

The Crucified People

This issue of *Sofia* is called *The Crucified People*, a term more often heard in Latin America to describe people crucified by poverty, hunger, homelessness and violence. Liberation theologians say it is in these crucified people that Christ is to be found on Earth today and their struggles for a better life are Christ rising again. There is a temptation in places like Britain to think of all this as happening to ‘third world peasants’ overseas and far away. The very word ‘peasant’ is not now in common use in Britain except as a jocular term of abuse. However, we cannot ignore the fact that today many people are suffering severely in Britain from homelessness, joblessness, hunger, cold and other forms of deprivation. There are ‘crucified people’ in rich countries like Britain as well. This has become much worse over the last four years, while the very rich continue to grow richer, so that the situation now is what the Archbishop of Westminster described recently as ‘frankly a disgrace’ (see page 6).

In our first article, ‘Cut to the Quick’, Mary Lloyd looks at the effects welfare cuts are having on the most vulnerable people in Britain. She also looks at the scandalous situation whereby some people are homeless in this wettest of winters and at the same time property speculators in London and elsewhere can buy a house and, even leaving it empty, make a big profit because of the state of the market. Finally, she describes the work being done by some bodies trying to help those suffering most.

Xenophobia also causes hardship to many vulnerable people, and in his article ‘Another Face – Another Fate’ Dominic Kirkham discusses this ugly phenomenon. He looks at how we treat the stranger in our midst and, ending on a note of hope, suggests we can learn from the absorbent qualities of that ‘glorious concoction’ the English language, which flourishes because of its inclusivity.

Gypsies are among the strangers who have suffered much persecution in Britain, Europe and the rest of the world. A *Gypsy Timeline* on page 13 gives a few salient dates in their history. On the two final pages we print Federico García Lorca’s Gypsy Ballad, ‘The Black Sorrow’, and Mayday

Notes look not only at the shabby treatment meted out to Gypsies, Romanian and Bulgarian immigrants when controls were lifted on New Year’s Day 2014, but also at superb Gypsy music and their Guča International Trumpet Festival, where they rise again.

Continuing on the theme of the stranger, we have two extracts from Peter Stribblehill’s MA dissertation on non-realism and inter-religious dialogue. The main purpose of this dialogue is for strangers to become neighbours, maybe friends, to recognise them, in the common mode of address used by the Diggers, as ‘Fellow Creatures’.

At the end of her article Mary Lloyd quotes the judgment story in Matthew 25: *‘I was hungry and you gave me food... I was a stranger and you welcomed me... Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did it to me.’* These words of Jesus are the basis for the theology of the crucified people. Francis of Assisi took them literally when he referred to lepers (whose exclusion has given us the term ‘social lepers’) as ‘my Christs’.

Jesus proclaimed the Kingdom of God, the coming on Earth of a kind and fair society, in which the dispossessed come into their own, the poor come first, the hungry are filled and peace and justice reign. Inevitably, he came into conflict with the ruling powers of his time, both religious and imperial, so they killed him. A ‘kingdom mentality’, or ‘the mind of Christ’, can still be dangerous today and lead to martyrdom. We think, for example of Oscar Romero, Archbishop of San Salvador, shot dead on March 24th 1980 a few days after he preached a sermon: ‘I ask you, I implore you, I order you: Stop the repression!’. Thus the kingdom belongs first to those suffering poverty, oppression and exclusion, and to all who join them, in however small a way, to resist these forces that are against the kingdom.

According to liberation theology, the ‘sin of the world’, for which or by which people are ‘crucified’ today is, above all, structural prior to individual wrongdoing. That is to say, the sin is

the unjust or ill-conceived structures (of which individuals can take advantage) that damage or destroy lives. For example, it was unregulated banks that caused the financial crisis of 2008 but it is the ‘crucified people’ who are paying for it as they suffer from the savage cuts, while bankers themselves continue to get enormous bonuses. Highly respected economists say these cuts are unnecessary and ideologically driven. Or for another example, there is the free-for-all property market. A buy-to-let landlord recently on the news, who owns a thousand properties, served notice to quit on all his tenants receiving housing benefit, because the cuts (including the bedroom tax) might make them unable to pay their rent. He said: ‘I run a business. I don’t have a duty of care.’ That is not illegal. On the other hand, the sign of the kingdom is generosity, both political and personal.

The words ‘kindness’ and ‘generosity’ are etymologically related. Both go back to a proto-Indo European root meaning ‘kind’ in every sense (becoming *kin/d* in the German branch and *gen/t* in the Latin). Thus we have kindly, humankind, kin, akin, kindred (spirit), generous, genus, generation, gene (20th century coinage), gentle ... The kingdom is the Reign of Kindness. Kirkham says in his article, ‘New scientific understandings of human origins totally discredit the concept of race; humans are amongst the most genetically uniform of mammal species.’ We are all one humankind.

Based on Jesus’ proclamation of the kingdom, we have the Christ Epic, developed in the decades after his death. Christ Jesus, *‘although he was in the form of God... emptied himself... and became obedient to the point of death – death on a cross. Therefore God highly exalted him... so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend in heaven and earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord’* (Phil. 2. 5-11). He is the prototype, the first-born of a new humanity. So another way of describing the kingdom is that we are Christ’s body: ‘we are one body because we all share the same bread’ – the kingdom is when we do.

William Blake calls Christ ‘the Lord, the Universal Humanity’. In the Christ Epic, God raises him and sets him ‘far above all thrones, dominations, rulers or powers.’ Today among the invisible powers that ‘post o’er land and ocean without rest’ are Money and the Market. The epic

of Christ the Universal Humanity is saying very clearly that human beings are above, more important than any of these powers, however seemingly invincible. The crucified will rise again. The Reign of Kindness, Humanity (in both senses) comes into conflict with these powers and the Christ Epic is the story of its victory, with Jesus Christ as paradigm and eponymous hero. However, we have no supernatural guarantee that this will happen, nor do we expect accounts to be settled by heaven or hell in a supernatural realm after death. But at home on Earth we can still believe that this humanity is worth striving for, that the spirit of those who have given their lives for it lives on, now belongs to it, remaining part of what humanity has done and is forever.

Of course, some theologies of the ‘atonement’, though still current among some Christians, look bizarre and even revolting to many ordinary people today. Such is the case with the two ransom theories. In the earlier theory the ransom is paid to the devil. The devil gained power over the human race by the ‘original sin’ of Adam and Eve and in order to win humanity back for himself, God had to pay a ransom to the devil, which was Christ’s death on the cross. This sounds like a sort of folk tale with terrific supernatural antagonists. The second theory (propounded by Anselm in his *Cur Deus Homo*), that the ransom was paid to God because his dignity had been offended by human sin, is more repellent, especially when it takes the form of penal substitution: that God required sin to be punished and so Christ on the cross suffered the punishment and paid the penalty in our stead. Such a God cannot be described as loving or even fair. Plenty of theologians and New Testament scholars think that this was not how Jesus saw his own death.

We don’t have to accept these colourful constructs. It is more reasonable to hold that Jesus’ preaching of a coming Reign of Kindness clashed with the ‘anti’ forces of his day, so they killed him. We can see him as the prototype and paradigm of so many victims since, both the voiceless and those who spoke out. We don’t need the supernatural guarantee to side with his Reign of Kindness and the Christ Epic of a Universal Humanity, to live as kindly as we can, mind that others, ‘our Christs’ at home and abroad, suffer so cruelly, and look forward to their rising again.