

# BEARING WITNESS

By ANGELA TILBY

FOR MOST of the last fifteen years I have lived in two worlds. One has been the world of media. For six years I made religious programmes for BBC Radio. Then I became a television producer, and worked on the documentary series *Everyman* and on worship programmes. Since 1972 the ups and downs of the BBC have been the background of my working life. Its rumours, panics, triumphs and scandals stimulate me and afflict me with anxiety. The television environment has been likened, by a senior television executive, to a bear garden.

The other world is the world of the Anglican parish. For eight years I lived as a vicar's wife in the shadow of two beautiful mediaeval churches. I was surrounded by traditional English religion, brought proudly up to date by 'Series 3' and the *Alternative Service Book*. The parish lived at a different pace from my working world. Here change was slow. It took years and years to decide a colour for the new hassocks. I was always mildly surprised when I fumed up the motorway from the madhouse of television to find that, in the parish, nothing had apparently happened.

Yet there has been a twist. The two worlds have acted on me in different ways. The parish has turned out for me to be a place of instability, disillusion and even betrayal. The agnostic bear garden of television has sheltered and, rather to my surprise, nourished me. The parish, and all that it stands for, remains, and I remain, and there is no way back. I drive through the parish on the way to other places, past the spire that is crumbling and that is held up by scaffolding, and there is no way back.

I remain a believing Christian, an Anglican. The one consistent element in my life is that of *witness*. By witness I mean the attempt, and the failure to describe what I have seen and heard. Witnessing is hard work. I have been at it since before I can remember. Almost my first memory is of learning to read. Before that there is a dim wordless impression of being with my mother and elder brother under the green copper dome of a Roman Catholic church.

I have always been preoccupied with God. As I grew up I often experienced the idea of God as a problem, a question mark,

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producing guilt and dread. For years, it seemed, the idea of God and I circled one another warily, like tigers surveying each other in a jungle clearing. My childhood fantasies were often violent and God was a red-robed warrior with a bow of burning gold and arrows of desire. I defended the idea of God from attacks by unbelieving friends. More dreadful than the idea of God was the possibility of there being no God. This would leave, as my personal problem, the entire God-less universe. I was often anxious about this, and nervous and timid about dealing with the outer world, for the inner world was alarming enough. What made the tension dissipate was attempting to describe these things. Description was breakthrough. With words I could say, 'This is how it is'. With words I became a witness.

I now realize that witness is one of the most crucial aspects of biblical faith.<sup>1</sup> God seeks out his victims, the poor and the frightened, and loves them into being messengers: 'The Lord gave the word, great was the company of the preachers'. I also see that any and every Christian vocation includes an element of witness. We witness as lay people, as priests or as religious, as married people or celibates. We witness not only in trying to live out these specific and traditional roles, but in our failure to do so. Our courage and vision are witness, so also are our defeat and our guilt. So, in a darker sense, are the compromises that cleanse us from idealism and self-delusion.

As a lay person in the Church my witness has three expressions. The first is private and secret and occurs in that void of sensible communion which believers call prayer. The second is public and corporate. It involves the witness of preaching and teaching in the Church. It also involves the more muted but variegated witness of story-telling through television programmes. The third expression is intimate and shared from person to person with the few people whom I am learning to trust. I was, in fact, a public witness before I understood that prayer is witness, and a sense of failure to witness in conditions of intimacy is a constant challenge to any claims that I might make to be a person who prays or preaches.

Witnesses must be open to cross-examination. As Rowan Williams points out,<sup>2</sup> one of the possibilities that Christians have to offer the world is the possibility of life lived under the judgement of the incarnate Word. So part of the discipline of witness is an honest review of the past and present.

When I was fifteen I started going regularly to church. It was the 1960s, the era of secular theology and sexual permissiveness. I disliked the thought of both. The vicar preached against them too. The answer, as he expounded it, was to have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. I accepted this, hoping that it would solve my problem with God, a problem which still bore down on me as hovering darkness and the threat of non-being. It did not. But I became a ferocious and not at all unsuccessful missionary among my schoolfriends. I witnessed and persuaded and argued and prayed. In 1966, at the age of sixteen, I was confirmed.

The models offered for life as a lay person in the Church did not make much impression on me. I assumed that I would work, marry and 'settle down'. I felt no vocation to the ministry, though I thought I might marry a vicar. Sometimes I felt rather guiltily that I ought to be a missionary or a social worker, but two terms attempting to teach small boys in a preparatory school showed me the limits of my capacities for the patient nurture of the unresponsive.

I went to Cambridge to read theology. This had not been a popular decision with my family. My teachers at school seemed regretful, and said that theology was not a suitable subject for a first degree. My friends at church were puzzled. Academic theology had a bad name in the evangelical circles in which I moved. I doubted the wisdom of it myself. I was aware of being motivated by a strong sense of desire, which was at the same time dangerous and enchanting.

I now see this might have been part of God's lure, which I nearly resisted completely. At the time I was puzzled and baffled by Jesus. I could not admit this to myself or to anyone else because I was supposed to be a deeply happy evangelical Christian. But the figure in the gospels frightened me. I felt disabled by his challenges, excluded by his invitation. While in the sixth form I had read St Mark's Gospel in Greek with the aid of Dennis Nineham's commentary.<sup>3</sup> This was a breakthrough. I found myself becoming fascinated by the austerity of the gospel form, its originality and inconclusiveness, the abruptness and energy of Mark's Greek. For the first time I began to see a biblical text as *witness*, rather than as a damning analysis of my personal failures. Through the back door of academic study I began to sense that I was brushing against the outskirts of the ways of the Holy One.

In my spare time at Cambridge I wrote and produced religious plays. My preoccupation with God continued in my writing. I could be more truthful on paper than I could be in prayer or in intimate contact. For a year I was warden of the college chapel. We said Compline in our dressing gowns. One day, it must have been in Lent, we attempted to read the entire book of Job out loud. We abandoned the attempt at about chapter 30 as supper was imminent.

In my first year I was the only woman reading theology. I still had no idea what I was going to do with my life, but I was beginning to assume that it would have something to do with God. When I left university I began to realize that the restlessness of my search for God was a symptom of my absence from myself. I went on retreat. I was horrified by the silence, the formality and the isolation of the contemplative community I stayed with. Still, I went on going, determined that the darkness should yield some of its secrets. As far as I could I witnessed to the absence of any sense of God in bleak and enigmatic poems and prayers.

Often I felt closer to Buddhism than to Christianity. 'God' was what I found at the boundaries of my being: the other, the not-me, the terrible horizon. When I was moving away from the evangelical theology of my late teens I began to read Karl Barth. He is still the theologian I return to at times of testing and stress. Barth refreshes the spirit because he is, first and foremost, a witness. He was, after all, the prophet of the war-time Confessing Church, and his Calvinism is a hammer knocking holes in all sacerdotal systems. Though he abhors mysticism, though he rejects any 'analogy of being' in which others might find a theological basis for prayer, Barth is the theologian who helps me to pray:

If a man believes and knows God he can no longer ask, 'What is the meaning of my life?' But by believing he actually lives the meaning of his life, the meaning of his creatureliness, of his individuality, in the limits of his creatureliness and individuality and in the fallability of his existence, in the sin in which he is involved and of which daily and hourly he is guilty, yet he also lives it with the aid which is daily and hourly imparted to him through God's interceding for him, in spite of him and without him deserving it.<sup>4</sup>

Here is a witness to the otherness and the grace of God. Barth helped me to a vision of a God who was God, who stood over

and against my self-doubt and complexity and failure without being entangled or ensnared by them. Barth's God is free and he is the merciful destroyer of all idols. Having spied, as I felt I did through Barth, the back of God, even from a distance, silence became impossible.

I was invited occasionally to preach. I found this difficult. My doubt was not whether I had anything to say, it was far more whether what I had to say was so terrible that it would destroy me for the arrogance of trying to speak it. My sermons and talks were heavy with dread, darkness and guilt.

By this time most of my male contemporaries from Cambridge had passed through theological college and ordination. Most got married on the way. Two became missionaries in dangerous situations. Some became academics. The majority entered the parochial ministry as they had always intended to. Among them was my husband from whom I am now divorced. Being a priest's wife for eight years showed me a lot about the structures of the Church of England and their effects on clergy and laity.

The clergy who were my contemporaries are now in their mid-thirties. They have had their fair share of frustrations, personal and professional. Ours was not the only broken marriage. There have been illnesses and breakdowns. The survivors strike me as serious, often tired men, well-meaning, patient and trapped. The machinery of the Church grinds on and lives are ground down with it. There is business as usual, the show goes on. Baptisms, weddings and funerals, and the occasional searing tragedy which drains the colour out of everything. God seems to call people to the parochial ministry who have a capacity to rejoice in the absurdity of it all, and to wrest meaning from it, both for themselves and for others.

But the cost is high. Often the most successful, at least in terms of filled pews, are those who are wounded by narcissism, who offer their 'charisma' for others to feed on. Yet they themselves live off envy. They are incapable of true relationship. Then there are the bureaucrats and careerists who still hope to find, within the decaying outposts of the ecclesiastical establishment, the social status that they would never have in any other profession. Then there are those who are troubled and guilty. They are often the most interesting, but think so little of themselves that they cause endless problems because they cannot define their own needs and

wants in a responsible way. Everyone ends up protecting them, above all from the knowledge that they are being protected.

The Church of England is a strange Church. It is not quite a sect, and has never really been a tribe. Well-mannered, scholarly, un-theological; the nearer it gets to communion within itself the more it resembles a gentlemen's club. Lay people drift in and out of the Church of England. They know they have a right to be in church but they do not know that they are really needed. Lay people regard the clergy as 'the Church', and use their priests as coat-hangers for a variety of projections. Vicars for example, are sexy, but forbidden. The vicar's wife complicates the picture. The vicar's wife is irredeemably lay, but is bafflingly married to the Mystery. This fact provokes enormous jealousy, which is rarely acknowledged or dealt with. It was only the catastrophic acting out of this jealousy, within my husband's parish, that made me realize what was going on. When our marriage ended I left the vicarage carrying, as it seemed to me, my priest husband's shadow on my back.

Failure and grief, however, are often occasions of theophany: '... behind the dim unknown standeth God within the shadow'.<sup>5</sup> It was impossible for me not to seek God in the breakdown of marriage, and to connect this seeking with the rest of the search so far. I found that I was praying differently. Prayer became a container for desperation. It also became a healing well. To my surprise I found myself turning away from some of the gloomier images of God that I carried around within me. I began to experience something of the divine laughter and gentleness, a call to hope, patience and freedom, woven into the pain and given with it.

Now and then I preached, and I found myself impelled to speak of God as love. I was always rather surprised when the word came out of me. Often I had resented the Christian insistence on love, finding it a cruel demand, spoken, as it so often is, with unnerving blandness and unreality into human emptiness. Now, love, *amor Dei*, seemed simply given. As I spoke it I even sometimes knew that I had experienced it. Or that *it* had experienced *me*, and had not departed.

Even in the early 1980s women preachers were unusual. At times I felt a bit like a performing animal. It was often explained to me that I had been asked 'because you are a woman' (although I noticed that Anglo-Catholics said that they had asked me because

I was a lay person). I sometimes came away from churches feeling mysteriously unseen and unheard, strangely patronised in the warm welcome extended to me, subtly put down by compliments.

I think part of what I experienced was the mechanism by which the clergy project their own disabilities on to lay people. It is as though their image of themselves can only be maintained by seeing lay people as weak, difficult, dependent or in need. (Many lay people, of course, are more than happy to fulfil that expectation). The clergy of the Church of England are trained to be ring-masters, not collaborators. The whip they use to maintain their control is often a soft whip of quiet blackmail masked as moral persuasion. But the whip is disabling, however soft it feels.

Look at what happens when a committee is formed to carry out a specific task in a parish. Talent is rounded up. A bank manager is co-opted to look after the finances, a teacher to steer the educational efforts and so on. The vicar will explain that he is delegating responsibility, and may believe that in so doing he is using the gifts of the laity for the glory of God and the good of the Church. The laity however are caught in a 'double-bind'. The vicar has given them power, but they know that they are powerful only in so far as their proposals prove acceptable to the vicar. The vicar has obvious power. He presides at the Eucharist. He probably chairs the committee. He opens meetings with prayer. Where does his priestly power end? The laity do not know but they guess. Intelligent, usually confident men and women resort to hesitant, over-polite, falsely deferential behaviour. The vicar wins, effortlessly, and believes that he has furthered the cause of lay participation in decision-making.

I was horrified when a particularly famous and bigoted Anglo-Catholic priest said to me, 'I was ordained to rule'. I now think that perhaps he was simply being honest, and that it would be wrong to discount the advantages of his point of view. Many turn to religion because they need to be dependent for a time. They are truthfully in touch with their own fragility and are prepared to be subservient in order to be shepherded.

It is no accident that significant Church growth occurs where such models of the clerical/lay relationship are being lived out. The Kingdom Churches, for example, offer a clear, direct and personal authority structure, from apostles to shepherds, from shepherds to sheep. Everyone knows their place. Ambivalence is removed. But the Church of England is not that sort of Church.

Ambivalence is what it is good at. That is why it has a General Synod *and* a bench of bishops and why it finds it extraordinarily difficult to make up its mind about anything.

For those looking for consistency, the Church of England is a Kafka-esque nightmare. Most of the clergy still behave like robber barons, controlling the ambivalence according to party or whim. All you can be sure of as a lay person is that if you disagree with the vicar you can always find another one down the road who will take up your cause. The clergy do not trust each other much. Nor do they recognize how clerical individualism weakens the Church's credibility. The English know their clergy and the stereotypes of wetness, hypocrisy and eccentricity have their roots in reality. If the clergy insist on behaving like the laity, what are the laity to do?

If inconsistency and individualism were recognized as problems by the Church as a whole there might be pressure to do something about it. Clergy should be sent on management courses, where they would learn how to work with people in a collaborative way without losing sight either of personal or of commonly held goals. Most clergy, however, are a bit frightened of this. They want to preserve their naïvety, their right to be innocent and wounded. They want to control from weakness rather than direct from strength.

So, 'management' models for the relationship between clergy and laity are unlikely to be taken seriously. The reasons put forward will no doubt focus on the 'secular' and 'class' connotations of the management model. But the true reason lies deeper. Managers in the real world really do have to repent of individualism and embrace corporate aims. They have to become vulnerable to assessment. Real managers can be hired, fired, promoted or dismissed. To threaten priests with such accountability strikes at the roots of their personal security.

Some, however, have tried, and have reaped a certain kind of success. I heard recently of a Roman Catholic priest who took charge of a large disorganised parish in the (then) industrial North East. He quickly discovered that, as parish priest, he was expected to do everything. If a light bulb failed in the local school his permission was required before it could be replaced. Before long he had got tired of this. He drew up a long list of his parishioners, noting their jobs and skills. He then delegated all the practical responsibilities for running the parish among the congregation.



His plan worked wonderfully well and was much admired. The laity were involved, busy and active, doing the same jobs for the Church as they did at home or at work. For free. The chief advantage was reaped by the priest himself. For he kept to himself the *real* job, which, for him, was the pastoral work. This was what he enjoyed and was good at and he organized the entire parish to enable him to exercise his ministry with total control and independence. Though he 'managed' the laity he was not accountable to them because he had screened off his magic sacerdotal function from any kind of critique or assessment.

How can such devices be healthy for the Church? How can the strenuous efforts of the clergy to define and control the laity enable the whole body of believers to grow to maturity? It is, on the whole, the clergy who write books about the laity, who devise schemes to educate them, who propose, even, to 'liberate' them for Christian service.

As a lay person, I find this disquieting. Why? Because, obvious though it is, the *normative* Christian life is that of a lay person. It is as lay people that the vast majority of Christians are called upon to discover and offer their prophetic, pastoral, charismatic, theological and mystical gifts. The clergy have a share of these gifts, but it is a share, not a monopoly. Indeed it could be argued that one of the things that priesthood entails is a willingness to gather up the gifts of the whole body rather than develop an individualistic ministry. Eucharistic competence is surely central to the priesthood? It is more important than theological literacy or pastoral wisdom. To say this is not to criticize or to inhibit priests from developing academic, pastoral or any other relevant skills, but it does mean that when they do so they must be prepared to offer them in the market place, as lay people do, and be subject, as lay people are, to rigorous assessment and criticism.

All this is obvious and has been said before. But it has rarely been understood. This came home to me some years ago when I was the Series Producer of 'This is the day', a television liturgy transmitted on BBC 1 on Sunday mornings. With the rest of the production team I ran a series of seminars designed to help potential preachers. Most of our team were lay people. Some had theological training, the rest had acquired some kind of informed interest in religious communication. We knew our programme, and we knew our audience because we read their letters week by week. We did our best to share this knowledge with our potential

preachers. The odd thing was that the clergy we invited to take part in the seminars assumed that we were only interested in their television technique, and that this was something we could clothe them in, like make-up, for the camera. They seemed to be expecting us to discuss whether they should wear clerical dress, or whether they smiled enough. We invited the participants to prepare an unscripted talk. Some had not bothered, or came clutching an old sermon. Some seemed affronted, not so much at any adverse criticism (often we were too polite) but at the fact that we were *interested* in what they were trying to say. The thought that as theologically informed lay people we might be useful and supportive collaborators was found to be deeply threatening. One Anglican bishop who preferred not to prepare his address before transmission dismissed the team's attempts to pray with him before the programme began as 'incompetent'. I had the impression that as 'media people' we were supposed to know our place. Rude mechanicals we were allowed to be. But theologians, never!

A tension between clergy and laity can be destructive, and often is. It is most destructive where it is not recognized. Death creeps in masked in smiles and protestations of Christian 'love'. Yet tension need not be destructive. It may be that the two constituents of the one body are intended to discipline and heal one another. There are seeds of an understanding of how this might come about within the New Testament. I refer particularly to the insights of recent scholarship on the relationship between the Gospel of Matthew and the Gospel of Mark.<sup>6</sup> In the last part of this article this relationship is taken as a kind of parable of the relationship between clergy and laity within the Church.

The relationship between the clergy and the laity has a history. So has the relationship between Matthew's gospel and Mark's. For seventeen centuries Matthew's gospel was regarded as the first gospel, both in order of composition and in importance. Matthew's gospel possesses certain characteristics which ensures that, if it is taken as the first gospel, it will overshadow Mark almost completely. First, it is clearly *gospel*. Matthew gives a clear and structured account of the Lord Jesus Christ as the Messiah and Lord of the Church. Matthew has Jesus founding the Church. Jesus authorises the Church's ministry, its discipline, its mission and its theology. Matthew has the disciples sent out as missionaries to spread the faith by preaching and baptism. Matthew also recognizes that the new kingdom, like the Old Israel, requires

scribes and judges. Matthew's is a spectacular gospel of miracles and unambiguous signs. It lays the foundation for a certain kind of triumphalism which can always be assured of a popular response, and is mirrored in the contemporary style of the papacy. Matthew's gospel is also judgemental. Matthew knew that the Lord forgave, but, try as he might (and he does try), he finds it very difficult to understand forgiveness. So he hedges it about and limits it in certain important ways. Matthew believes in clerical punishment. He thus lays the foundations for a Church-sanctioned morality which has been enormously influential, creative and damaging. Above all Matthew's is an authoritative gospel, a gospel for popes, prelates and priests.

For seventeen centuries Matthew's gospel has overshadowed Mark. Mark itself has been largely ignored. For if Matthew predates Mark, Mark becomes irrelevant. Mark's 'expansions' of Matthew's text become mere untidiness; his gaps, aching holes in Matthew's neat and plausible structure. Any distinctive vision that Mark might have is swallowed up in the sheer splendour of Matthew's presentation. But now we know, or at least, we think, that Mark came first. Mark, far from being derived from Matthew, supplied Matthew with one of his most important sources. But unlike Matthew's other sources, which are lost in whatever original form they may have existed, we still have Mark intact. Matthew, then, is commentary on Mark. He tidies up, abbreviates and perhaps distorts him. But he does not replace Mark. Mark remains in the canon in his own right. Why?

Mark is almost certainly closer to the original events than Matthew, and his gospel is very different. It is a dark and enigmatic text, as I found to my surprise and delight when I read it in Greek with the aid of Nineham's commentary. Mark's gospel is a gospel of the hiddenness of God, of divine majesty and human blindness, folly and despair. Mark's Christ is a 'fast God',<sup>7</sup> striding ahead of the bewildered disciples on the long road to Jerusalem and the cross. Mark's is a critical gospel. Even as he proclaims Christ he mocks the Church as he knows it, prefigured in the body of disciples, those foolish, corrupt, pompous and self-deceived twelve who were originally called by Jesus. Mark knew that all of them (not only Judas) had betrayed Christ by their ignorance and stupidity. He also knows that the disciples are embryonic pharisees as much as they are embryonic apostles. In the end, with his

ambiguous and unfinished resurrection message, he seems to have little hope for them.

Yet, as Christopher Burden points out,<sup>7</sup> there is a category of persons in Mark's gospel who respond to Jesus appropriately. These comprise the minor characters who flit across the pages of the gospel. Some are anonymous, some are named. They include Bartimaeus, the woman with a haemorrhage, the Syro-Phoenician woman, the young man who fled in the garden, Simon of Cyrene, the centurion at the cross and others. Their encounters with Jesus are usually brief. They find him by accident, or come to him in desperate need, they run away in panic, they babble when they should be silent. They are the witnesses, the ones who know who Jesus is. They respond with awe, surprise, faith or heart-breaking generosity. These, the author seems to be saying, are truer disciples than the official 'called' ones. They are at least more authentic than those who make careers out of following Jesus, who are in it for their own advantage or satisfaction, to keep at bay their unhealed wounds or to project their own ambivalences onto other people.

So, in his strange way, Mark exposes clerical hypocrisy and commends the faith and honest fear of the 'little ones' who will never be great or powerful in any Church. Mark is a lay person's gospel. It is a chilling thought that Mark's critique of clericalized discipleship should have been successfully silenced for seventeen centuries!

But there it is. We have Mark, and can be grateful. Of course Mark is incomplete. Without Matthew (and Luke and John) it is chaotic! No one could run a Church on the basis of Mark. Yet Mark goes on needing to be discovered. Mark is primal, energetic, charismatic. It is witness. Without Mark, in a very important sense, there is no gospel. There is, true, a form of Christendom; a critique of this world and its powers. There is miracle and law, doctrine and morality—and we are not asked to live without these things.

But, says Mark again and again, Spirit and life are God's mystery and belong to no man or woman. All we can know comes to us through naked encounter with the Lord, in panic, terror, love and faith. The articulation of that encounter in ritual and doctrine is always secondary.

Lay people are called to be authentic as Jesus was authentic, in the Body and the Blood, in the breaking and sharing of our real

lives and substance. I have been encouraged, by my long fascination with Mark's gospel, to think that the clue to the secret of my own hesitant discipleship might lie within his dark and incomplete text.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See David Holt's treatment of Paul Ricoeur's *Essays on biblical interpretation* in his article 'Psychoanalysis and witness', *Harvest*, vol 32, 1986.

<sup>2</sup> In 'Women and ministry—a case for theological seriousness', an essay in *Feminine in the Church*, ed by Monica Furlong, (SPCK, 1984).

<sup>3</sup> Nineham, D. E.: *Saint Mark*, Pelican Gospel Commentaries, (Pelican Books, 1963).

<sup>4</sup> *Faith as knowledge*, chapter 3, p 26, 'Dogmatics in outline', (SCM, 1966).

<sup>5</sup> 'Once to every man and nation', hymn by J. Russell Lowell, English Hymnal, no 563.

<sup>6</sup> These reflections were prompted by the fascinating comparison between the passion and resurrection narratives in Matthew and Mark by J. L. Houlden's *Backward into light*, (SCM, 1987).

<sup>7</sup> Burden, Christopher: 'Such a fast God—true and false disciples in Mark's gospel', *Theology*, March 1987. The quotation of the title is from R. S. Thomas's poem 'Pilgrimages', in *Frequencies*, (Macmillan, 1978).