

# ONLY A WITNESS TO SPEAK FOR THE LIGHT

## Simone Weil and Her Option for the Poor

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ON 24 AUGUST 1943, a young Frenchwoman died in a sanatorium in Ashford, Kent. Her grave there remained without a name for fifteen years. Gradually, as her writings were published by friends and translated into other languages, Simone Weil became known to the wider public in various guises: a philosopher, a political and social reformer, a Christian mystic outside the Church. She was a prolific writer with a wide range of concerns. Albert Camus found it ‘impossible to imagine a rebirth of Europe which does not take account of the requirements laid down by Simone Weil’.<sup>1</sup> T. S. Eliot ascribes to her ‘a kind of genius akin to the saints’.<sup>2</sup> Both popes of the Council, John XXIII and Paul VI, were impressed and influenced by her writings. There is even a road named after her in Ashford today, Simone Weil Avenue.

To Simone herself it would have meant nothing that her name should be remembered. Name and personality belong, she believed, to a superficial level, the level of the self, the ‘I’, which may at times, perhaps, shine brilliantly with its own light, but is ultimately wretchedly prone to error and sin.

But above this level, far above, separated by an abyss, is the level where the highest things are achieved. These things are essentially anonymous.

It is pure chance whether the names of those who reach this level are preserved or lost; even when they are remembered they have become anonymous. Their personality has vanished.

<sup>1</sup> Albert Camus, ‘Lettre à “Caliban”’, quoted in David McLellan, *Simone Weil: Utopian Pessimist* (London: Macmillan, 1989), 259.

<sup>2</sup> T. S. Eliot, preface, in Simone Weil, *The Need for Roots*, quoted in *Simone Weil: An Anthology*, edited by Siân Miles (London: Virago, 1986), 6.

Truth and beauty dwell on this level of the impersonal and anonymous. This is the realm of the sacred ....<sup>3</sup>

Weil is writing here at the end of her life, but it was towards this realm that the whole thrust of her aspiration had been directed from an early age. She says that she never desired any other good than the pure truth, certain and eternal, that awaits us after death. When she was fourteen, her fear of being excluded 'from that transcendent kingdom' gave way to the conviction that anyone can reach it 'if only he longs for truth and concentrates all his attention upon its attainment .... The conviction that had come to me was that when one hungers for bread one does not receive stones.'<sup>4</sup> And this, as she says, was before she had even read the gospel.

Simone Weil, in her life and her thought, is a clear illustration of the Spirit blowing where it will. She claims that faith, implicit and then explicit, came to her without direct human intervention. She felt that she had been born, and always remained, within the Christian inspiration. She had no particular religious upbringing; her Jewish parents and brother were agnostic. As she grew up it seemed to her better to leave aside the problem of God, so as not to reach a wrong solution, and concentrate



*Simone Weil*

instead on the problems of this world. Nevertheless, in giving these her whole attention, she could not but stumble upon the hidden God offering Godself in the experience of grace. Our response to this interior call need be no more than a directing of our desire towards the deepest good to which we are drawn. The truth of the relationship between grace and desire

<sup>3</sup> Simone Weil, 'Human Personality', translated by Richard Rees, in *Simone Weil: An Anthology*, 69–98, here 75.

<sup>4</sup> Simone Weil, 'Letter IV: Spiritual Autobiography', in *Waiting for God*, translated by Emma Craufurd (New York: Perennial Classics, 2001 [1951]), 21–38, here 24.

became fundamental to Simone Weil's faith. Goodness and virtue are not human achievements but something we receive. 'To beg for them is to believe that we have a Father in heaven.' Our part is simply 'attention'.<sup>5</sup>

The idea of attention is central to Weil's spirituality. It is not an effort of mind or will-power, something at which we strain in a muscular way. What Simone means by attention is more like looking or listening, 'suspending our thought, leaving it detached, empty and ready to be penetrated by the object'.<sup>6</sup> It is a passive process, expressed better by the Greek word *hypomene* (steadfast endurance) than by its Latin translation *patientia*. It is watching and waiting in 'faithful immobility which lasts indefinitely and cannot be shaken', like the servant waiting for his master's return.<sup>7</sup> This waiting for goodness and truth commits us more fully than any searching. God searches for us, rather than the other way round. We can only turn our eyes towards God.

We cannot take a single step towards heaven .... If, however, we look heavenwards for a long time, God comes and takes us up. He raises us easily .... There is an easiness in salvation which is more difficult for us than all our efforts.<sup>8</sup>

Salvation is difficult because it demands a denial of self and consent to God's love possessing us. The fuller the attention, the more the 'I' disappears, for 'God alone is capable of loving God. We can only consent to give up our own feelings so as to allow free passage in our soul for this love.'<sup>9</sup> Prayer is directing all the attention of which we are capable towards God. And it is the only source of love of our neighbour, which is only truly love when it is God in us loving him or her. We have to consent to make room for this creative attention, which enables us really to put ourselves in our neighbours' place and love them in a practical way. 'God hastens into every soul immediately it opens, even a little, in order through it to love and serve the afflicted.'<sup>10</sup>

The more we develop this power of attention the more it transforms our human activity:

<sup>5</sup> Simone Weil, 'Attention and Will', translated by Emma Craufurd, in *Simone Weil: An Anthology*, 231–237, here 231.

<sup>6</sup> Simone Weil, 'Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God', in *Waiting for God*, 57–66, here 62.

<sup>7</sup> Simone Weil, 'Forms of the Implicit Love of God', in *Waiting for God*, 83–142, here 126.

<sup>8</sup> Weil, 'Forms of the Implicit Love of God', 127.

<sup>9</sup> Simone Weil, 'The Love of God and Affliction', in *Waiting for God*, 67–82, here 80.

<sup>10</sup> Weil, 'Love of God and Affliction', 80.

The poet produces the beautiful by fixing his attention on something real. It is the same with the act of love. To know that this man who is hungry and thirsty really exists as much as I do—that is enough, the rest follows of itself.<sup>11</sup>

This is why Simone maintains that the training of the faculty of attention, at whatever level, is the most important part of education.

None of our efforts to turn our attention wholly on something other than ourselves is ever wasted. Should the occasion arise, they can one day make us better able to give someone in affliction exactly the help required to save him, at the supreme moment of his need.<sup>12</sup>

Simone Weil's sure grasp of the one thing necessary arose out of her response to grace in the experience of life: thought and action were closely integrated. She felt that God had taken the direction of her soul 'in hand from the start'. She was always very drawn to the Christian idea of loving of one's neighbour, which she liked to call justice, as well as to the gospel value of poverty. Although at first she would neither affirm nor deny the dogmas of Christianity, she never hesitated to adopt its values and attitudes for the business of living, putting them into practice with wholehearted commitment.

Her social criticism was a result of this, for she was painfully aware of the contrast between her own comfortable bourgeois way of life and that of those less privileged. Even as a child, she says, 'I always put myself instinctively ... in the place of all those who suffered constraint'. At ten she would have joined a protest march of the unemployed if her parents had not managed to block the way.<sup>13</sup> A friend of hers at the *lycée*, who was later to write her life, noted that her compassion might often be expressed in violent indignation at wrongs done to others, but never about those done to herself. A fellow student at the Sorbonne, Simone de Beauvoir, tells us that she wept on hearing the news of a great famine in China. 'I envied her for having a heart that could beat right across the world.'<sup>14</sup>

In one of her early essays, Weil wrote: 'Every saint has refused all happiness which means being separated from the sufferings of humanity'.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Weil, 'Attention and Will', 234.

<sup>12</sup> Weil, 'Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies', 65.

<sup>13</sup> Simone Weil, *Écrits historiques et politiques*, quoted in McLellan, *Simone Weil*, 8.

<sup>14</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*, quoted in McLellan, *Simone Weil*, 18.

<sup>15</sup> Simone Weil, *Premiers écrits philosophiques*, quoted in McLellan, *Simone Weil*, 15.

St Francis of Assisi, with whom she says she fell in love as soon as she heard about him, may have helped to inspire this deep insight into holiness. As a participation in God's holiness it incarnates God's predilection for the poor, a preferential love revealed by Christ's whole life and teaching in the gospel. Simone Weil made the same preferential love her own to such an extent that it constantly impelled her to share the lot of the poor and powerless, in genuine solidarity with them. It was perhaps the chief moving force in her life, influencing all her choices and decisions.

**To share the lot of the poor and powerless, in genuine solidarity**

Her own social identity seemed unimportant to her, and she eventually became disenchanted with political activity. She felt it as an essential need, a vocation, 'to remain, in a sense, anonymous, ready to be mixed into the paste of common humanity'.<sup>16</sup>

In spite of her poor health and frequent violent headaches, beginning during her student years Weil would spend her vacations working to exhaustion alongside farm labourers, harvesting or potato-picking. After she finished her studies, she became a teacher—and tried to explain to her pupils at the girls' school in Roanne why she also needed to do manual work:

Human beings are so made that the ones who do the crushing feel nothing; it is the person crushed who feels what is happening. Unless one has placed oneself on the side of the oppressed, to feel with them, one cannot understand.<sup>17</sup>

She decided to take a year off teaching and work in factories in order to share all the hardships of industrial workers in the early 1930s. This was to be a landmark in her life.

The oppressive situation of working people (after all, the majority of human beings) in modern capitalist industrial society was a problem that occupied most of her thought during this time. She wrote a long study, *Oppression and Liberty*, which traced its roots to the struggle for power and privilege. 'The essential evil besetting humanity', she says, is 'the substitution of means for ends'. In the frantic pursuit of increased production, wealth, power and war, human life is being sacrificed 'to things which are only a means to a better way of living ... It is this

<sup>16</sup> Simone Weil, 'Letter I: Hesitations concerning Baptism', in *Waiting for God*, 3–10, here 7.

<sup>17</sup> Simone Weil, 'Lectures on Philosophy', quoted in McLellan, *Simone Weil*, 93.

fundamental folly that accounts for all that is senseless and bloody right through history.’<sup>18</sup> As an epigraph to this work she used a quotation from Spinoza: ‘With regard to human affairs, not to laugh, not to cry, not to become indignant, but to understand’.<sup>19</sup> And, with her characteristic determination to put her principles immediately into practice, she embarked on her factory year.

Simone began work as an unskilled labourer in December 1934. Within a few weeks she had lost her sense of human dignity, ‘destroyed by the daily experience of brutal constraint’.<sup>20</sup> The submission to arbitrary commands; the constant pressure to increase pace; the extreme fatigue; the pain from accidents (which included a tooth broken on a saw and a hand lacerated by metal shavings resulting in an abscess); the threat of dismissal as mass unemployment arose; the total mindlessness of the work; and, above all, the fact that sheer survival was the only aim: Weil’s experience could only be compared to the degradation of slavery. Seeing on the faces of her companions all that she herself was going through, she did not feel the suffering as her own so much as that of all working people. It was, she says, her first contact with affliction.



*A car production line in the 1930s*

<sup>18</sup> Simone Weil, ‘Analysis of Oppression’, translated by Arthur Wills and John Petrie, in *Simone Weil: An Anthology*, 147–177, here 161.

<sup>19</sup> Weil, ‘Analysis of Oppression’, 148.

<sup>20</sup> Simone Weil, *Seventy Letters*, quoted in McLellan, *Simone Weil*, 96.

I knew quite well that there was a great deal of affliction in the world, I was obsessed with the idea, but I had not had prolonged and first-hand experience of it. As I worked in the factory, indistinguishable to all eyes, including my own, from the anonymous mass, the affliction of others entered into my flesh and my soul.<sup>21</sup>

Affliction (*malheur*), ‘the great enigma of human life’, thus became her foremost and often anguished concern.<sup>22</sup> The theme recurs in most of her later writings, gradually finding a mysterious resolution as her faith grew more deeply and explicitly Christian. Suffering may be intermittent, and need only affect you partially. But affliction is a condition that involves the whole of your being, social, physical and psychological. It is an uprooting of life, a powerlessness, which deprives you of your very humanity.

It is not surprising that the innocent are killed, tortured, driven from their country, made destitute or reduced to slavery, imprisoned in camps or cells, since there are criminals to perform such actions .... It is surprising that God should have given affliction the power to seize the very souls of the innocent.<sup>23</sup>

Three years after her factory experience, Weil spent Holy Week and Easter at the Benedictine abbey of Solesmes. She was suffering from splitting headaches, ‘each sound hurt me like a blow’, but by an extreme effort of attention she found she was able to rise above this and find a pure joy in the beauty of the services:

This experience enabled me by analogy to get a better understanding of the possibility of loving divine love in the midst of affliction. It goes without saying that in the course of these services the thought of the Passion of Christ entered into my being once and for all.<sup>24</sup>

The idea of affliction took on a vital dimension for her as she saw it supremely typified in the crucified Christ, made a curse for us and abandoned by his Father. Job, the innocent, afflicted man, forced to cry out against God, was himself a figure of Christ. ‘The effects of misfortune upon innocent souls are really unintelligible unless we remember that we have been created as brothers of the crucified Christ’, and that the whole universe, with its blind necessity that impinges on us, ‘has been

<sup>21</sup> Weil, ‘Letter IV: Spiritual Autobiography’, 25.

<sup>22</sup> Weil, ‘Love of God and Affliction’, 69.

<sup>23</sup> Weil, ‘Love of God and Affliction’, 69.

<sup>24</sup> Weil, ‘Letter IV: Spiritual Autobiography’, 26.

created as the Cross of Christ'.<sup>25</sup> In the following years her contemplation of the mystery of Christ's passion would gradually give her a new light by which to regard the horror of human affliction.

Meanwhile, Simone's headaches had intensified to such an extent that she had to give up her teaching job. For the next two years, 'my existence seemed to be blotted out by physical pain'.<sup>26</sup> While at Solesmes she had met a young Englishman who introduced her to the metaphysical poets. Later on she discovered George Herbert's poem 'Love Bade Me Welcome' and learnt it by heart, saying it over to herself when her pain was at its height, clinging with total attention 'to the tenderness it enshrines' and making the effort to love. It was during one of these recitations, which had 'the virtue of a prayer', that 'Christ himself came down and took possession of me'.<sup>27</sup> She wrote of,

... a presence more personal, more certain, and more real than that of a human being; it was inaccessible both to sense and to imagination, and it resembled the love that irradiates the tenderest smile of somebody one loves.<sup>28</sup>

This was the first of her mystical experiences, totally unexpected and impossible for her to invent, she says, since she had never read the mystics.

The year after that war broke out, and in June 1940 Weil and her parents had to leave Paris, eventually settling in Marseille until May 1942. There she met the Dominican friar Joseph-Marie Perrin, and they became close friends. At her request he got her in touch with Gustav Thibon, who had a farm in the Ardèche, so that she could work as a labourer. In the evenings she and Thibon read Greek together and she learnt the Greek text of the Our Father by heart. It so took hold of her that she used to say it over each day with absolute attention.

At times the very first words tear my thoughts from my body and transport them to a place outside space where there is neither perspective nor point of view .... At the same time, filling every part of this infinity, there is a silence, a silence that is not an absence of sound but that is the object of a positive sensation .... Sometimes,

<sup>25</sup> Simone Weil, *Intimations of Christianity among the Ancient Greeks* (London: Routledge, 1998 [1957]), 198.

<sup>26</sup> Simone Weil, 'Petit carnet noir', quoted in McLellan, *Simone Weil*, 135.

<sup>27</sup> Weil, 'Letter IV: Spiritual Autobiography', 27.

<sup>28</sup> Simone Weil to Joë Bousquet, 12 May 1942, in *Seventy Letters*, translated and edited by Richard Rees (London: Oxford UP, 1965), 140.



also, during this recitation or at other moments, Christ is present with me in person, but his presence is infinitely more real, more moving, more clear than on that first occasion when he took possession of me.<sup>29</sup>

These mystical encounters with Christ were an utterly different kind of contact with truth, the kind of contact in which the intelligence has to become 'silent in order to let love invade the whole soul .... There are truths which are within its reach, within its grasp, but which it is only able to grasp after having passed in silence through the midst of the unintelligible.'<sup>30</sup>

In Marseille she used to meet Fr Perrin whenever they could both manage it. It was he who made her consider the questions of dogma, faith and sacraments more carefully. She already believed in the central mysteries, accepting Trinity, incarnation, redemption, Eucharist and the teachings of the gospel with total commitment. 'I love God, Christ and the Catholic faith as much as it is possible for so miserably inadequate a creature to love them'.<sup>31</sup> But she could not bring herself to ask for baptism. She felt convinced that God did not require this of her yet, and felt it 'no less strongly at the moments of attention, love and prayer than at other times'.<sup>32</sup> It seemed to her that her place was on the threshold of the Church. It would take too long to explain all her reasons for this. But there is no doubt that she herself discerned it as a question of vocation, involving real sacrifice.



*Joseph-Marie Perrin*

<sup>29</sup> Weil, 'Letter IV: Spiritual Autobiography', 29.

<sup>30</sup> Simone Weil, *Letter to a Priest*, translated by A. F. Wills (London: Routledge, 2002 [1953]), 37.

<sup>31</sup> Weil, 'Letter I: Hesitations concerning Baptism', 8.

<sup>32</sup> Weil, 'Letter I: Hesitations concerning Baptism', 6.

It is for the service of Christ or the Truth that I deprive myself of sharing in his flesh in the way he has instituted. He deprives me of it, to be more exact, for never up till now have I had even for a second the impression of there being any choice.<sup>33</sup>

Even more significant, perhaps, was her lifelong option for the poor, which had led her unerringly to the heart of Christianity. It was surely this that lay at the root of her paradoxical vocation as a Christian outside the Church. She was irresistibly drawn by the compassion of Christ, who suffered 'outside the city gate' (Hebrews 13:12), taking literally to herself the words of the epistle to the Hebrews: 'Let us then go to him outside the camp and bear the abuse he endured' (Hebrews 13:13).

I cannot help still wondering whether in these days when so large a proportion of humanity is sunk in materialism, God does not want there to be some men and women who have given themselves to him and to Christ and who yet remain outside the Church.

In any case, when I think of the act by which I should enter the Church as something concrete which might happen quite soon, nothing gives me more pain than the idea of separating myself from the immense and unfortunate multitude of unbelievers.<sup>34</sup>

Simone Weil's solidarity with the suffering, and the paradox of her prophetic stand 'at the intersection of Christianity and everything that is not Christianity',<sup>35</sup> can be seen as a witness to the truth of God's preferential love for afflicted and sinful humanity, a love that represents so urgent and vital an impulse of God's heart that God emptied Godself, going out of the living communion of love within the Trinity to identify with those at the greatest extreme of powerlessness. As Simone saw it, the creation, incarnation and passion put, as it were, an infinite distance between God and God:

Because no other could do it, he himself went to the greatest possible distance, the infinite distance. This infinite distance between God and God, this supreme tearing apart, this agony beyond all others, this marvel of love, is the crucifixion . . . .

This tearing apart, over which supreme love places the bond of supreme union, echoes perpetually across the universe in the midst of

<sup>33</sup> Simone Weil, 'Letter V: Her Intellectual Vocation', in *Waiting for God*, 39–42, here 41.

<sup>34</sup> Weil, 'Letter I: Hesitations concerning Baptism', 6.

<sup>35</sup> Weil, 'Letter IV: Spiritual Autobiography', 27.

the silence, like two notes, separate yet melting into one, like pure and heart-rending harmony ....

Those who persevere in love hear this note from the very lowest depths into which affliction has thrust them ....

The unity of God, wherein all plurality disappears, and the abandonment, wherein Christ believes he is left while never ceasing to love his Father perfectly, these are two forms expressing the divine virtue of the same Love, the Love which is God himself ....

As for us men, our misery gives us the infinitely precious privilege of sharing in this distance placed between the Son and his Father ....<sup>36</sup>

Although affliction is part of the human condition—‘Our country is the Cross’—it is ultimately radiant with the light of God’s joy.<sup>37</sup> For the cross is our only hope. ‘No forest bears such a tree, with such blossom, such foliage and such fruit.’<sup>38</sup> This tree of the cross grows within us from the seed of divine love. All that is required of us in our affliction is to remain turned towards God—‘love is a direction and not a state of the soul’—and consent ‘to allow free passage in our soul’ for God’s love.<sup>39</sup>

Simone was writing this essay, ‘The Love of God and Affliction’, and others on related themes, during her year at and near Marseille, and she sent them to Fr Perrin when she left in May 1942. She felt the departure keenly, but it seemed to her that she ought to go. Her chief object was to get more directly involved in the war effort, and the only way to do this was by joining the Free French in London. She had been trying to get approval for a front-line nurses project—an organization of nurses committed to treating front-line troops in battle—which would give her the chance to join the combatants herself and share their suffering.

The suffering all over the world obsesses and overwhelms me to the point of annihilating my faculties and the only way can revive them and release myself from the obsession is by getting for myself a large share of danger and hardship .... In my present situation I cannot live. It very nearly makes me despair.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>36</sup> Weil, ‘The Love of God and Affliction’, 72, 74, 75.

<sup>37</sup> Simone Weil, *On Science, Necessity and the Love of God*, in *Gateway to God* (Glasgow: Fontana, 1974), 91, 98.

<sup>38</sup> Weil, ‘The Love of God and Affliction’, 75.

<sup>39</sup> Weil, ‘The Love of God and Affliction’, 81, 80.

<sup>40</sup> Simone Weil to Maurice Schumann, quoted in *Simone Weil: An Anthology*, 44.

Weil did get taken on by André Philip, de Gaulle's commissioner for the interior, and arrived in London via New York in December. But it was obvious from the start that 'this fragile creature' (as a colleague described her) was quite unsuited for any kind of active mission.<sup>41</sup> Instead they gave her the job of assessing and responding to the political documents coming in from the Resistance Committees, mostly preparing for a new constitution for post-war France.

Simone worked phenomenally hard, writing day and night, and produced several substantial papers and a major work in these last months of her life. Her social and political thought, radically transformed by her faith, had grown in depth and assurance. Since human beings have an eternal destiny, any theory or laws about their relations in society must take this into account. Political power could not be rightly exercised, she saw, without a guiding inspiration relating it to absolute good. She identified the essential fact of human nature as the 'unquenchable desire for good' at the centre of each person.<sup>42</sup>

There is a reality outside this world, that is to say, outside space and time, outside man's mental universe, outside any sphere whatsoever that is accessible to human faculties. Corresponding to this reality, at the centre of the human heart, is the longing for an absolute good, a longing which is always there and is never appeased by any object in this world ....<sup>43</sup>

This reality is the source of all the good existing in this world, and anyone who consents to turn his or her attention and love towards absolute good sooner or later receives good from it, 'which shines through him upon all that surrounds him'.<sup>44</sup>

It is because of this in-built link between human nature and absolute good that we are bound to show universal respect towards every single human being. But the only way of expressing this respect is through the physical and spiritual needs of the human being. In other words, our respect must have practical consequences. A method could be found to relate politics to the good, just as St John of the Cross wrote treatises on how to attain to mystical contemplation. Simone starts by giving an

<sup>41</sup> Louis Closon, 'Témoignagé', quoted in McLellan, *Simone Weil*, 236.

<sup>42</sup> Simone Weil, 'Draft for a Statement of Human Obligations', translated by Richard Rees, in *Simone Weil: An Anthology*, 221–230, here 223.

<sup>43</sup> Weil, 'Draft for a Statement', 221–222.

<sup>44</sup> Weil, 'Draft for a Statement', 222.



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uncompromising statement of each one's basic obligation 'to remedy according to his responsibilities and to the extent of his power, all the privations of soul and body which are liable to destroy or damage the earthly life of any human being whatsoever'.<sup>45</sup>

Today we are becoming more and more acutely conscious of the privations imposed on four-fifths of the world's population by the oppressive structures of modern industrial consumer society for the benefit of the minority, a pattern which is repeated within the economics of the developed countries, while the military interests of nations pursuing power and prestige destroy and damage millions of human lives. More than seventy years ago Simone Weil could see that the notion of human rights that had served as a basis for Western democracy was inadequate since, without the power to enforce them, rights could be quite ineffective. Furthermore, 'to place the notion of rights at the centre of social conflicts is to inhibit any possible impulse of charity on both sides'.<sup>46</sup> She advocated instead a statement of human obligations and duties, corresponding to each human need. What she had come to realise with devastating clarity was that true social justice can never be obtained by human means alone, for the source of human obligation is above this world:

<sup>45</sup> Weil, 'Draft for a Statement', 225.

<sup>46</sup> Weil, 'Human Personality', 83.

It is the light falling continually from heaven which alone gives a tree the energy to send powerful roots deep into the earth. The tree is really rooted in the sky. It is only what comes from heaven that can make a real impress on the earth.<sup>47</sup>

As always it is the oppressed who are at the forefront of her deep concern, those whose rights are ignored, the afflicted to whom harm is being done by others. But she sees, too, that there is no lasting hope for their salvation in words such as revolution, rights or democracy, since all of these can be abused. 'The afflicted are overwhelmed with evil and starving for good', for truth, justice, compassion, beauty, eternal values.<sup>48</sup> Human justice has to do with personal claims and rights, it evokes a spirit of bargaining and contention. Divine justice consists in seeing that no harm is done to others, it is identical with love:

Our notion of justice dispenses him who possesses from the obligation of giving ....

The supernatural virtue of justice consists in behaving exactly as though there were equality when one is the stronger in an unequal relationship ....

He who treats as equals those who are far below him in strength really makes them a gift of the equality of human beings, of which fate has deprived them. As far as it is possible for a creature, he reproduces the original generosity of the Creator with regard to them.

This is the most Christian of virtues.<sup>49</sup>

Power should therefore be put into the hands of those who can and want to hear the cry of the afflicted, not into the hands of political parties whose primary aim is to maintain themselves in power. It is the same kind of attention that listens to truth and affliction, a tender, sensitive listening that really puts oneself in the place of the afflicted. 'The name of this intense, pure, disinterested, gratuitous, generous attention is love.'<sup>50</sup>

While her hope for a dangerous mission was ebbing, so was Simone's vitality. Uniting thought and action had been the mainspring of her life. But at last her overstrained system succumbed to tuberculosis. A lifetime's habit of austerity as well as her anxiety to share the restrictions of those in occupied France made it impossible for her to take the greatly increased

<sup>47</sup> Weil, 'Human Personality', 86.

<sup>48</sup> Weil, 'Human Personality', 86.

<sup>49</sup> Weil, 'Forms of the Implicit Love of God', 83, 85, 86.

<sup>50</sup> Weil, 'Human Personality', 92.

nourishment needed for recovery. She was too debilitated by her illness. Richard Rees is surely right when he says that, however her death might be explained, it will amount in the end to saying that she died of love.<sup>51</sup> The portrait her friends give of her, as well as the whole cast of her mind and her behaviour, convince us of that. They speak of her gentleness, serenity, boundless charity, extreme consideration for others. 'When it came to generosity, a concern and pity for others, nobody has ever denied that she had these qualities, and in the highest, most selfless forms.'<sup>52</sup> Describing her at their last meeting, Gustav Thibon went further: 'I had the impression of being in the presence of an absolutely transparent soul that was ready to be re-absorbed into original light.'<sup>53</sup>

Brilliant and profound though her insights were, Simone Weil truly considered herself no more than a witness to speak for the light. And, like all genuine prophets, she felt wholly unequal to this. She wrote to Fr Perrin,

If no one consents to take any notice of the thoughts which, though I cannot explain why, have settled in so inadequate a being as myself, they will be buried with me. It is a great sorrow for me to fear that the thoughts which have come down into me should be condemned to death through the contagion of my inadequacy and wretchedness. I never read the story of the barren fig-tree without trembling.<sup>54</sup>

Her heroic waiting, *en hypomene*, had nevertheless borne its fruit, and she could humbly recognise this. In one of her last letters to her parents she says to her mother,

Darling M. you think that I have something to give. That is the wrong way to put it. But I too have a sort of growing inner certainty that there is within me a deposit of pure gold which must be handed out .... It is indivisible, and whatever is added to it becomes part of it. And as it grows it becomes more compact. I cannot distribute it piecemeal. To receive it calls for an effort ....<sup>55</sup>

It is we who have to make the effort. Weil's prophetic role is simply to point out the transcendent Kingdom, urging us to turn all our attention towards it, moment by moment, so that God's compassion may be visibly present in this world.

<sup>51</sup> Richard Rees, *Simone Weil: A Sketch for a Portrait* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1966), 191.

<sup>52</sup> Simone Pétrement, *Simone Weil: A Life* (New York: Pantheon, 1976), 27.

<sup>53</sup> Joseph-Marie Perrin and Gustav Thibon, *Simone Weil as We Knew Her*, quoted in McLellan, *Simone Weil*, 189.

<sup>54</sup> Simone Weil, 'Letter VI: Last Thoughts', in *Waiting for God*, 43–56, here 52.

<sup>55</sup> Simone Weil to her parents, 18 July 1943, in *Seventy Letters*, 196.

The love of our neighbour is the love which comes down from God to man. It precedes that which rises from men to God. God is longing to come down to those in affliction. As soon as a soul is disposed to consent, though it were the last, the most miserable, the most deformed of souls, God will precipitate himself into it in order, through it, to look at and listen to the afflicted. Only as time passes does the soul become aware that he is there. But, though it finds no name for him, wherever the afflicted are loved for themselves alone, it is God who is present.<sup>56</sup>

### **Love**

Love bade me welcome; yet my soul drew back,  
     Guiltie of dust and sinne,  
 But quick-ey'd Love, observing me grow slack  
     From my first entrance in,  
 Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning  
     If I lack'd any thing.

'A guest', I answer'd, 'worthy to be here':  
     Love said, 'You shall be he'.  
 'I, the unkind, ungrateful? Ah, my dear,  
     I cannot look on Thee.'  
 Love took my hand, and smiling did reply,  
     'Who made the eyes but I?'

'Truth, Lord; but I have marr'd them; let my shame  
     Go where it doth deserve.'  
 'And know you not', says Love, 'Who bore the blame?'  
     'My dear, then I will serve.'  
 'You must sit down', says Love, 'and taste My meat'.  
     So I did sit and eat.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Weil, 'Forms of the Implicit Love of God', in *Waiting for God*, 93.

<sup>57</sup> George Herbert, 'Love', in *The Poems of George Herbert* (Oxford: OUP, 1913), 196. This is the poem that Weil was reciting when she had her first mystical experience.