

# CALLED TO BE POWERLESS?

By TED KENNEDY

**T**HE GOSPEL story of the widow's mite is a favourite with many church fund-raisers. It is constantly suggested that Jesus was applauding the voluntary act of a poor widow in giving to a worthy cause all she had to live on. It was God's will that she should drain herself dry: *she was called to be powerless*. Such an interpretation leaves us with a very hard God indeed, and with a Christ who, in this instance, is aligned with the scribes. Certainly it contains no clue as to why people wanted to kill him.

I think the story is really one of Jesus lamenting human exploitation. He had already shown a distinct off-handedness toward the treasury tax (Mt 16,27). The chief priests had got the clear message from his angry outburst in the Temple that he was really aiming beyond the sellers—at themselves. It was *their* pockets that were being lined. The sellers were their front men. If he was going to oppose their reputable way of robbing the poor, then he must die.

The widow's mite story is not unconnected. The atmosphere is still electric from Jesus's diatribe against the scribes for swallowing the property of widows, when he takes up a position, probably derisively, opposite the temple treasury. He observes one such oppressed widow put all she had into the treasury. He complains about the extent of her exploitation, then moves away, predicting the destruction of the very Temple itself (Mk 12,38-13,2).

The above interpretation is, I admit, markedly divergent from the common one, and this points to a marked divergence in the perspective from which the gospel is viewed. But this is precisely the sort of new starting-point which the Church has called us to look for in a renewed evaluation of war. And it is precisely the sort of fresh and radical starting-point in viewing the whole of the gospel which we must adopt if we are to face honestly and seriously our christian responsibility towards the poor today. The words of Albert Einstein: 'The unleashed power of the atom has changed

everything except our way of thinking', apply equally and urgently to our way of thinking about the gospel. The gospel itself is in urgent need of liberation.

I do not think there is any validity in a so-called christian *call to be powerless*. Power-mongers have often for their own purposes devised such a vocation—for others, not themselves. Then again, sometimes the phrase is used as a piece of rhetoric, as if indeed it were possible to *render oneself powerless*. The story is told that once Francis of Assisi entertained his brethren by playing an imaginary violin consisting of two branches from a tree. In his voluntary poverty he had succeeded in depriving himself of the violin, but the musical accomplishment drawn from his inherited culture was with him still. He could not jump out of his own skin. In that sense Francis was *not* poor or powerless as those who have been wrenched from their cultural inheritance are.

One of the difficulties with this kind of rhetoric is that a language about 'poverty' can be devised which has no need for reference to *real live poor people*. Its claims to be theological language is the very reason which makes it counterfeit—that it purports to run free of any concrete historical correlate. How often do we see the spotlight focused on some famous christian 'worker among the poor', where there is evidently intense fascination with someone who has voluntarily renounced certain possessions, and less interest in the actual persons who live in a state of enforced dispossession. There is a hushed admiration of such a person staying heroically among the poor, who themselves would seem to remain always anonymous, always undesirable company, non-persons with interchangeable features, pictured in the background to our famous White Christian Missionary. Here I know I am on dangerous ground. There have been times when some affluent Christian listening to me has reacted with amazement that I was not struck dead on the spot! Rich Christians do seem to need such heroes feeling dependent on them to act vicariously on their behalf, as long as their heroes remain demure before the oppressors of the poor. In the cramped conditions where the poor are forced to live, you will often find stench, disease, alcoholism and petty violence (in contrast to the massive disguised violence of the rich landlords). It does seem strange that in an age when deodorants are available to combat odour, antibiotics to conquer disease, and the behavioural sciences offer intricate insights into dealing with deviant behaviour, the comfortable educated Christian takes flight at the thought of a face-to-face meeting

with the devalued people of the earth. Even more sadly, the fear which grips them when faced with a personal introduction to the poor clouds their vision. They fail to see that the poor have not chosen these degraded conditions but accept them rather than compromise their own humanity and so degrade their inner dignity. It is true that none of us can be held responsible for what others make of their own interior lives, but what does not sink into our conscience is that we are accountable to the poor. We cannot breathe through their nostrils, but we must take responsibility for the polluted air they breathe.

In this article I am endeavouring both to put aside specious notions about christian poverty and powerlessness which still have wide currency today, and to examine ways in which the terms *poverty* and *powerlessness* can have real christian significance. There is, of course, in all of us an interior powerlessness over our lives which is a simple fact of life and which we can neither control nor lose. It is our powerlessness before God upon whose power we rely. When we deny this, imagining that we can arrogate this power to ourselves, we shackle our own freedom and that of others. It is of the essence of christian spirituality that we learn to acknowledge and become amenable to this powerlessness in ourselves. It is a prerequisite to all prayer. This call, then, is not to render ourselves powerless, but to *recognize and accept* a powerlessness which is already and always there. We have only to look at so many recovering alcoholics who found sobriety along with their own powerlessness. It is humbling to realize that very often it was not in their attendance at Mass or the sacraments that they first heard the call to accept their powerlessness. We do need to stress this awareness when we come to talk about faith. Its direct reference is God himself. But it ought lead us to join hands with all our brothers and sisters, to reach out to every person and all the animals and all of creation too—all our brothers and sisters. Here we all stand equal in our powerlessness before our Creator.

That is what Francis sang about. No wonder, then, that he should have so mistrusted riches which keep reading back to us the betraying thought that we do not need God, and suppress the inner joy which goes with the realization that we do. When we get to know the poor we come to realize that it is we who do the worrying, they who do the suffering. We do need to be freed from that false self-accrediting effortfulness which gives rise to brooding anxiety. What is more, when our faith leads us to think in the

plural with all the other elements of this created universe, it should also lead us Christians to accept with both hands the environmental issues of our time.

But then there are other forms of powerlessness which are defined against the background, not of God, but of other human beings. Within this definition there are two groups of people who can be seen to be powerless in contrast to the power of others or because of it. They are *little children* and the *poor*. There is a language which belongs very much to the world and which is commonly used when referring to these two groups of powerless people. It does not take into account the possibility of a relationship with them. It implies that they comprise a sort of inert mass waiting to be activated by us. We have the right to control and regulate their numbers. It can come as somewhat of a surprise to us Christians, who can unwittingly absorb such language, when we realize that the gospel emphasis is the reverse. They are the active ones, we the passive. They are the missionaries possessing a hidden dynamism. There are no other groups of people spoken of in the gospel in this way. They bear a *consecration* bestowed on them by God, not because of merit won, but simply because of what they are. It is not a question of romanticizing some virtue peculiar to them nor attributing to them some added worth over other human beings. It is simply to recognize depths to the old catholic principle of sacramentality. Such people are not God, but they remain the unique revelation of the presence of Jesus for us. Out of the mouths of babes and the poor do we hear his authentic voice. This is to say more than Jesus is poor; it insists that the poor are Jesus. They possess a luminosity for us which is described in the New Testament as:

- 1 they already possessing the kingdom (Mk 10,14; Lk 6,20);
- 2 their having faith (Mt 18,5; James 2,5), and therefore
- 3 they must be welcomed for themselves in Christ's name (Mt 18,5; Mt 25,45);
- 4 and we must become like them in their relationship to the kingdom and in their faith (Mt 18,2; Mk 10,25).

We are called to see them in faith as the instrumental cause of our salvation. Such belief should energize the specifically christian abhorrence of abortion and every other form of injustice. It should

drive us into a precision of language in describing our relationship with them. What transitive verbs can be properly placed between us and them, where we are the subjects, which do justice to the gospel relationship? For we must remain alert to the constant pull to exchange the language of the gospel for the counterfeit language of the world.

The gospel is very precise. There is no mention of *helping* or *giving welfare to* or relating to the powerless in any indirect or vicarious way. In fact there is no hint of the very popular *transport model* which suggests that we have power and resources, spiritual, moral, educational, physical or muscular, which can proudly carry across the widening gulf between ourselves and them. The gospel stays with the simple, homely, two-way term *give welcome to*. This is a long way from the altruism which does not allow for mutuality, which keeps the powerless always beyond arm's length and always *other*. If such altruism were a virtue, it would be open to the powerless to exercise it. But the poor themselves know better than any how to *give welcome to* the poor and to little children. In the bittersweet world of the poor, there are no unwanted little children, no unwanted poor guests. So the poor seek out the poor to receive a genuine welcome. We must turn to them and ask a blessing from their consecrated hands, and believe that they will receive us into everlasting tents.

'In the first centuries of Christianity' wrote Peter Maurin in the *American Catholic Worker* fifty years ago,

the poor were fed, clothed and sheltered at a personal sacrifice. And because the poor were fed, clothed and sheltered at a personal sacrifice, the pagans used to say about the Christians 'See how they love each other'. In our own day the poor are no longer fed, clothed and sheltered at a personal sacrifice but at the expense of the taxpayer. And because the poor are no longer fed, clothed and sheltered the pagans say about the Christians 'See how they pass the buck'.

Jesus was quite insistent in directing his followers into a personal eye-level friendship with the real live poor—by his own example, but also in his advice. 'Make to yourselves friends with the mammon of iniquity so that *they* will receive you into everlasting tents'. He also made it clear that if we are going to make the poor our personal friends, we will therefore make enemies of the rich. Do not let anyone try to convince you it can be otherwise. Such

terms of persecution are central to the following of Jesus, not a possible, though hoped-against contingency.

*To know personally and reverence the poor and to accept the inevitable consequences from this must be regarded as normative in all christian living.*

That which must be a constitutive element in our very first steps as companions of Jesus has often been presented as an optional refinement. This neglect carries with it a distorted perception of all christian values including a proper understanding of the very nature of God in Christ (Jer 22,16-17).

During the second World War, Dorothy Day was pursuing a pacifist line in her newspaper *The Catholic Worker*. Some members of the movement found that they could not subscribe to her position fully, feeling that the U.S.A. was involved in a just war against nazi Germany. Dorothy accepted their conscientious position. She wrote a note to all members in the catholic worker houses saying that, provided that they continued in the daily responsibility of feeding and sheltering the homeless poor, they would still be regarded as full members of the Catholic Worker Movement. Her own pacifist position remained unmitigated. She believed that to be where the poor are will eventually lead to a purer understanding of the gospel.

Orthodoxy is tested by orthopraxis. To deny personal hospitality to the poor is to deny the faith. Our love for God is only as strong as our love for poor people.

What I am saying here comes as an affront to those accustomed to negotiate religious terms without ever meeting the actual poor. In fact, *their* reading of the gospel suggests that they ought never do so. The admonitions of Jesus: 'Let your light shine before men . . .' and 'Do not parade your good works before men . . .' have come to refer for them, in the first place, to their social peers, and in the second, to the poor. It is sometimes actually suggested that the rich should allow their benefactions to be advertised among their fellows (who will presumably be edified and encouraged to follow suit) but they should remain anonymous to the actual poor people who receive their cast-off goods via some agency. So the rich ought never to cross the door-mats of the poor, nor the poor cross theirs!

This is a complete inversion of the priorities set by Jesus. The areas of publicity and anonymity have been reversed. Our almsgiving should not be paraded publicly for our fellow rich to see. It is only the poor who should see our embarrassed efforts to

meet up with them. When the poor truly experience in their inmost spirit a fidelity shown them by us Christians, a hope for them now as well as forever, and a love for them coming from our hearts, then let that light shine so that together we may glorify our Father in heaven. That is to preach the good news to the poor.

Then again, in our evasion-tactics to beat off the gospel, we develop the knack of metaphorizing the literal, and literalizing the metaphor. There is the story of Jesus at the leading pharisee's banquet. He spoke with a literal directness to his wealthy host, advising him not to invite his friends, brothers, relations and rich neighbours to his parties, but rather the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind. As always when meeting the rich, Jesus showed that their wealth cut no ice with him. The same directives apply to us, yet we deftly transpose the unambiguous poor in the story to our own tame metaphorically and 'spiritually' poor. Then the parable Jesus told the guests becomes converted from a metaphor into a literal blueprint of action, a sturdy rule of politeness for all social occasions. Such theories we devise to avoid table fellowship with those who in reality are the most desirable of friends!

There was once a religious order called the Trinitarian Fathers who saw their ultimate vocation in exchanging themselves for slaves, so that each went out into the unknown, never again to share common life with his fellow Trinitarians, but regarding his new life as offering community life to the full. They looked on their fellow religious more as in-laws, relating to each other through their *nearest* brothers and sisters, the most oppressed people of the earth. I find their example a happy one in contrast to so much present-day stress on false community, requiring religious to be meal-mates forever: with the poor outside the gates.

In the dominant world-society, the powerless are deemed to be people who do not matter. A closer scrutiny shows that it matters a great deal to the rich that the poor should remain outside. They are counted on *not* to be counted. The healing actions of Jesus were not just physical cures. They included the removal of forms of social leprosy and they unleashed a dynamism in the poor based on their own faith. These were sufficient cause for the powerful to have him killed. These two factors, his compassion for the socially rejected and his trust in the power of their own faith underlay the personal relationship he had with them. What is of enormous significance is that while he held uncompromisingly to that relationship, he could face the death which resulted from it, knowing that

he had nothing to lose.

When Jesus looked upon the poor, he recognized, in the same horizontal line of vision, the face of his Father. He received them gratefully as the Father's gift. Never is the uniqueness of Jesus's power over human power so highlighted as in the defiant stance he took when confronting those who would soon bring about his death, with his arms around the poor, saying in effect: 'We are indestructible'.

There are undoubtedly today two competing theologies of the meaning of Church which stem from two equally competing interpretations of the figure of Christ and of the nature of sin. The first places almost no consequences on the social context in which Christ lived. The kind of God he is made out to be leaves him as one with no real choices in life. The figures of power in a Jewish elitist nation and a Roman colonized state are all accidental. They are like quaint drawings on a cardboard stage-set which is no longer needed now, so discarded. What becomes then important is not *when* or *how* Christ came to be killed, but only the fact—in churchy billboard language—that Christ died, and for us all. The only meaning in Christian poverty derives from such a non-historical model. Private morality is the only morality that counts. Human oppression cannot easily be brought into focus as a question of morality, let alone kept in permanent view. So your civic activities are confined to the politics of morality rather than the morality of politics as such; the political lobbying for private moralities rather than the social morality of the political order.

In the radically revised theology of the meaning of Christ, we find the morality of politics his primary concern. Social sin comes up clearly as the first reading of sin. It was social sin, not private sin, that brought death to Christ. The sin of rendering others powerless is the primal sin, that which constitutes the very meaning of sin, the sin of the world. This means that racism, sexism and national social elitism in all their forms emerge as primary targets in all of Christian living as they were for Christ. The existence of poverty betrays a severe breach in God's covenant and is therefore an insult to God himself. Any so-called Christian spirituality which does not come to grips with this from the start is guilty of privatizing and pendentizing and thereby trivializing the gospel; religious, but spiritually hollow.

By these standards, at least in my own Australia, we Christians have a long way to travel. As I see it, our Catholic schools are



continuing to produce our full quota of racists, sexists, capitalists and the war-minded. The aggressive male-dominating syndrome: 'Lay every girl; shoot every boong; make every kill in business', continues to escape the otherwise vigilant eye of the moralist. That mentality presses down heavily on thousands of girls and boys long before some turn to the feminist and gay movements for support. Yet many a frowning moralist looks at these movements as the cause of social evil rather than the result—people sinning rather than sinned against.

Oscar Romero, the murdered Archbishop of San Salvador, was different. 'It is, in practice, illegal' he said, 'to be an authentic Christian in our environment . . . . precisely because the world around us is founded radically on an established disorder before which the mere proclamation of the gospel is subversive'.

There is a logical link between the attitudes that the poor are already dead and that little children are not yet alive. Both are based on the fallacy that life is no more than wordly power. At this very late hour it is urgent that we realize that the reverse is true—the powerless hold the key to the world's life. If there is to be a peaceful future for the world, it lies in their hands.

It is in this initiative from the poor and powerless that the real gospel energy is being released today. In comparison it is hardly worth noting the faltering efforts of western Christians to make use of their power on behalf of the poor. All around the world the poor are refusing to allow their birthright to be wrested from them—that human space where their spiritual-cultural heritage can be nurtured, where they can live subsistently and keep renewing the world's resources and where they can give and enjoy each other's welcome—'all they have to live on'. That human space is a place of peace. It stands as the direct counterpoint to the power-drive of unrestrained economic growth which is most likely to bring about war. The poor are inviting us to join them in their struggle, to realize that our own liberation is intimately bound up with theirs, so that none of us need ever pay tax to the treasury again. The poor are requiring of us western Christians vast attitudinal change. If we drag our feet, they may take measures to require behavioural changes anyway. It is to be hoped that our faith will recognize here the cutting edge of the gospel, the only real alternative to the spiral of violence being pursued by the powerful today.