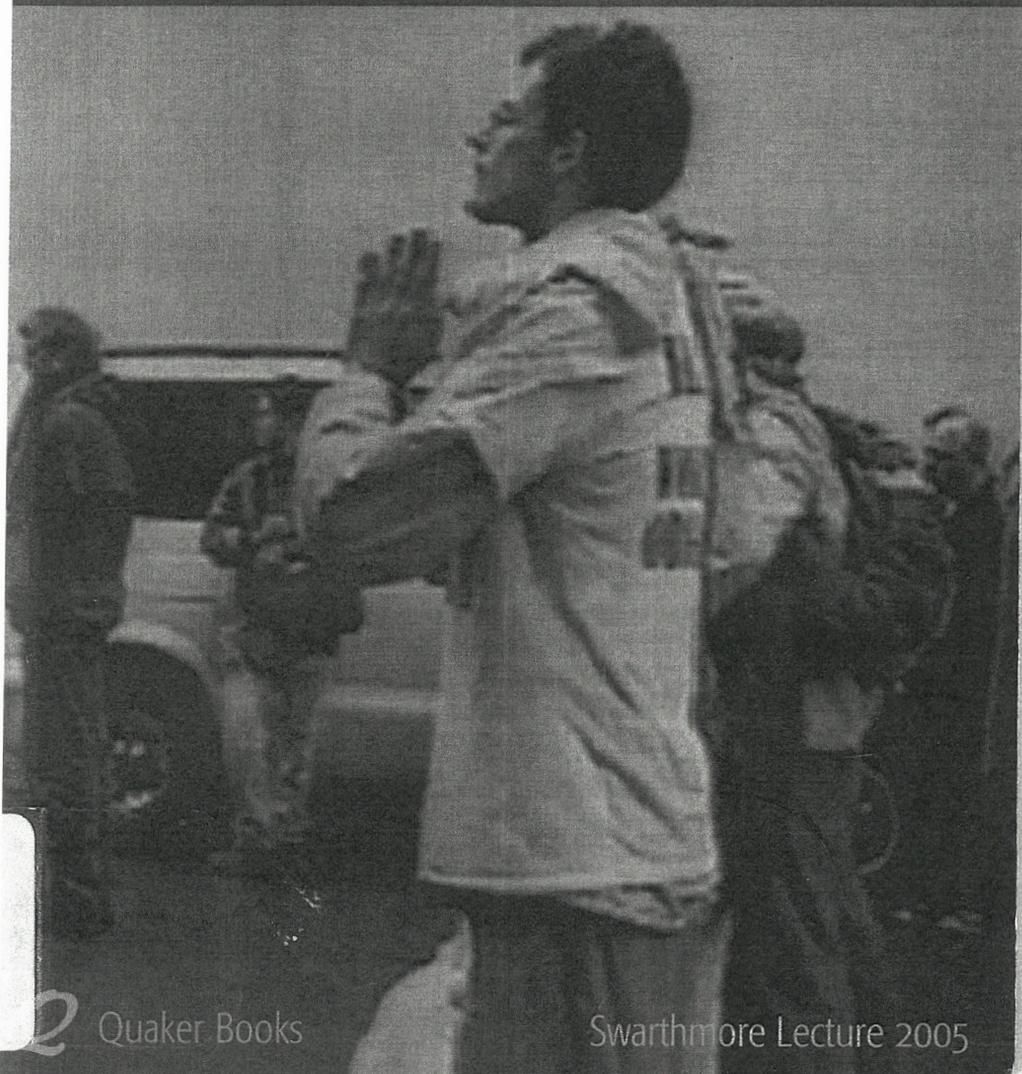


Helen Steven

No Extraordinary Power

Prayer,
Stillness
and Activism



 Quaker Books

Swarthmore Lecture 2005

A Cupboard of Delights

Over my years of struggling with questions of faith, I have developed a metaphor that I have found helpful. I visualise a cupboard full of the exciting goodies of my faith. The things that I use a lot, necessary commodities, are on the middle shelf, about eye level, well within reach, ready to be pulled out and used every day. Some things are out of reach on the top shelf, probably useful at some time in the future, but not particularly helpful at the moment. These are the points of faith that I can't understand, but I know instinctively that they may need to be brought down, dusted off and re-examined sometime. On the bottom shelf are the things that are going to be thrown out as worthless or even harmful. The important thing is that items of faith can be moved around every time I tidy the cupboard and re-examine its contents, while there is always room on the shelves for more.

In the chapter which follows, I will be exploring some of these tenets of belief that I have found vitally necessary as an underpinning for my active life. Of course there will be huge omissions and my choices are the product of my own subjectivity: not a museum piece of polished exhibits or final answers, but simply an invitation to explore.

Ground of Our Being or Ancient of Days?

All that has been written so far is based on the premise that there is a God, who exists beyond ourselves and therefore gives prayer a meaning. But is this so? How do we experience God and to what extent does God in any way answer our prayers or inspire our actions?

John Robinson's book *Honest to God* and some of the writings of Teilhard de Chardin and Paul Tillich had a profound influence on the way people of my generation thought about God. John Robinson challenged the whole concept of an all-powerful father figure, dwelling in a far-off heaven, able to dispense justice and

intervene dramatically in the affairs of human life. The “immortal, invisible, God only wise”, the “Ancient of Days, pavilioned in splendour and girded with praise” spoken of in the hymn books.

Belief in such a God must certainly influence the way we pray. Often it leads to a huge sense of inadequacy, of total unworthiness and shame before such splendour and might, so that abasing oneself in confession of sins becomes a prerequisite to prayer. From this comes the need for an intermediary, priest, minister, an advocate before God, who is in some way more holy, more inspired, more endowed with grace, who can plead our cause.

There is also inevitably a strong element of fear, leading to a timidity and reluctance to step out of line, to act out of turn, to challenge the religious authorities and in any way incur the wrath of God. This can lead to a kind of social and moral conservatism.

By extension, belief in a God of such certainties can lead to a sense of over-riding moral rectitude, a conviction of the rightness of one's cause to the exclusion of all others, and a clear-cut idea of right and wrong. There is no room for doubt, and questioning suggests disobedience or even blasphemy.

It is amazing how deeply rooted in our whole culture is this idea of an awe-inspiring patriarchal, transcendent God, and how embedded in our psyche is the idea of a male, dominant and often vengeful God. This is precisely the kind of notion of God that feminists would reject as exemplifying all that is negative and abusive in patriarchal structures. A friend of mine recently spoke about her great difficulty in reading the Bible at all, describing much of it as “toxic waste”, fit only to be thrown out. And quite right too. This is the Lord of Hosts, the God of Battles, the Conquering King in whose name wars can be fought, imperial conquest justified, and whose name can be used as a battle-cry in the midst of slaughter. This is the angry God who punishes sin with horrible savagery, an all-pervasive seeing eye who pursues us relentlessly like the hound of hell.

In his book *Jesus Against Christianity*, Jack Nelson-Pallmeyer points out that most of us are highly selective in our reading of the

Bible, and carefully edit out the over-riding picture of a God who is pathologically violent. We focus on the hope of the rainbow, conveniently ignoring that a flood, apparently masterminded by God, had wiped out nearly all of humanity. We read Exodus as a story of the liberation of oppressed people, not noticing that Egyptian slaves were also the victims of all the plagues, including the killing of the firstborn children. We sing merrily about the walls of Jericho falling down, overlooking a programme of genocide that appeared to have divine approval. God as portrayed in much of the Bible is ruthless, vengeful, arbitrary and genocidal. Pallmeyer claims that we ignore this aspect of the Bible at our peril.

Although many of us at an intellectual level have rejected this image of God, vestiges of such attitudes remain and are surprisingly deep-seated even in our secular society, and might be said to underpin many of our western values of supremacy today.

I have always struggled with belief in a transcendent God precisely because I find this so hard to reconcile with a God of love. But if we dismiss totally the idea of a God “out there”, beyond ourselves, all-seeing, all-wise, guiding and directing our actions, we must find a new location for God. If I still believe in God, still believe that there is a greater purpose beyond my own ends, still believe in divine guidance from a source beyond myself, then where is this God, and in what ways is this God different from the “Ancient of Days”?

Much of the problem centres around whether our belief is in a transcendent God “out there” or an immanent God discovered in the depths of our being. For Friends, of course, this is not a new debate.

Personally, I derive much more comfort and inspiration in the idea of a God who is “closer than breathing”, the very ground of our being. This shifts the entire focus of the divine away from distant inaccessibility, to an immediate immanent presence within every one of us, constantly present and constantly loving. Thus, not only is God the very essence and core of my own being,

there is also “that of God” in every person I meet. The Nepalese greeting *Namaste*, usually coupled with a folding of the hands and a bow, means “The God within me greets the God within you”.

There is a direct connection between a belief in this kind of God and the respect that forms the whole basis of nonviolence. If every one of us embodies an aspect of the truth of God, the divine, the very essence of humanity, then this must immediately affect how we treat that person. This was at the heart of Gandhi’s teaching. If we kill or use violence against another human being, then we are doing violence to the truth of God within them.

Even enemies, those with whom we profoundly disagree, have this element of the divine, and it becomes our task to seek that out in order to be able to move forward in mutual respect. Nonviolent action is based on the assumption that by one’s own actions, by confronting people openly and lovingly in a new and creative way, one can reach this deep inner core of the divine, appeal to the very highest nature within a person and so effect change. And of course the change may need to happen within oneself. This is why part of nonviolence training teaches one to look one’s opponent in the eye, thus encountering the window on the soul, meeting as human to human and saying, “You cannot ignore my humanity, just as I respect yours”. And of course this is also one of the reasons why secret police wear visors and dark glasses, precisely to avoid such a deeply challenging contact.

At the start of the Options for Defence week on Iona, during which military generals, military experts and peace campaigners gathered for a conference, we all assembled in the Chapter House of the Abbey. It was a distinctly stiff beginning, suspicion in the air and each side eyeing the other with proverbial hackles raised. To begin the introductions and attempt to ease the atmosphere, I said that we all sincerely believed that we were working for peace, but simply differed over the methods. The relief was almost palpable as shoulders came down, people relaxed into their seats and began to look each other in the eye.

I remember an occasion at the peace camp at Greenham Common. We had been blockading a gate for several hours, when a decision was made to open the gates forcibly from the inside by driving at them with a large truck. The gates were being forced open slowly and women were being crushed under the gate as it swung. Those of us lined up on the outside, hemmed in by a solid row of police, felt totally helpless and at a loss as to what to do. Eventually we decided to stand up and speak to the police officer directly in front of each one of us. I was opposite a very young man, and as I was angry and distressed I said, rather unkindly, “Do you like doing this kind of thing?” To my consternation his eyes filled with tears and he said, “I am hating every minute of it and I wish I was anywhere else.”

Of course there are times when it seems impossible to discern that of God in the other; times when all appeals fail and attempts to make peace can lead to suffering and even death. Yet unbelievably, in some of the most extreme situations there are amazing stories of how the deep humanity of another has been touched and a seemingly horrific situation transformed.

There is a remarkable book by a man called Eric Lomax, who was a prisoner of the Japanese during the Second World War. He experienced horrific torture at the hands of his captors, and one man in particular was to haunt his nightmares for years after the end of the war. He visited psychiatrists and medical experts, but to no avail. Eventually he realised that he must force himself to come face to face with this man and speak with him about what had happened and, if possible, find it in himself to extend forgiveness. It took him many years of searching, but at last he discovered that the man who had been his torturer had been so haunted with guilt for what he had done that he had entered a Japanese monastery, and that he too was seeking out his victim to seek forgiveness. In a painfully honest but very moving scene the book describes how the two men eventually met and were able to give each other release and peace of mind.

This illustrates a belief in God who at the core of our humanity goes beyond the confines of our individual human experience to include a dynamic within the whole universe. One of my main reasons for believing in some kind of divine purpose comes from the sheer wonder and beauty of creation. Where we live in the far north-west of Scotland we are privileged to be able to enjoy the darkness, and even occasionally the wonder of the Northern Lights. Seeing great curtains of light flickering like searchlights in a great canopy across the sky, or pausing to reflect on the time it has taken for the light of an individual star to reach our tiny planet, makes me so aware of how infinitesimally small we are in the whole cosmos.

Or at the other end of the spectrum, consider the tiny magic of a seed unfurling in the warm earth, or the little interlocking feathers of a wren, or the green brushes of a larch in spring, or the minute perfection of a sea shell, and wonder at the beauty of it all. In that sense I cannot but believe in a creator, not so much as initiating an organised act of creation, but as a purpose for good behind the universe. "And God saw that it was very good." As the letter attributed to Chief Seattle says, "To harm the earth is to heap contempt on its Creator."

I am not a scientist and confess profound ignorance of the finer points of chaos theory and the physics of the universe, but I have a vivid memory of being shown a video at Woodbrooke, the Quaker study centre in Birmingham, which showed computerised images of fractals, explained for the lay person. Seemingly random objects such as forests, clouds or mountain ranges were programmed into the computer in such a way as to show the most amazing patterns and designs. I was profoundly moved and thrilled, as it seemed to me to show a design for life far beyond our understanding, full of sheer beauty.

It is this love of the environment that we live in, and of the infinite variety of people around me, that inspires in me a deep reverence and gratitude for life, and so moves me to action.

My understanding of God, then, could be described as being in the connectedness of all life. God for me is like the divine spark that links me to another human being, to the animals, to all of creation – a kind of great web of connection, alive, shimmering with energy, creating flashes of inspiration and profound love.

In his profound book *I and Thou*, philosopher Martin Buber makes a distinction between the ordinary relationship of I/it and the numinous spiritual meeting of I/Thou. Saying that "In the beginning is relation" and that "All real living is meeting", he describes the encounter with the "Thou". "The *Thou* meets me. But I step into direct relation with it. Hence the relation means being chosen and choosing, suffering and action in one." In a remarkable passage he describes the different encounters in relation to a tree.

I consider a tree.

I can look on it as a picture: stiff column in a shock of light, or splash of green shot with the delicate blue and silver of the background.

I can perceive it as movement: flowing veins on clinging, pressing pith, suck of the roots, breathing of the leaves, ceaseless commerce with earth and air – and the obscure growth itself.

I can classify it in a species and study it as a type in its structure and mode of life...

In all this the tree remains my object, occupies space and time, and has its nature and constitution.

It can, however, also come about, if I have both will and grace, that in considering the tree I become bound up in relation to it. The tree is no longer *It*. I have been seized by the power of exclusiveness... Everything belonging to the tree is in this: its form and structure, its colours and chemical composition, its intercourse with the elements and with the stars, all are present in a single whole.

Buber describes this unique relationship as universal love and calls it the “cradle of Real Life”.

In a somewhat similar way, Buddhist philosophy teaches that we have more than five senses; that there is what is called the *aliya* consciousness behind all the other senses which is the sense that makes the connection enabling us to see, hear and touch reality. Thus prayer becomes a way of plugging into this web of connection, of living and being in tune with the dance of the spheres that is both part of our own inner consciousness, while at the same time being part of a goodness infinitely beyond our imagining.

Reaching Beyond Ourselves

Looking back into the past and even into our own lives, there are times when people seem to accomplish deeds, perform acts of heroism, undertake projects that are totally unexpected and far beyond their own seeming limitations and powers. Very often this is ascribed to a power or dynamism beyond our own experience and external to our own imaginings.

Where does that “still, small voice” come from, tugging at the heartstrings, annoyingly imperative and brooking no refusal? So often the voice of conscience is obviously not in our own best interests at the time, leading us inexorably to places we are afraid of or where we would rather not be. I remember travelling on the train from Glasgow to London en route for my two years in Vietnam and the adventure of a lifetime. I was homesick already and had tears pouring down my cheeks, when a woman sitting opposite leaned across and patted my arm saying, “Yes dear, London is a long way from home!”

History is filled with inspiring examples of people who have done amazing things, well beyond their ordinary powers. I often quote a poem by Adrienne Rich which has become one of my favourites:

My heart is moved by all I cannot save:
so much has been destroyed
I have to cast my lot with those
who age after age, perversely,
with no extraordinary power,
reconstitute the world.

(Rich 1978)

However, I would take issue with the line “with no extraordinary power”. People do sometimes appear to act out of some sort of “extraordinary power”.

Jesus’ disciples, for example, were as ordinary a bunch of characters as you could find. James and John arguing over pride of place; Peter, rash and impetuous, blustering and vehement in his denials; Matthew the money-grubbing tax collector and collaborator; Thomas the cynical doubter: all of them taking flight at the critical moment of testing and cowering fearfully in the upper room, jumping at the first knock at the door. And yet this same group of country peasants were able to stand up publicly and proclaim what they had experienced, in direct defiance of all the might of the religious and military establishment. They scattered all over the Roman Empire, in and out of prison, finding an eloquence and courage far beyond themselves.

Some years ago I was attending a week on Iona led by Vincent Harding, a theologian from the US who had worked alongside Martin Luther King. I had been asked to lead the worship in the Abbey that evening, and I asked Vincent to read Dr King’s description of his experience of being in the depths of despair. It was during the Montgomery bus boycott, and he had just received a threatening abusive telephone call in the middle of the night. He wrote:

It seemed that all my fears had come down on me at once.
I had reached the saturation point... I was ready to give up.
I tried to think of a way to move out of the picture without

appearing to be a coward. In this state of exhaustion, when my courage had almost gone, I determined to take my problem to God. My head in my hands, I bowed over the kitchen table and prayed aloud... At that moment I experienced the presence of the Divine as I had never before experienced him. It seemed as though I could hear the quiet assurance of an inner voice saying, "Stand up for righteousness, stand up for truth, God will be at your side forever." Almost at once my fears began to pass from me. My uncertainty disappeared. I was ready to face anything. The outer situation remained the same, but God had given me inner calm.

Three nights later, our home was bombed. Strangely enough, I accepted the word of the bombing calmly. My experience with God had given me a new strength and trust.

(King 1963)

Vincent read the passage aloud in the Abbey with the tears streaming down his face. After the service he handed the book back to me and told me that he had been with Dr King the morning after that experience and had been told the whole story.

So people do experience an enabling power, which many would attribute to God or the Spirit working within them. Some would call it the power of Jesus, and I would like to explore this theme a little further.

As I have already mentioned, I was brought up an enthusiastic Christian and a church member. On my return from Vietnam, I was no longer so certain. I had experienced other faiths and philosophies and learned much from them. I was also appalled by the arrogance of some western Christians. However, I was living in Scotland, in a culture that was ostensibly Christian, so I continued to describe myself as Christian mainly out of cultural conformity, but also because the example of Jesus' life still gave me an inspirational pattern to aspire to. Joining Friends gave

me the freedom to explore my spirituality in a supportive, non-judgemental environment.

However, during a bible-study role play on Iona, I came to experience something profoundly revealing about the power which Jesus had which has remained with me ever since as a challenge and an inspiration.

The passage which we were studying was from Matthew's Gospel, the story of the paralysed man being lowered through the roof by his friends for Jesus to heal. We were a large group of about 40 people, and we began by reading the passage through carefully. We were then offered a choice of groups – a disciples group, the man's friends, a group of "paralysed people", a Pharisees group, onlookers, and a Jesus group. We were encouraged to pick the group that most interested us. I found myself in the Jesus group. Each group was then given a short task to help us into our role. The paralysed people just lay on the floor; the Pharisees were given various legal passages of scripture to study; the Jesus group that I was in was asked to think quickly about what our message to the crowd was going to be.

After we had done this we were given some questions about our characters, and asked specifically to use our imaginations to think about how we were feeling at the time, still in our role as Jesus. My imaginings really surprised me. I found myself thinking that I was young, a bit of a country lad, speaking in a broad local dialect, inexperienced, not at all sure of my authority, and, yes, frightened. Totally real, totally human feelings. And yet completely at odds with all I had previously believed about Jesus as "Son of God", somehow special, untouched by everyday worries, going through life knowing it would be "all right in the end". Here suddenly was a human being, a frightened, fallible person, just like me. It bowled me over!

Almost immediately in the role play we were given our next task, which was to go over to the Pharisees group and ask them in what way we were causing them offence. By this time we were so

afraid that we drew straws for the task, and I was one of two detailed to go. It was like stirring up a hornets' nest! We were bombarded with legalistic jargon about why we should not be healing the man, and we were repeatedly asked the very question we weren't sure about: "On what authority can you do these things?"

We suddenly found ourselves blazingly angry that such legalism could prevent an act of mercy, and we both found ourselves quoting passages of Micah and Amos we had forgotten we ever knew. It was a gloriously liberating experience of holy rage.

As we gathered together to make peace with each other and reflect on what we had learned, I felt as if I had received a profoundly exciting revelation – one which I am still processing today.

Firstly I learned that Jesus was as fully human as I am, subject to all the same joys, fears, triumphs and limitations. In fact Jesus was often described as the "Son of Man", and I had always given this title a somewhat exalted, mystical meaning. But it can be quite simply translated as "the Human One" or "everyman".

But if this Human One, who was like me, was also endowed with special power – was also the Son of God – then by extension I too am a Daughter of God, also able to lay hold of that special power. For a few moments I had experienced a power and outrage beyond myself, and this showed that that special power which Jesus had is also available to me. This is the power that inspired the prophets, Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Rosa Parks, Dorothy Day – and me. It was an extraordinarily exciting discovery.

I went back to the Gospels and read them through again in the light of this discovery, and I found many passages where Jesus seemed to be emphasising this very message to his listeners. He said things like "The kingdom of God is *within you*" (Luke 17:21), or "Greater things shall you do" (John 14:21); he sent the disciples out in pairs in the full expectation that they could carry out his mission just as effectively as he could.

Then I began to reflect on the word "Messiah". Messiah means the "anointed one", and there is a very real sense in which we are all

anointed with the Spirit to do the work of the kingdom. "You are the One we have all been waiting for."

This was exciting stuff, and as I tried to explain it to people, just as I am doing here, I discovered the inadequacies of language to express deep spiritual experience. Some friends would say to me, "Oh, so you've been born again", or "You've taken the Lord Jesus Christ as your saviour and lord", and I would react vehemently, "Oh, no, nothing like that." And yet how do I really know what others mean when they use these words, or how do I put my feelings into words?

It sounds supremely arrogant and even blasphemous to say that I can experience the same kind of power as Jesus, and of course it was precisely this very question of authority and source of power that constituted the offence of Jesus to the religious leaders of his time. Such claims led him directly into conflict with church and state.

And this is the sting in the tail. Just as, in the role play, I felt fear when going to speak with the Pharisees, so now it came to me with blinding clarity that claiming this power and letting it drive where it must, leads straight into trouble. As Douglas Steere once said, "A Christian should be without fear, happy and always in trouble"!

Reweaving the Broken Web

Connections can be broken; the web is frail like gossamer. We know from our own experience that relationships are broken, trust betrayed; that goodness and love can be abused, scorned, trampled ruthlessly underfoot. Beauty in nature is being despoiled, ravaged, exploited to the point of extinction and total destruction. Far from being one with the flow of life, all too often we humans seem to have a death wish.

If God is in these connections, then does this mean that God is able to be broken, destroyed? In other words, that God is not

omnipotent, all-powerful, able to save the world, but that God is vulnerable, able to be wounded and even destroyed? "He saved others, himself he cannot save," were the mocking words to Jesus as he was dying.

It would indeed seem to be so, and the crucifixion of Jesus would seem to bear this out. Love can indeed be despised, rejected, even put to death.

This concept of a vulnerable God would go some way to answering some of those hard questions about unanswered prayer. There is an irreconcilable gap between a God who is love and a God who is all-powerful. The age-old question arises of how a God of love can allow disasters, tragedies, pain and suffering to happen. If suffering is indeed part of God's will, then God cannot be a God of love. True perhaps that suffering and pain can build character and refine our natures; but that God could will such disasters upon us in order to make us love God more would suggest a warped, self-centred, malevolent God.

On the other hand, a God who wills the good, but who suffers alongside us – is literally com-passionate – is much closer to the God of love in whom I can place my confidence. Where was God when the bomb was dropped on Hiroshima? The answer comes back: "God was in Hiroshima with the suffering people." It seems to me that believing in God's omnipotence can be a real obstacle to prayer, and that when we look at the meaning of power in a new way, we may find some answers.

This understanding of a God who is not all-powerful means that we are rejecting the idea of a puppet-master God who can manipulate events and intervene powerfully in history. Does this then mean that we are also rejecting any idea of a divine purpose at work? I would say not.

As a historian I am fascinated by the unexpectedness of events, the tiny conjunctions of events and circumstances that can change the course of history. It is always good fun to speculate on the "what ifs" of history. However, I do not view history as a series of direct

interventions by God, but rather as the result of the committed or sometimes mistaken actions of individual people. The Jewish Passover celebrates God's deliverance of the Jewish people from slavery in Egypt, but Moses' willingness to undertake the task, to overcome his fears, to rise to the challenge of defying the might of Pharaoh, was a crucial part of that deliverance. There is a more indirect intervention in that Moses experienced an encounter with God, which opened his eyes to the suffering of his people, and released his own potential for action. The awareness and compulsion to action may indeed be part of divine inspiration, but for God's purposes to be fulfilled, we ourselves must be prepared to take action. The answer to prayer may be quite simply: "What are you going to do about it?"

Perhaps a more appropriate prayer might be for eyes that see, ears that hear and a heart that cares. "Replace my heart of stone with a heart of flesh", or as a poem by Miriam Teichner puts it:

God – let me be aware!
 Stab my soul fiercely with others' pain.
 Let me walk seeing horror and stain.
 Let my hands, groping, find other hands.
 Give me the heart that divines, understands,
 Give me the courage, wounded, to fight,
 Flood me with knowledge, drench me with light.
 God – let me be aware!

(Steven 1988)

Many years ago, I came across a poster publicising a meeting of the Christian Union at Glasgow University. It showed a huge nuclear mushroom cloud with the title "Don't worry: God is in charge". I was so incensed that I climbed up on a railing to pull it down, but I would dearly like to have replaced it with a poster saying "Do worry; God is waiting for you to do something."

A passage by Colin Morris quoted in *Anthology of Hope* seems to illustrate the imperative to do something beyond mere words:

In the late 1950s when Britain was preparing to explode her first hydrogen bomb in the Pacific, the churches yelled bloody murder, passed frenzied resolutions, protesting, deploring, expressing grave concern etc, etc, and delegations of ecclesiastical dignitaries and political pundits waited on the Prime Minister to threaten and plead. But it was a 60-year-old Unitarian who quietly withdrew his life savings, bought a little boat and sailed it into the Test Area as his personal protest. Of course it was idiotic, irresponsible, quixotic of him, but his action commanded a queer sort of respect because he was prepared to lay his life on the line for what he believed.

And we comfortable, well-fed, well-housed soldiers of Jesus, having made our big speeches and rolled the rhetoric around our tongues, went to our beds the night the bomb went off, shaking our heads sadly at the turn of events and hoping that someone would listen next time. They didn't and they won't. For politicians understand this word game, too. Resolutions and deputations don't frighten them. If anything gives them unease it is crazy little men who sail right into the heart of big issues in total disregard for their lives. Such men are dangerous. The rest of us could not be tamer.

Does the answer to prayer then depend solely on our response, and if so, what of our failure and apathy? Are we saying that faith depends on works? What when our human efforts are feeble, lacking in determination, or just plain fail? This philosophy is surely a road to despair, as so often our weak efforts are pitted against forces far more powerful than ourselves, and we rarely see any result for our efforts.

And what about the times when our actions are misguided or inappropriate? Is prayer purely subjective? Are we simply praying to ourselves, directed entirely by our own emotions and feelings, based on our subjective reading of a situation, which may be in direct opposition to another's equally strongly held convictions?

In positing a vulnerable God, are we simply reducing God to a human dimension, contained and confined by the limitations of our own mortality and weakness?

Perhaps part of the key to understanding this dilemma is to look more closely at what is meant by power in this context. We speak of a vulnerable God, able to be wounded and broken, and this brokenness has been exemplified in the lives of the saints ever since. Here is no triumphant God conquering all opposition; rather this is a God who "takes his kingdom by entreaty". We are speaking here of a very different kind of power: the power of nonviolence, or the power of love. This is the kind of power that does not dominate or trample others underfoot; it is not imposed from above, but rather is an inner power, that wins others to itself by the strength and appeal of love.

In his classic book *The Power of Nonviolence*, Richard Gregg explores the whole dynamic of this very different kind of power. Calling nonviolence "moral ju-jitsu", Gregg describes how one confronts aggressors by appealing to their humanity with nonviolence in a way which is totally new and unexpected, so different from the normal response of violence that the opponent is momentarily thrown off balance as in ju-jitsu. This dynamic can be replicated on a wider stage involving the state or an institution. Nonviolence is based on the understanding that a ruler's power rests on the consent of the people. If this consent is withdrawn, then ultimately the ruler's power base is totally eroded. If, when faced with nonviolent resistance, the state uses force to regain control, people previously neutral or uninvolved will be so turned against the state and its methods that they will be won over to the side of the protestors. One of the reasons that I became so attracted to the Gandhian principles of nonviolence is that they seem to epitomise the values of the kind of Christianity I had come to believe in, and to embody in action this different kind of power.

It might be helpful at this stage to examine these principles of nonviolence in more detail. Perhaps most important, and

most often misunderstood, is that nonviolence is essentially confrontational. It is prepared to resist injustice and wrong wherever it occurs, fearlessly and honestly. In so doing, the nonviolent activist is often perceived as creating disorder, rocking the boat and stirring up trouble.

This was particularly so in apartheid South Africa, where campaigners were often accused of stirring up trouble and violence, while what they were really doing was exposing the massive structural violence of a racist regime. Nonviolence exposes the latent violence of society, by lovingly confronting injustice. This passage by the late Leslie Weatherhead captures something of the strong nature of that love:

Love in the New Testament is stern and strong and severe and virile. It is not sloppy and sentimental and weak... Love is all the things St Paul described in 1 Corinthians 13, but it has steel in it as well as tears... Love suffers, entreats and endures, and fools think this is weakness. But those who oppose love take up arms against the whole universe.

(Steven 1988)

Secondly, by always seeking an alternative to violence, nonviolence has to be essentially creative and innovative, drawing on the resources of imagination and lateral thinking, and releasing a potential for originality. This creative thinking is not limited to the individual interaction; it is also seeking to build the new society, already living out the vision of the world as it could be. Gandhi spoke of doing practical work as an aspect of nonviolence, and this points to the very practical, physical, hands-on building of the alternative society – realising the vision in down-to-earth ways. The Kingdom is here and now, within our grasp, ours to build and live. It is literally “living in that life and power that takes away the occasion of all wars”.

In so doing, nonviolence is always seeking out that of God in the other, ever hopeful of finding the best, never demonising or

stereotyping, and always seeing the individual human being behind the mask of uniform or allegiance.

Nonviolence also involves being prepared to accept suffering rather than inflict it on others. We are not speaking here about the glorification of martyrdom, but rather about being realistic about the cost of being different, and the possible, even inevitable consequences, of confronting the powers. In a magnificent passage, Martin Luther King points to the way in which, through the committed acceptance of the costs of nonviolence, ultimately the opponent is won over:

To our most bitter opponents we say: “We shall match your capacity to inflict suffering by our capacity to endure suffering. We shall meet your physical force with soul force. Do to us what you will, and we shall continue to love you... Send your hooded perpetrators of violence into our community at the midnight hour and beat us and leave us half dead, and we shall still love you. But be ye assured that we will wear you down by our capacity to suffer. One day we shall win freedom, but not only for ourselves. We shall so appeal to your heart and conscience that we shall win *you* in the process, and our victory will be a double victory.”

(King 1963)

Finally, and perhaps most exciting of all, nonviolence expects change; indeed it believes that through its actions, change has already begun. This is what makes nonviolence revolutionary and turns the world upside down with a completely different set of values. We will return to this theme when we address the question of resurrection, but in our understanding of prayer, it is vital to understand that this is the power we can plug into: the dynamic, unstoppable power of nonviolent love.

Living the Good News

To many of us brought up in the Christian tradition, the word “Gospel” has become so familiar that it is almost synonymous with the word “book”. Mark’s Gospel, John’s Gospel sound almost like the Book of Mark or the Book of John. But its real meaning of “Good News” should have us on tiptoe with anticipation, tingling with hope and looking out for something really exciting. “Behold I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people” (Luke 2:10, AV).

But what exactly is this good news and what relevance does it have to our lives? I received some insight into this some years ago during a short spell in prison.

I had been asked to participate in a BBC religious broadcast discussing the passage in Luke’s Gospel which is sometimes referred to as Jesus’ manifesto for action:

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, and to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.

(Luke 4:18–19, New RSV)

I was sitting there in my cell trying to prepare material for the broadcast and asking “What would be ‘good news’ for the other women prisoners on my block?” Obviously the immediate short-term answer would be freedom – freedom to go home, to go on the town, to see their families again. But what was the deeper, long-term meaning of good news? I was at a loss to find words that would have any meaning for my fellow inmates.

A little while later I was having a chat with the woman in the cell next door. She was inside for the umpteenth time for being drunk and disorderly. Somewhat naively, I asked if she wouldn’t like to join Alcoholics Anonymous. “Oh no,” she said. “To do that you have to want to give up the drink.” “Don’t you want to?” I asked. “To want

to give up drink,” she said, “you have to respect yourself, and I don’t, and neither does anyone else.” I had no words of reply.

Of course it is obvious, the good news for that woman is that she is of value, that she is of infinite worth in the eyes of God, and that the fullness of her life matters. But words and phrases like “Jesus loves you”, “You are precious in the eyes of God” become meaningless clichés, mere pious words and platitudes. The only way to tell that woman the good news was for me to treat her with absolute respect.

This has an immediate bearing on all our human relationships and on how we treat others. It is this respect that must be at the heart of all our efforts towards racial justice; it is respect that informs our testimony to equality – not just equality under the law and in our social systems, but equality in the eyes of God. It is that profound respect for the life and potential of another human being that makes us active for peace and passionate in opposition to the weapons of death.

It was this ability to recognise the full potential of the most unlikely individuals that characterised Jesus’ life. In Jack Nelson-Pallmeyer’s book *Jesus Against Christianity*, he points out that most of the creeds of the churches focus on the birth and death of Jesus while missing out the most important part – what he actually did. He gave Matthew, the money-grubbing collaborator, the chance to be generous and popular; he saw beauty in the actions of a woman of doubtful reputation; he provided an outlet for the exuberance and enthusiasms of Peter. In fact he quite deliberately courted criticism by openly associating with those very people whom the religious establishment least respected.

However, Jesus’ actions and life went far beyond simply giving affirmation to people. People are not crucified for being kind to others. Jesus’ whole life was lived as an alternative nonviolent window on to God – not the vengeful God of retribution, but a loving, compassionate, merciful God. Nor was the purpose of his life to bring about an apocalyptic end-time of ultimate punishment

for sins. He set an example of how life might be lived right now in the context of a loving, caring community. What Ron Sider describes as “communities of loving defiance”.⁵¹

Because defiance is exactly what such a lifestyle entails. We can view Jesus’ whole ministry as a life lived in deliberate opposition to the domination of his time. It was not enough to show compassion for the poor and dispossessed; the whole system of oppression which left people in poverty and despair had to be challenged. In Jesus’ time the domination system was the Roman Empire, founded and maintained by ruthless conquest, and supported by a collaborationist system of client kings such as the Herod family, and religious officials from High Priest down to local officialdom represented by the scribes. This entire structure placed an intolerable burden of taxation, land dispossession and grinding poverty on the peasants, made worse by religious dogma that blamed their plight on punishment by a vengeful God.

Jesus set out on a deliberate policy of nonviolent resistance and of teaching by demonstration about a loving, merciful God. From preaching sermons so inflammatory that the congregation tried to throw him over a cliff, to deliberately breaking religious rules as publicly as possible, he seems to have gone out of his way to be provocative. He healed the man with the withered hand in front of all his critics instead of doing it quietly round the back of the synagogue; he openly challenged the priestly monopoly on forgiveness; he disappointed the people’s apocalyptic expectation of violent vindication by a God of justice by riding calmly into the seat of power on a humble donkey; and then as a climax he caused a major riot, complete with property damage, right at the very centre of the oppressive power structure. No wonder they had to get rid of him.

It is important to note that during all this time, Jesus was carefully, lovingly building up the alternative community, showing through example and teaching how life in communion with a loving God is possible. This, to me, is what the Last Supper is all

about. Nothing to do with a sacrificial offering to appease an angry God, but everything to do with building, uniting, strengthening the beloved community for the task ahead.

For this, I believe, is what we are called to do. As believers in a God of love and compassion, we are called to resist all that destroys fullness of life. This is the power that leads my friend Art Laffin to witness week by week at the doors of the Pentagon (the “heart of the empire” as he calls it). This is what leads my friend Angie to work alongside Palestinian villagers despite frequent attempts by the Israeli authorities to prevent her. This is what led hundreds of US citizens to break their government’s embargo on Iraq by crowding out the post office with parcels. This is what leads some of us to refuse to pay our taxes towards military purposes. Because the domination system, both political and religious is alive and well in our present day, and we are part of the resistance. At least, I hope we are.

In 2002 at the Big Blockade at Faslane Naval Base, Brian and Jan, warden and deputy warden of Iona Abbey, were among the many who were arrested. They were trying to meet a deadline for the publication of a new worship book for the Abbey, and both agreed to spend their time in the cells thinking and praying about it. This is the affirmation of faith that resulted from their time in the cells:

We believe that God is present
 In the darkness before dawn;
 In the waiting and the uncertainty
 Where fear and courage join hands,
 Conflict and caring link arms,
 And the sun rises over barbed wire.
 We believe in a with-us God
 Who sits down in our midst
 To share our humanity.
 We affirm a faith
 That takes us beyond the safe place:

Into action, into vulnerability
 And into the streets.
 We commit ourselves to work for change
 And put ourselves on the line:
 To bear the responsibility, take risks,
 Live powerfully and face humiliation;
 To stand with those on the edge;
 To choose life
 And be used by the Spirit
 In God's new community of hope.

(Iona 2001)

It is this kind of conviction and commitment that gives us perfect freedom. If our prayer life, however we interpret it, can put us in touch with the great power for good in the universe, then the good news is about liberation. We have full authority to be different, to be difficult, to swim against the tide, and to live life freely and abundantly.

We are Free and Kept Alive by Hope: Thoughts on Resurrection

Friends often ask me how I have managed to keep on campaigning year after year with no apparent signs of success – indeed all too often the contrary, as the world seems to plunge deeper into despair. I usually reply rather flippantly by describing my work as beating my head against a brick wall hoping to find a rubber brick!

At a more serious level, many people have asked whether I could do work for peace without a spiritual or religious basis. I know, and have a huge respect for, many campaigners who would make no claim to any kind of spiritual motivation for their work (although I might challenge their definition of spiritual), but for myself I know that I could not sustain the work without the support and strength of my faith.

This is where I have an interpretation of the meaning of resurrection which I find helpful. To many, a belief in resurrection is concerned with life after death. For myself, I am not prepared to speculate too much on that. I feel that we make so many good and wonderful connections and relationships during our lives on earth, that it would be a waste for some kind of continuance of beauty and love not to exist, but I am quite content to leave that in trust for the future.

Resurrection, to my mind, seems rather to do with overcoming fear – fear of failure, fear of ridicule, fear of death. “Death, where is thy sting?” is a triumphant shout of defiance to the powers of oppression, that they can do their worst in a physical sense, but ultimately cannot crush the Spirit.

There is a wonderful description of the funeral of Victor Jara of Chile. Victor Jara was a well-known radical and political folk-singer and brilliant guitarist. At the time of the overthrow of Allende's government, Victor was one of thousands imprisoned in the huge stadium in Santiago. He was tortured, his fingers were broken, and eventually he was executed. Despite a heavy military clampdown, thousands defied the authorities and came out on the streets to hold his funeral. Overlooked from machine-gun posts on the roof tops and on street corners, the crowd might have been understandably intimidated, until someone shouted out “Victor Jara – *presente!*”; one after another the names of the dead and disappeared were shouted out, and for each one the crowd shouted “*Presente!*” – here with us.

Another of our Iona Community liturgies calls on the great heroes and heroines of the past in the words, “Columba, stand with us!”, “Martin Luther King, stand with us!”, “Rosa Parks, stand with us!”; and all our companions in the struggle – stand with us.

And thus the torch of resistance is passed on to us, their successors. On the wall near the spot where Martin Luther King was assassinated there is a plaque which says, “Don't let the dream die”.

So what about those times of despair, those desperate times when all our endeavours seem to be futile, when all our hopes lie in

ashes and the future seems totally hopeless? It is at this point that holding on to resurrection hope in the midst of disaster becomes a matter of crucial importance.

Jesus' cry of despair from the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" was a cry of deepest anguish that all he had worked for, believed in, hoped for, all the promise of good news, all the dream of justice and a new world, lay in ruins, utterly defeated by the cruel might of the state. Some have interpreted his last words, "It is finished", as a shout of triumph for work completed. Personally I cannot but feel that in that situation he was much more likely to have given a shout of anguished despair.

And yet within a short time, a tiny band of the most unlikely followers emerged from the seeming death of all their hopes and proceeded to turn the world upside down.

It was in December 1982 that 30,000 women had "Embraced the Base" by linking arms around the perimeter of the US air base at Greenham Common, to show their opposition to cruise missiles. The next day, 13 December, many women stayed on to blockade the base. I was one of a group of around 500 blocking the entrance to the so-called Red Gate. There was a huge police presence and some of their handling of us was quite rough, with women being dragged by the hair, having their arms twisted and being kicked in the face. However, the blockade was holding. Suddenly a rumour swept through the crowd, "Here come the riot police." Sure enough, minutes later vans arrived and disgorged hundreds of police equipped with shields and visors. I saw one rolling up his sleeves declaring, "We'll soon clear this lot." Within about five minutes, like a knife through butter, they had broken the blockade and traffic was rolling again to take the workers into the base.

I was sitting at the side of the road in tears, like most of the others, when suddenly, ringing through my head, came the words and the music of Bach's *Magnificat*: "He has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts." And I suddenly knew with a sure conviction that although we had been scattered like chaff on this

occasion, this was not the end of the road; that some day the proud would indeed be scattered and the mighty cast down.

Eventually cruise missiles did leave Greenham Common and a couple of years ago there was a ceremony of taking down the fence and returning the land to the commons.

This might seem to suggest a contradiction to some of our earlier arguments about God not being "beyond", transcendent, able to pull the strings. Personally I see no contradiction, because the workings of God are within the heart and within the context of events. Someone, somewhere, is moved and inspired to take action and the struggle goes on.

In the middle of Wenceslas Square in Prague there is a monument to Jan Palach, the young student who burned himself to death in protest at the Soviet crushing of the rising. At the time it seemed a useless throwing away of a young life; nothing changed, the Czech uprising was crushed by the Soviet tanks and the world looked on. Now we speak of the later "Velvet Revolution" which liberated Czechoslovakia as a model of nonviolent resistance. When I looked at that monument in Wenceslas Square I began to understand its success. A photograph of Jan Pallach is surrounded by a parapet two or three feet high. At first it looks like stone, but when you bend down to touch it, you realise that it is not stone but the hardened wax of countless hundreds of candles burned over the years.

The important part is the doing, the stepping out in faith. Doing our utmost, to the very limit of our being, and then being free to let go of the result; not to be bound by success, but to hold on to the confidence that the outcome will be taken up by others and the flame continue to burn. Back again to that word "steadfast": we ourselves being steadfast, trusting that others will be steadfast in their turn.

Perhaps a reminder here about the meaning of heroics is in order. We have all looked at the deeds of others and said, "I could never do that". That is not the point. Heroism is not necessarily about great dramatic deeds of daring. We are not called to imitate

each other's actions nor to feel disempowered by our failure to be what we are not. We are called to be faithful, to follow our own inner leadings, in our own time, using the particular and special gifts that are unique to each one of us.

But the importance remains in the doing. It involves taking risks, daring to be different from the crowd, keeping in touch constantly with our inner Light, knowing that countless others are doing the same, all making a difference.

Undoubtedly one of the lowest moments of my life was when HMS *Vanguard*, first of Britain's Trident submarines, arrived on the Clyde. Although we had known it was coming for years and had been campaigning vigorously and creatively for just as many years, I don't think anything could have prepared us psychologically for the shock of its reality. Just seeing the huge grey-black bulk being manoeuvred into position at the end of the loch, and realising the full significance of its deadly potential for total annihilation of all that we valued and held dear, was a desperate, heart-stopping moment.

As I have already told, we all launched our little boats as a protest against its progress up the loch. My canoe had been stopped by a boat load of marines, who having informed me that they were saving my life, held firmly on to my craft. I could only sit there in tears watching the inexorable progress of *Vanguard* as it thrust its way up the Gareloch. I had never felt so helpless and powerless in my life. When we came on shore, people gathered round and began singing "We shall overcome". I simply couldn't join them.

Unexpected as it may seem, this for me is the point of resurrection. The point where we have done all we can to the best of our ability, however feeble or seemingly useless, and then we have to hand it over, to let go. Let go of the outcome of one's actions in trust and confidence that they are not in vain, that somewhere in the secret workings of God, a change is taking place.

Because the evidence of history is that change *does* happen – indeed, that is what history is.

Ten Tips for Practical Praying

- ∞ Relax about it and don't worry. Throw away guilt if you find prayer difficult.
- ∞ Think creatively and widely about what prayer might be and find a way that suits you. It could be weeding the garden, drawing mandalas, walking the dog, painting, playing the violin. Choose something that is not technically too difficult, to free up the mind and the imagination.
- ∞ Make a regular time for your prayer activity. Not necessarily daily, although that is helpful, but try to make it regular like brushing your teeth.
- ∞ Make a place for it. No need to mortify the flesh. Find a comfortable corner, a place you like and can return to in imagination when you are not there, and make it your own private spot.
- ∞ Decide whether you want to be part of a group, but make sure the group is compatible – some can lay on an agenda of their own.
- ∞ Tell people that you need space and see that they respect it.
- ∞ Try exploring other groups' ways of praying and go on a retreat or organise your own prayer weekend; e.g. Ignatian, Iona, Key House, Woodbrooke.
- ∞ Follow a study course; e.g. *Hearts and Minds Prepared*, or *Gifts and Discoveries*.
- ∞ Consider prayer an adventure and be prepared to be surprised. Write down your results and any tasks that come up.
- ∞ If you find yourself challenged, find a support group and don't go it alone.

Above all enjoy yourself