

Growing into holiness

If I will only walk the road and keep moving in response to the God who loves me then He will show me, and grow me into holiness even amid the toing and froing, hither and yon.

‘Jesus never claimed to be the answer – He said He was the way. The Christian Gospel is always moving, going deeper, wading in – ankle deep, knee deep, waist deep, and then over your head, as Ezekiel has it’ **writes Martin Cavender**

*Holy, holy, holy! Lord God Almighty,
Early in the morning our song shall rise to thee,
Holy, holy, holy! Merciful and mighty,
God in three persons, blessed Trinity!*



I daren't tell my family I'm writing a piece about holiness because they would just fall about, laughing. They love me amazingly, but they would be the first to say that the way I lead my life hardly aligns with the popular definition of 'holy'. Holiness, they would say, isn't about dashing about being frenetic. It's about stillness and peace, the understanding of *stabilitas* and a life of grace and order, set apart for God. They are quite right, and I yearn for that. It's perfectly well within my grasp to attain I suppose.

When I was at school, singing the words of that wonderful hymn, I was a long way from grasping its meaning. The more I travel the road of this Christian journey, the more I realise that there is always more to it than I can presently see or understand. It's Aslan's 'deeper magic' in Narnia. It's no good just finding the right track and sitting on it. It's no good just trotting out proof texts from the Bible, or proclaiming that 'Jesus is the answer'. Jesus never claimed to be the answer – He said He was the way. The Christian Gospel is always moving, going deeper, wading in – ankle deep, knee deep, waist deep and then over your head, as Ezekiel has it. If I will only walk the road and keep moving in

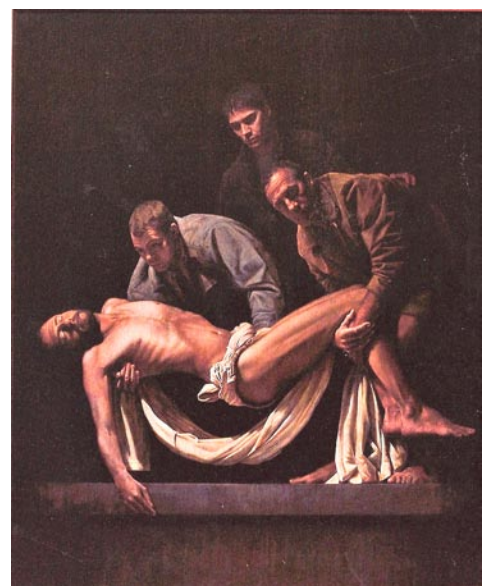
response to the God who loves me then He will show me, and grow me into holiness even amid the toing and froing, hither and yon.

‘Be holy, because I am holy’, says the Lord of Hosts to the children of Israel, and I hear that. But how? Personally, I’m not sure holiness always looks like the normal caricature, however delightful that may seem. Maybe I’m fooling myself – but let what follows be snapshots of part of my personal odyssey, much of it concerned with poetry and the arts.

One of the best books I know on Christian leadership is Henri Nouwen’s *In the Name of Jesus*. I keep returning to it and to that indispensable work on the Holy Spirit by Bishop John V Taylor, *A Matter of Life and Death*. Even Nouwen’s three chapter headings get me facing again in the right direction – ‘From relevance to prayer’, ‘From popularity to ministry’ and ‘From leading to being led’. I have no doubt, as these suggest, that at the heart of growing into holiness is the little matter of humility. John the Baptist knew this and we too are called to ‘prepare the way’. In the words of Allen Bond, ‘The bigger I grow in God, the smaller I become’. Jesus says it beautifully, taking up the poetic resonances of Isaiah: ‘Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart and you will find rest for your souls’. The great Church figures throughout History have always been the humble ones, from St Francis of Assisi to John Wesley and John Wimber, St Polycarp to Julian of Norwich, John Stott to Corrie ten Boom and Jackie Pullinger; that elderly praying lady in the congregation, and the man who prayer-walks the village and on and on. A great cloud of witnesses.

Holiness is the product of grace, and God gives grace only to the humble. Humility is the opposite of hypocrisy. Jesus did not condemn sinners; He condemned hypocrites. I recognise the Pharisaical hypocrisy in me when I am two-faced, pretending to a righteousness I fail to live. Humility pretends to nothing, but simply lives who it is. ‘What you see is what you get’ is one of those in-your-face phrases which comes and goes – but at its best it means just that – ‘I am who I am, without airs and graces, and I would be very glad to know you and serve you’. It is a humble phrase. In my desire to know God and grow into holiness I must understand that He resists the proud, but His grace is drawn to the humble. Humility brings grace to my need, and grace alone can change my heart. The writer Francis Frangipane puts it well, ‘Humility is the substructure of transformation. It is the essence of all virtues’.ⁱ

Learning some of that was part of the rollercoaster for a man like Nicodemus. In John Granville Gregory’s paintingⁱⁱ the three men attending the burial of Jesus, from left to right, are Joseph of Arimathea, John the apostle and Nicodemus. Joseph and John are looking to their work – but Nicodemus is looking at the viewer, looking at me. I think his question is not so much ‘why?’ as ‘what do you make of all this?’ The Pharisee, the Levitical scholar who knew he was made unclean by handling a dead body, was now the man who had brought 75 lbs of myrrh and aloes with which to anoint the body of Jesus. He suddenly didn’t care any more about all his learning and authority. In humility he was learning afresh and from the start about who God really is, coming to that ‘reckless, adventurous life commitment’ that Eugene Peterson talks about. Nicodemus was on Isaiah’s highway of holiness .



The same is true for John and Peter running to the tomb two days later, in Eugene Burnand’s wonderful paintingⁱⁱⁱ. Their faces are filled with apprehension, panic, possibilities, John’s hands clasped in anguish and overwhelming emotion. Someone attending a recent church weekend

thought Peter was counting on his fingers, trying to work out the timing of the days and what was happening, as he ran. I think that's a pretty good description of the way I'm operating, too.

I know that holiness is not some outworking of a Victorian concept, an adjunct to the 'gentle Jesus, meek and mild' of my childhood. It's often a feisty, complex, rollercoaster experience, as it was for the disciples as they tried to figure out what was happening with this unexpected Jesus, this man who demanded of them 'And you, who do you say that I am?'

The closer we come to Jesus the greater is the vulnerability demanded of us. Truly there is a massive creative force at work – if only we will let it – changing us more and more into His likeness. Bernini's astonishing statue 'The Ecstasy of St Theresa' demonstrates this brilliantly, right on the edge of rapture. As Simon Schama said in the recent BBC TV series 'Power of Art', the statue 'hovers on the moving borderline between sacred mystery and indecency'. A friend of ours, who has been living the celibate life to which she is called, spoke movingly a couple of days ago about the way in which getting closer to God meant becoming more aware of temptation, not less; more alive and human, and therefore more vulnerable in one's complete humanity. Sensuality and prayer are very close. In the words of St Irenaeus in the 3rd century, 'The vision of God is a human being fully alive'; or Dietrich Bonhoeffer in the 20th, 'Christianity is not about religion; it is about making humanity, and making it as God intended it to be'.



'St Theresa in Ecstasy' is part of a sculpture complex completed in 1652 by Giovanni Lorenzo Bernini for the Cornaro Chapel of Santa Maria della Vittoria, Rome.

Few forms demonstrate this journey into holiness better for me than music. There are passages in Rachmaninov's piano concertos, in Mozart and Beethoven, in Oscar Peterson's piano and even in *The Black Bear* played by the pipes and drums of the Black Watch which render me speechless and move me to tears, and I don't know why. It can be complicated if I'm driving at the time.

The music doesn't have to be what is called 'sacred music'. As the composer James MacMillan says in his recent fine lecture on Radio 4, 'The Divine Spark of Music', 'In the case of music there seems to be a veritable umbilical link with the sacred. Through the centuries, musicians have proved themselves to be midwives of faith, bringing their gifts to the historic challenge of inspiring the faithful in worship'. He quotes the Scottish Jesuit, John McDade, 'Music may be the closest human analogue to the mystery of the direct and effective communication of grace'.^{iv}

The journey continues. Despite all the alarms and excursions of my life, I know that I'm travelling, and I know who is going with me. I discern more and more clearly the shape and size of knowing God and knowing those who are in Christ and have Jesus in them, and I revel in the unexpectedness of what I'm finding. I'm on the way, and I thank God for that. And I haven't even mentioned poetry.

Martin Cavender left the law in 1992 to join the Archbishops' initiative in evangelism, 'Springboard' and now directs ReSource. Martin is married to Cesca and they work together in ministry from their home in Axbridge, Somerset. This article first appeared in ReSource magazine. For more articles click [here](#).

ⁱⁱ *In the Presence of God*, p.12 (New Wine Press, 1994)

ⁱⁱⁱ 'Why' (after Caravaggio's 'Entombment'), John Granville Gregory, dated 2000 – in St David's Cathedral, Pembrokeshire.

ⁱⁱⁱ 'Peter and John running to the tomb', Eugene Burnand (1850–1921) – in the Musee d'Orsay, Paris.

^{iv} *The Divine Spark of Music* by James MacMillan for the Sandford St Martin 30th Anniversary Lecture, 1 October 2008; Sandford St Martin Trust, 0207 898 1796.