

## Stumbling, Swearing, Trudging: exploring theology in *Messiahs Don't Fly*

(A talk given to the St Albans and Oxford Ministry Course at a Theology of Work weekend, 1999)

My primary aim in writing *Messiahs Don't Fly* was to tell a story that interested me, but my own grappings with ideas about faith, work and vocation are threaded through it. As I look back over the process of writing it, I can pick out theological themes related to fall, incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection, and these are what I'd like to share with you.

### **Fall**

As Jerome K Jerome nearly said, 'I like sin, it fascinates me. I could sit and watch it for hours.' One of my interests in writing novels is to observe sin. How it threads its tentacles through the world, distorting even our attempts to do good. Michael's stupidity in getting involved with Alison arises out of his gift of friendship. He doesn't like to let anyone down. Arrogantly, naively, he assumes he can manage the situation.

In my earliest drafts of *Messiahs Don't Fly*, I added hymn verses at the start of chapters to offer a kind of theological reflection on the action, and the hymn that began my opening chapter acknowledged that even our best acts are in need of God's redemption:

And all the gifts we bring,  
And all the vows we make,  
And all the acts of love  
We plan for thy dear sake,  
Into thy pardoning thought,  
O God of mercy, take.                    *H. Twells Hymns Ancient & Modern 229*

I wanted to study the consequences of sin, how it reaches out its tendrils far beyond an individual act, the way that damaged relationships leave long-term scars. The verses I used as the crises of the second part of the novel began to build were:

We have not known you: to the skies our monuments of folly soar,  
and all our self-wrought miseries have made us trust ourselves the more.  
We have not loved you: far and wide the wreckage of our hatred spreads,  
and evils wrought by human pride recoil on unrepentant heads.  
*Donald Wynn Hughes HAAMNS 351*

Or, as Jenny visits her mother,  
How can your pardon reach and bless  
the unforgiving heart  
that broods on wrongs,  
and will not let  
old bitterness depart?                    *Rosamond Herklots HAAMNS 362*

There are sins that are entered into with deliberate evil intention, sins that result from sudden rages or passions, crimes influenced by alcohol or drugs, but at least they show up for what they are. More dangerous are the sins that masquerade as good. The ones that lure us into complicity little by little, until we are unable to look at ourselves objectively, or break free, the ones that give us the words with which to justify ourselves: surely this is of God? A writer has to ask the question: what motivates someone to act as they do? How would I have to think in order to break up someone else's marriage, expose someone to the newspapers, indulge in some behind the scenes

manipulation to get my schemes through? I've found it frighteningly easy to come up with the spurious justifications that might allow me to think, this must be of God. The force of Eve's temptation is that it seems such a good thing to do. Eat, know good and evil. (And is that such a bad thing to know, if we are to be mature human beings?)

One ministry course student said of *Messiahs Don't Fly*, 'I wouldn't want people to think that sort of thing happened on *our* course.' Well, no, I wouldn't want to give the impression that all ministerial training is rife with scandal, but actually there's only one main scandal, Nan and Ridgefield's lapse, hastily regularised. It's that that leads to Alison's errors and stops Michael confiding his problems. I wasn't wanting to be negative about ministry training, but to show the struggle to deal with temptation, sin and its consequences with moral integrity, and to grow in the process. And I would want to think *that* went on our course. Do we want clergy or lay leaders, who have no idea what it is to face temptation? Who have never been tested?

We might wish that they always resisted temptation, especially the one that really matters in the church, sexual temptation, but few of us are completely perfect. A high priest, says the writer to the Hebrews, 'can deal gently with the ignorant and wayward, since he himself is beset with weakness. Because of this he is bound to offer sacrifice for his own sins as well as for those of the people.' (Heb 5:2-3) Knowledge of sin and failure, and of how God moves us on from that, may be a key thing we bring to ministry. As this woman ordinand quoted by Francis Dewar says:

I do not have gifts in music, or in working with young people and children; I do not have great oratory powers; I am not good at administrative work; I am not quick thinking or very organized in my thoughts of daily life. But I know what it is to laugh and to cry; to love and to hate; to suffer pain and disappointment, grief and barren despair. I know what it is to sin and to know God's forgiveness; to feel bitter regret, and then peace and hope in him. I know what it is like to be an atheist and a believer, and the struggle involved in both. This is all I can offer, along with sincerity of nature and a personality which does nothing half-heartedly and never gives up.

## **Incarnation**

The cover of *Messiahs Don't Fly* bears a picture called 'Incarnation', and incarnational theology was, for me, one thread that ran through it. Craig Russell shows the crucified figure hanging over our world, the Word made flesh, dwelling among us, sharing our ordinary human existence, ending up pierced to death by our human creations, our steeples. John Hapgood once wrote that Christians have to stand 'where heaven and earth meet and interact and bruise one another', and the phrase has come back to me as I have meditated on the imagery of that picture: birth and death, sexuality, imprisonment, sin, and the images of heaven, of God, mingling with them. The bird - dove? - flying free, the open door offering the hope of resurrection. It speaks to me of the struggle to be Christian amid all the variety of human life, the mess of God incarnate, down on earth.

In the last few weeks I've been remembering the passion I had as a child and as a teenager to bring Christ down to earth. I remember asking a Sunday school teacher how it was possible to be Christian in the act of doing your teeth, because I really wanted to know. I wanted passionately to make Jesus accessible, freed from the archaic language and imagery of the Book of Common Prayer. I remember making a solemn vow that I would not rest until it had been translated into modern English, and oh, the relief when Series A came out, and then the ASB, and I was relieved of my self-imposed vocation!

I started remembering this when I happened across an old exercise book containing my angst-ridden teenage poetry, much of it religious. Definitely not for public consumption, but I was struck by the

frequent incarnational themes. One took a phrase from *Bleak House*, (An A level set book in 1973) where Jo, the crossing sweeper, looks up at the cross on St Paul's Cathedral: 'From the boy's face, one might suppose that sacred emblem to be, in his eyes, the crowning confusion of the great confused city;' writes Dickens, 'so golden, so high up, so far out of his reach.' And I had contrasted that high-up cross with a roughly dressed Christ mingling with humanity on the dirty streets. That was where God, where the cross, was to be discovered, not somewhere 'up there'. It was strange to realise that twenty five years later, I'd used the same imagery in a poem I wrote about my novel:

Messiahs don't fly  
White pinioned wings wide soaring, cleaving air.  
Above, cloud high, beyond the human gaze,  
A passion unobserved must fail to save.  
No soaring glide to heaven theirs.  
But wounded feet  
Bare bloody staggering on flint-sharp stone,  
Bruised knees with gasping heart  
and thorn-pierced hands,  
Shall scale the climb.

That is far from a complete theology. It may even have a touch of heresy in it somewhere. But that is what drives me. I guess that while we truly assent to the creeds that define Christian faith, it is likely to be one particular aspect that really drives us, and through which God is most real to us. For me it is this: that the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. Inhabited a world of touch, sound, taste, smell, sight. That's why, as a writer, I want to describe physical events, or use language much stronger than would ever pass my lips, to think of the many manifestations of sex - passionate or exploitative, healing, gentle, fearful or brutal.

The image of being on the ground recurs - Michael crash-lands on the first page, on the last he is choosing to leap down, free. Jenny is assaulted and thrown to the ground, unable to cry or ask for help. There's always God, she broods after the assault, when she realises how alone she is, but what use is a spirit who shares the pain without warm solid arms to hold you, or real hands to wipe your face? When in the end she does collapse in tears to the floor, it is Nan's touch that holds her there, and wipes away her tears.

I led a study group at my local church on faith and work, where one of the questions was: 'Where do I find it easy to see God present?' One of the group spoke of glimpsing God, the uncreated Creator (she'd been reading a theology book) flashed on a face, or visible momentarily in a generous act. I watch people, she said, and I think, (and I hear this in her American accent) 'there's God!' 'Oh, there's God!'. The image is of the dart of the kingfisher or the shooting star - a flash, and it's gone. Which led me to Gerald Manley Hopkins:

The world is charged with the grandeur of God,  
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;  
and then his poem with the line 'As kingfishers catch fire' that goes on to say  
The just man justices;  
Keeps grace: that keeps all his goings graces;  
Acts in God's eye what in God's eye he is -  
Christ - for Christ plays in ten thousand places,  
Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his  
To the Father through the features of men's faces.

Part of exploring the theology of work is to ask what it means to say 'there's God' not only of the good and the beautiful, but in the distortions and the sinfulness of our world. In the disaster or tragedy, crucifixion as well as resurrection.

### Crucifixion

We can't call every example of suffering a crucifixion, but certainly anything that reflects real life will have its share of suffering. Michael has to lose everything in order to begin his journey to maturity. He's had things too easy; rejection by ABM knocks out his faith, his relationships, and all his future plans and dreams. He has nothing to fall back on. He has to see the truth that lies behind his selectors' assessment, though at first it makes no sense to anybody, least of all to himself. For him, the crucifixion experience of being in the hospital, aware of his complicity in the plight of his wife and child, and of his inadequacy and inability to rescue them, is of fundamental significance. When he next goes to ABM, he is conscious of having changed, being less sure, more vulnerable, and he gets through. It was at the start of one of the chapters in the hospital that I used Vanstone's hymn:

Drained is love in making full,  
Bound in setting others free,  
Poor in making many rich,  
Weak in giving power to be.  
Here is God: no monarch he,  
Throned in easy state to reign;  
Here is God, whose arms of love  
Aching, spent, the world sustain. *W.H.Vanstone HAAMNS 496*

One among several reasons I left the hymn verses out of the novel was an unease about this one\*. Would I be thought to be saying that Michael was Christ, the Messiah of the title? Because you couldn't possibly have a messianic figure who swore and messed up sexual relationships. On the other hand, if it's true that Christ is in us, his followers, and that we can have a share in his sufferings, can there be a finger pointed at us that says, 'Here is God'? It seemed safer to add that little word 'even' to Ridgefield's words to Jenny at the end. 'Even Messiahs don't fly,' so why should we expect to have things easy? And yet, Michael does have many Christ-like qualities: a caring attentiveness to the needs of others, a capacity to make anyone feel welcome, and a disturbing edge that isn't quite safe.

God's presence in our work is not confined to the times we can be kind and effective, but is there in the frustrations, the failures and the crucifixions. There is a sense that, even if nothing redemptive is happening, or can happen, God is present, being love, holding and sustaining. As various characters in my novel underwent their own crucifixion experiences, I used a couple of hymns by Timothy Rees which emphasised this sense of God present, suffering and sustaining.

God is Love: and he enfoldeth  
All the world in one embrace;  
With unfailing grasp he holdeth  
Every child of every race.  
And when human hearts are breaking  
Under sorrow's iron rod,  
Then they find that selfsame aching  
Deep within the heart of God. *T. Rees HAAMNS 365*

And:

The groaning of creation,

Wrung out by pain and care,  
The anguish of a million hearts  
That break in dumb despair;  
O crucified Redeemer,  
These are thy cries of pain;  
O may they break our selfish hearts,  
And love come in to reign.    *T. Rees HAAMNS 404*

I want to add one thing to that. It's not simply a matter of saying, 'God is there' when people suffer, as if it's fine for nothing to change. God's presence in the evils and the suffering is a dynamic one, wanting to redeem both individuals and structures, to bring wholeness, to allow growth, to bring to completion (as St Paul says). Like yeast, waiting to act. Maybe in this or that case, there can be no redemption in this life, but God's will is to make whole. Helen Oppenheimer speaks of the drunken tramp, who seems to be a hopeless case, without value, and God looking and saying: 'But I loved that one, I did not want him lost'. There can be no resignation about suffering, or fallenness. 'But I loved that one, I did not want him lost.' Our task is, if possible, to look for ways in which we can join with God's purpose to make whole. This is an important point for the theology of work. It suggests that mere acquiescence or acceptance of suffering, is not the whole answer, although it is one strand in Christian tradition.

### **Resurrection**

'Resurrection moments' litter the novel. I wanted to show God at work in people's lives, even when they don't acknowledge it or see it. Sometimes it's a hint that God is working behind the scenes, so that when Michael rails at God: 'I give you everything. My whole bloody life, and then you abandon me. I've had it with you', the next phase of his life is already in hand, though it will be some months before he recognises it. His faith is restored to him in what feels very much like a 'resurrection moment'. For a flash of time, the fog lifts, a shaft of sunlight breaks through, he can see he's on the right route.

Sometimes a light surprises  
The Christian while he sings:  
It is the Lord who rises  
With healing in his wings;  
When comforts are declining,  
He grants the soul again  
A season of clear shining  
To cheer it after rain.    *W. Cowper HAAMNS 108*

Michael doesn't find answers after his experience in the church. His questions remain, but he has glimpsed a signpost, has been given a gift of faith that is what Helen Oppenheimer calls 'enough to go on'. Enough to *go on*. Enough to go *on*. Writing Michael's experiences was not an attempt at piety, but an act of faith in itself. I identified with the abandonment, with wanting to believe that God was at work somewhere and would come to my rescue, but not having it happen. That's why I left the possibility that Michael's religious experience in the church might have been induced by the strength of the sun through glass and the real presence at the back of the hall of a churchwarden sorting through books.

I find myself thinking of my former vicar Peter Judd's Easter Sunday morning sermon about 'resurrection moments'. He spoke (with permission) of the stories people had shared in a Lent house group, of living through the nightmare of the death of a son, of being diagnosed with serious illness,

experiences that felt like bearing a heavy cross. They had discussed Simon of Cyrene bearing Jesus' cross for a little while, and people who had been like Simon for them, helping to bear their cross when they were at their most desperate. I was still at the bottom of the pit, said the bereaved mother, but there were hands reaching down. These are resurrection moments, said Peter. These moments when, in the midst of suffering, grief, confusion, despair, God reaches out to us through another's caring, and eases our burden, gives us a glimmer of hope. Our experience isn't likely to be dramatic, like Christ's resurrection, swallowing up death in victory, complete redemption of a hopeless situation, but we can look for these smaller resurrection moments.

In some ways it was a sombre theme for Easter Sunday, but it focused the service in a very profound way, bringing a heightened sense of God's presence in the church. (Unusual for us, as respectable, middle of the road, Anglicans!) I was discussing this idea of 'resurrection moments' in a group a few weeks ago, and spoke of this happening in meetings, where we've been going round and round in circles trying to find a way through a seemingly intractable dilemma. Then someone suddenly offers a fresh idea that cuts across the despair, offers a new way forward, and you can visibly see people's spirits lift. The road to Emmaus story shows how Jesus cut across the grieving, the despair of the disciples, gave hope, showed a way forward; a very real resurrection moment.

### **Vocation/pilgrimage**

*Messiahs Don't Fly* for me was above all a tale of Christian pilgrimage, of people struggling to find God's way. It's a continuing process. While there's a resolution of sorts at the end of this novel, there were enough loose ends for me to want to follow the same characters (plus a few new ones) through two more books, over what will be ten years for them and five for me. In writing about their journeys, I am also exploring my own.

I soared through my first few decades of life, and even when things looked confusing, God always stepped in to sort things out. The last few years, however, have definitely been bumping along the ground. Like Michael, knowing my vocation is not to ordination, but not sure what it is. I've experienced a lot of the pressures I gave to Michael, of people expecting that because you worked for the church, you must want to be ordained. As soon as the Church of England voted to allow women priests, I kept being asked, no, told, 'you'll be going forward now.' Only a few months ago, when I told someone I was attending the ordinations in Christchurch, they said very seriously, 'You'll be next!' I won't be, not least because liturgy and worship hold minimum interest for me, and I'm perfectly content to leave them to others.

Once, seventeen years ago, and not many people know this, I did flirt with ACCM as it then was. It seemed a logical thing to do when I knew my industrial chaplaincy job would come to an end, and training as a deaconness before it did so would give me a chance of continuing to be employed to do something similar afterwards. I sailed through all the preliminary interviews, and then began to get cold feet. I went to see my bishop, one John Hapgood, and said I wanted to withdraw. He said go to the conference anyway, to make sure. So I did, feeling an outsider, and a little bolshy.

The most alarming thing about it (apart from the deaconness selector who said her chief joy was being able to remind her priest about keeping his appointments, and the young man who didn't want to talk to her on the grounds that "I could never discuss my vocation with a woman") was how smoothly everything went. They all seemed to assume I was an eminently suitable ordinand, until to my relief the same deaconness at last noted my ambivalence and said, 'You don't really want this, do you?' and I could say no. Since then, I've had children and studied theology, worked as a diocesan officer, and contemplated a career in diocesan structures or theological education. Yet since leaving

my job in 1994 to go freelance, my journey has consistently been away from the formal and the licensed - I've even given up being a Reader - towards a place that feels creative but frighteningly insecure.

I want to take risks, follow Christ in uncharted places, as Ridgefield recommends. Echoing the poem, he reminds Jenny that any worthwhile learning involves conflict and discomfort, and

... even messiahs don't fly. They trudge. Uphill, with swollen feet, bare-soled over flint-sharp stones, or ice or fire, hardly knowing what route they should be taking. And we have to follow, damn them, scarcely seeing them in front of us for the fog, with not the faintest idea where we're going. Stumbling and swearing at the merest suggestion that such foolish adventuring might be divine.

With him, I want to say, 'As for me, I'd rather give up half the time. Go back home to sit by the fire with a good book, because I'm much too old and lazy to be a pilgrim.' I fight a constant battle with the temptation to give it all up and get a proper job. After all, maybe life is about being sensible, building up a pension, accepting your mediocrity, that you're never going to realise your dreams. And then I return to Hazel Nowell Ailor's poem:

It is a daring prayer, 'Thy will be done!'  
If answered it might well destroy our ways.  
There may be heights where we are called to run,  
with victory eluding all our days.  
But cautious prayers produce such timid souls,  
and dreams may die while waiting for their time.  
My hands might never touch the high-set goal,  
yet I must stake my life upon the climb.

Michael's route is not through ordination, neither is mine, but as I've said before, the same obligations are placed on us all, clergy or lay, to listen for God's call. Vocation isn't a final role to be achieved. As Jenny tells Michael: 'Vocation is simply what you do next, it's no big deal, it isn't a long-term commitment to one role for life, with no escape clauses. ... Do what's necessary for today.'

*\*Another was having to negotiate permissions to use all the quotations. I've included them here as this eBook has a private circulation.*