resurrection of the crucified.

In a large multi-storey block of flats in a poor section of London there is a man who is incurably crippled. As in most of such huge tenements, human life is dehumanized. Neighbours have few incentives to meet, children few opportunities to play together. Real human community is hard to find. But in this block there is a difference. The crippled man—unable to leave his flat—keeps his door permanently open. Children and their parents come in and out at all times of the day to talk to him and tell him their troubles. He has become the human heart of a body which would otherwise be desperately short of love. His sickness is health for that community. The hopelessly handicapped man is the means of wholeness for those who otherwise would be trapped in a dehumanizing structure.

Probably every reader can recall comparable instances of the ministry of the weak to the strong. It is the illusion of the strong, the whole, and the healthy to see themselves in the centre and to see the handicapped as those on the margin. The Church should be freed from that illusion by the presence in the centre of its life of the Cross, and of him who suffered there. If the Church does not ensure that the handicapped have a place at the very heart of its life then it denies and dishonours him who reigns from the Cross, who saved others, but would not save himself.