

‘Physician, Heal Thyself’

2. When Illness Strikes

BY THE VERY REV'D JOHN A. R. METHUEN
DEAN OF RIPON

Whenever I am asked by Her Majesty's Custom and Excise Officers, 'Have you anything to declare?' I automatically feel threatened, insecure and guilty, even if I'm none of these things. It always puts me in mind of some gift I have secreted while on holiday, nestling snugly in the depths of my suitcase, just waiting to be dragged out into the light of day and publicly exposed in the crowded airport, under the accusing finger of officialdom. This feeling is not altogether different from my sensations at this moment, so perhaps I had better own up to something I have never written about publicly before today.

Some fifteen years ago I was in the closing stages of organizing a community festival in Reading with carnivals, street parties, concerts, dances, talent shows and all the other attractions of a three week extravaganza. No doubt due to the stress and pressure of all of this, I found myself one day suspended like Absalom betwixt the heavens and the earth (half-way up the stairs to be precise), when my back gave out and I was confined to a surgical bed with a number of dubious relaxation tablets for most of the period of the festival. Now there are some complaints that friends and family find it very difficult to take seriously: haemorrhoids for one and backs for another, and indeed, apart from painful twinges and irritating inconveniences, my compulsory rest-cure was not very difficult to deal with. However, I recall being visited by the Churchwarden's wife, who was of Caribbean extraction (as indeed was he, although he was an Anglican and she a Pentecostalist). Finding me thus helpless, she went to the foot of the bed and proceeded to harangue me about the state of my soul and that my being laid low was God's way of telling me to repent of my sins and really to let the Lord Jesus into my life. After some considerable time, during which she continued in a similar vein, the telephone mercifully rang and I was just able to stick out my arm to locate the handset and I requested my caller to 'phone back in five minutes, since I was occupied. The Churchwarden's wife, seeing that her time was short, then opened her handbag and proceeded to perform what she had really come to do. It was in vain that I protested that I had already been fortified with the rites of Holy Church, including the Laying on of Hands, Anointing, Confession and Holy Communion. She advanced upon me with intent and poured the entire contents of a bottle of Crosse & Blackwell olive oil all over my face, hair, neck and pillow. This was an

experience which I am not likely ever to forget. It would perhaps be more difficult to ascertain the exact relationship between that experience and my convalescence. I did, as you can perceive, recover, either because of it or in spite of it, but I would be hard put to perceive the Hand of God in the whole process in any particular way and certainly in any activity which would justify the adjective 'miraculous'.

Not all such experiences however are so easily dealt with and have such an amusing outcome. Despite the incident with the back, and several minor relapses over the years when the going has got rough, it is extremely unusual for me to be indisposed. I have always supposed that these things were God's way of telling me to slow down for a bit, and because I'm the sort of person I am, I have listened, at least for a few hours. Even a bathing accident in the Black Sea came and went in a matter of seconds, although I can recall going through that curious feeling of remoteness which people sometimes report when they have undergone life-threatening experiences. I was swimming out of the bay and round the headland and was caught in very much rougher seas, which took me and threw me against the cliff and, when I attempted to scramble out of the water, dragged me back across a rough and rocky shelf just below the surface, before picking me up and pounding me against the cliff once more. This was repeated three or four times and I remember it slowly coming into my mind that this was a situation that could not be allowed to continue indefinitely. On this occasion, it occurred to me that God was not so much telling me to slow down as to hurry up, and somehow or other I scaled the cliff, which I afterwards perceived to have been absolutely vertical with no apparent toe-holds, but presumably I had climbed realizing that I had no alternative. I certainly could not have done it in cold blood, and indeed those few seconds of my life did produce one or two bizarre elements in my personal appearance, wandering down the cliff path covered in blood and with half the Black Sea in my lungs and the other half in my stomach!

I mention these anecdotes because it seems to me that they contain the two elements which characterise my way of approaching the two really important occasions in my medical history when I faced terminal illnesses which could only be cured by life-threatening operations. Those characteristics are Humour and Detachment.

I hope that you will forgive a few more personal details but they are necessary for an understanding of the situations in which I found myself.

I was born in 1947 and very early in my life was diagnosed as having a mild form of haemophilia (a four per cent clotting factor, I understand, and if that sounds severe then it needs to be remembered that full haemophilia means nought per cent clotting factor). This was of sufficient significance that, during my childhood, I was not allowed to play contact sports (which did not

grieve me overmuch) and I sustained one or two injuries that in other people would be trivial, but in my own case were a bit more serious and put me in hospital. By and large, however, it did not affect me until the early 1980s when I developed impacted wisdom teeth and had to have them removed. This was done under the special conditions required for haemophilia with transfusions of clotting factor 8 in which I was almost totally deficient, and the operation was successfully carried out. It afterwards transpired, as most people know, that the early 80s was a high risk period for contaminated blood products, before screening came in, and, unbeknown to anybody, I was given infected blood and I contracted hepatitis C which, at the time, had not even been properly identified medically. The disease takes ten years to manifest itself, which it did finally in 1991 with its two symptoms, jaundice and cirrhosis of the liver. Consequently in 1992 I faced a liver transplant. In respect of jaundice, this took some time to become obvious because earlier in the year I had taken a sabbatical in Egypt and had returned a deeply crisp brown colour. My friends commented on the durability of my sun tan and it was not until six months later, almost Christmas, that my wife stumbled on the truth when she observed, 'that's not a tan, that's jaundice'. I contented myself with remarking, 'Well that shows how often you look into my eyes!' In respect of cirrhosis, I have to say that the uppermost thought at the time was my concern about my long-term relationship with alcohol. I was put on a strict alcohol-free diet for about a year to the extent that when I sneaked a glass of St Emilion 84 on Easter Day, I found that I did not even like the taste. My prospects suddenly assumed catastrophic proportions! More seriously, it began to affect my line of business; specialists looked doubtful about my celebrating the Eucharist and I was certainly forbidden to do the ablutions afterwards. Anyway, a liver transplant is about as major a piece of invasive surgery as it is possible to undergo in view of the size of the liver (about that of a rugby ball!), in comparison with that of the heart (a fist).

In the event, the whole process was remarkably successful and, following the transplant itself, the period of recovery was comparatively rapid, leaving a three foot scar shaped like the Mercedes Benz logo. I was able to leave hospital in less than a fortnight, and the recovery period and convalescence afterwards were characterized by an almost daily improvement, although, by the way, my system obviously felt the loss of the haemophilia and so on the rebound developed diabetes, albeit a mild strain.

Pressures there undoubtedly had been but of a rather unusual kind. At first I was in hospital near to my Manchester parish and I was the most over-visited patient in the whole city – up to thirty people a day would come to see me. This was immensely flattering but led to two consequences. Firstly I became thoroughly exhausted, and I must say somewhat bored, at telling and re-telling my

story day after day, week after week. I began to wonder for whose benefit all of this was being done. Secondly I felt under pressure to demonstrate my strong faith in order to keep up appearances, and I was by and large not able to share my anxieties. Having said that, the anxieties were fewer than one might imagine, and the process became fairly smooth. I was presented with three options which, of course, I shared with my wife: to proceed with the transplant immediately, while I was still healthy, to wait until my liver was about to collapse altogether, by which time my quality of life would have degenerated considerably, or, to carry on regardless and do nothing. Since the latter two options would lead respectively to probable and to certain death, there was frankly not much of a choice and the inevitability of a course of action sharpens the mind wonderfully. Death might be God's last chance to tell me to slow down, but, having said that, it was extremely important that this was something that I was doing with my family and the doctors and nurses, and everybody involved. This was not something that was being done *to* me, and I was conscious of the need to take control. That I interpret as being partly my own nature and partly the training of my profession. It is alleged that clergy, doctors and teachers make the worst patients because they can't bear to lose control. But it was also a conscious decision on my part to adopt what I considered to be a mature and therapeutic attitude to the whole process.

This has to be set in the context of the fact that, one by one, one's normal day by day props were taken away. I was moved to Birmingham which was seventy miles away from where I lived, and this almost completely cut out the load of visitors, which, although exhausting, had provided me with considerable mental stimulation. It also cut down the number of times I could see my family. Loneliness and boredom set in and an inability to do work or even serious study. I lost the status accorded to my priesthood and to my position as a not unknown local figure, and I lost, as all the other patients did as well, the sense of dignity and privacy and respect that usually help to keep one going. Furthermore people on the ward became aware of who I was and so, despite having lost all the 'perks' of the job, I was still expected to minister to them and their needs, fears, anxieties and personal troubles. There were few indeed to minister to mine.

There were certain things that I would not like to have to do again. When I was steeling myself in the final days before the operation, I was carrying about the bleep that would summon me when a suitable liver had become available. I was assailed by a very earnest group of Pentecostal Christians who told me most passionately that for me to have the operation would be an act of apostasy and lack of faith, and that all I needed to do was to pray for a miracle and the problem would disappear. But, of course, the trouble with miracles is that, by definition, they do not happen very often and certainly cannot be

predicted. Even God must not break the rules too habitually. Being under the general Hand of God is one thing, expecting to be Teacher's Pet is quite another. Likewise I would not particularly like to sit down and write my wife the letter I composed on the eve of the operation, having been summoned to the hospital by the bleep, in the knowledge that, were she ever to read it, I would be dead. I didn't believe for one moment that I was going to die – I'm too arrogant to contemplate my own extinction – but nonetheless there was somewhat of a sensation of standing on the brink of the abyss and taking a hurried look over the edge. However, for the most part, I did not have to keep up appearances because I had got it all worked out in my mind in my own rather simple manner; I would say my prayers, I would receive the Sacraments, I would consciously relax, and the rest would have to be left to God. While I was very conscious that this was something I was deliberately doing myself, I was also conscious that I did not have to do it alone and that, in addition to the support of my family and friends and the prayers of countless others, I was stepping out and putting my hand into the hand of God. But those twin characteristics of Humour and Detachment kept on re-asserting themselves during the whole process and the humour, which I shared with my family, was sometimes very black indeed and quite shocked the nurses, particularly when liver and bacon was served on the ward two days after I had had the transplant and I was overheard to make remarks about the evidence for economies in the National Health Service! Anyway, that was that.

Three years later, in 1995, I contracted severe abdominal pains which I associated with the previous operation and was taken, in rather a hurry, back to Birmingham, where no traces could be found of anything the matter, except that there was a blockage, and so, for the second time, I was taken down to the theatre, where it was discovered that I had a young but malignant lymphoma, which was excised. My Mercedes Benz logo was transformed into the symbol for the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament. That was an easy matter but I then had to endure twelve, extended to twenty, weeks of chemotherapy, and that was a very different experience from anything I had undergone hitherto. It is commonly said that the cure is worse than the disease; certainly the convalescence is worse than the cure and it was a process of simply feeling worse and worse. This was much more difficult to cope with, and, for the first time, I began to ask questions of God. What had he in mind, because it must be pretty fantastic if I was going to be rescued a second time? The illness had, furthermore, been diagnosed immediately following my appointment to a senior position in the church as Dean of Ripon, and I felt that I was being played around with, like a cat with a mouse. However, it has to be said, that once again I had no intention of dying, even though I afterwards

discovered that there were grave doubts about that, even amongst my closest family. From my perspective, if I happened to glance in the mirror, I could see that I had taken off some weight, for which I was very grateful, and I found myself staring at a Cassius-like figure with a suitably lean and hungry look. I was spared the spectre from Belsen that everyone else could see. However, the cancer was caught early and I pulled through and am now back to normal, more or less. Humour and detachment were certainly more difficult that time and there were periods of intense gloom and depression, not I think clinical and certainly not absolutely desperate, but serious questions were certainly raised.

One of the most curious aspects of all this is the sense of becoming an icon, a surrogate or even a vicarious sacrifice. Some people lived out their own experiences, anxieties and journeys of faith or doubt through me. Some other people seemed to expect my faith to be challenged, undermined, or indeed strengthened. Frankly, none of these things have happened and one or two people have felt a bit cheated as a result. I am sorry about that. However, many others feel more confident in sharing their fears and questions and anger at their own situations with me, not because I have come out of mine with a smiling face and with the sound of the trumpet, but because 'you've been there before me'.

Perhaps, in conclusion, there are two particular lessons here. *Sub specie aeternitatis*, appearances can be deceiving and things are not always what they seem. Firstly, on the one hand one is brought up to face the reality of one's own insignificance and that in the rich tapestry of the history of the universe, one's own contribution is likely to be of little, if any, consequence; on the other hand one needs the knowledge that one is cared for, wanted, needed, loved, guided and generally speaking, important, not only to one's nearest and dearest, but also to countless others whom one hardly knows and also, ultimately, to God. Secondly, that fear is pointless. This was something that I was doing, it was not being done to me. I was never really afraid of dying. I was sometimes curious about death, and I was occasionally disappointed to face the possibility that my life's aspirations and intentions might not come to pass, but I did not think there was anything to be afraid of. On the contrary, I seem to be by nature optimistic and 'Hope springs eternal in the human breast'. Pessimists tend to say that this renders the optimist constantly in a state of disappointment, but all I can say is that this is not the case for me, it just means that the solution or the outcome that one expected is, perhaps, not always fulfilled in a particular way. Sometimes things are more complicated, sometimes one's expectations are fulfilled in a roundabout way, sometimes one has the wrong expectations and a totally surprising result comes, but that does not destroy hope. Many hopes have already been fulfilled. I was very pleased that my parents lived to see

me restored to health after the transplant, I was very pleased that the surgeons caught the cancer early, I never regarded death as a real possibility, and I am delighted that I can lead a normal life. But I also realize that I have not been given a blank cheque. The medical profession never talks about 'cure' in this context but only 'remission'. Hope is not the suppression of fear and anxiety, it is much more the ability to live with questions and uncertainties and not minding.

Long-term aspirations and goals are more difficult to hold on to. I certainly have great plans for my life and my ministry, but I have received, because of my two bouts of serious illness in particular, severe blows to my self-esteem and my self-confidence, so that I am not really quite so sure where my life is going. This is quite hard for one who has a strong sense of vocation to accommodate. There is the inevitable feeling that every twinge or ache is not just those minor blips which affect everyone, but are symptoms of grave and potentially terminal illness, but, with regular checks and a systematic programme of medication, these fears are almost certainly irrational. Nevertheless, the theological concept of provisionality comes very strongly to the fore when one is not at all certain of the fulfilment of one's visions and purposes. I am not one to sit and mope and get depressed, or give up, or even worry too much most of the time, partly because, very often, these conditions seem to contribute towards one's general sense of dis-ease. Conversely, their absence contributes towards one's general sense of well being. The close inter-relationship of mind and matter is something that even now, after a century of psycho-analysis, we know very little about. Confidence, determination and serenity, however, have certainly had profound effects on my physical condition. Nevertheless, one cannot be bright and breezy all the time, living each day as it if were the last, and facing uncertainty with absolute confidence. One is assailed by doubts. For the most part living with questions and uncertainties and not minding will do as one way of coping; not caring about tomorrow is another; being provisionally confident is yet another. There are still dark moments. In the long-term this bitter-sweet cocktail may prove to be the way forward.

Incidentally I can now have a drink again. Cheers!

Earth and Heaven Bridging the Gap

BY THE REVD DR D. S. RUSSELL,
BRISTOL

The Old Testament writers, in common with other writers in the ancient world, are profoundly aware of 'another world' surrounding them. On one celebrated occasion Jacob, in a dream, saw a ladder 'set up on the earth and the top of it reached to heaven and behold the angels of God ascending and descending on it' (Gen 28:12). Sometimes the scene was quite dramatic, as on the occasion when Elisha's servant's eyes were opened 'and he saw, and behold the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire round about Elisha' (2 Kgs 6:17). That 'other world' where God dwelt with all his holy angels, for the most part unseen, was ever present, ready to be revealed to those with eyes to see. The gulf between them was still great, but joining the two in one was a bridge over which there passed a continuous two-way traffic. By dreams and visions the ancient prophets and seers could cross over, as it were, and see for themselves divine mysteries hidden from the eyes of other men: mingling there with the hosts of heaven they might even become as angels themselves (cf. Dan 12:3). In the opposite direction came angels and archangels, sent by God from heaven to earth as his divine messengers (cf. Dan 10); mingling there with mortals they might even become as men themselves (cf. Gen 19:1ff; Heb 13:2).

The language used to describe this intermingling of earth with heaven was the impressive and colourful language of mythology, with its graphic imagery and telling symbolism, giving powerful expression to this world's encounter with that of the divine. To express such truths and to disclose such 'mysteries', the language of science, of philosophy, of logic, of metaphysics, or even of theology is quite inadequate. The task requires, if not mythology itself, then at least that symbolism in which it is expressed – a language which is concerned not so much with definition as with discovery. It describes, as no other language can do, the bridge between 'the seen' and 'the unseen', the historical and the transcendent, the temporal and the eternal that links earth and heaven as one.

This picture of the mingling of earth with heaven, to be found in the Old Testament and in the ancient world generally, is to be found also in the New Testament. With the coming of Jesus and the birth of the Christian church, whilst much of the symbolism remained, the old mythology of dream gave way to a new reality of faith. The ladder set up between heaven and earth was no longer constructed from the insubstantial stuff that dreams