

about this book . . .

- Should the clergy always be serious?
- Can a parrot really preach?
- When is a student not a theologian?

This small volume contains three stories previously published in other books. Entitled *Primarily for Parsons*, the stories should also prove profitable for those not amongst the ranks of the clergy. Written somewhat tongue-in-cheek, they have also a serious note which helps to stimulate our thinking regarding the responsibility and privilege of pastoral exercises.

Written by an experienced story-teller, easy to read, and cheaply priced, these stories should provide more than a smidgen of entertainment.

Geoffrey Bingham is an Anglican minister. His experience as soldier, prisoner of war, farmer, writer, missionary, teacher, and family man, as well as theologian, has given him grounds for writing material which is Australian in tone, and relevant to the society in which we live. Some have found his books life-changing.



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Primarily for Parsons

by Geoffrey Bingham



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Primarily For Parsons

By Geoffrey Bingham

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FOREWORD

The three stories in this little volume have been abstracted from two other books. ‘The Preacher and the Parrot’ is contained in the volume entitled *The Concentration Camp* (NCPI, Blackwood, S.A. 1983), and ‘The Theological Student’ and ‘Soliloquy’ in the volume *I saw in the Night Visions* (NCPI 1986). Now assembled under the title *Primarily for Parsons*, the collection is mainly designed for pastors and other clergy, and even for theological students. We hope the title will so intrigue others that they will buy it in the way that men buy books entitled ‘For Women Only’. or women purchase ‘Only for Husbands’! In fact anyone might benefit from reading the present volume.

I am often asked whether this or that story I have written is fact or fiction. It is my delight and shrewdness mixed with a smidgen of teasing—never to let the questioner know. What we find in fiction is generally found in life anyway. The first two stories are written fairly tongue-in-cheek, and so I hope they will afford some amusement, as well as interest.

These days we are abstracting a story or an article from here or there, and putting them into a smaller volume because people’s reading span seems to be diminishing. Anyway we all like to have a small book in the car or in purse or pocket to snatch a vagrant reading when time permits.

I trust you have as much fun and fruit from reading these

stories as I have had in writing them.

By the way, there are plenty more available from whence these have come.

Geoffrey Bingham,
Coromandel East.
July 1987

THE PREACHER AND THE PARROT

The following is a story which is totally untrue. Yet, in contradiction to what I have just said, the story is wholly true. The story is that of a preacher and a parrot. In fact the parrot belonged to the preacher, or, if you will, the preacher belonged to the parrot. You will undoubtedly find the whole thing confused, as I myself have found it. It was also a matter of confusion for the preacher, to say nothing of the parrot!

The preacher of whom I speak was none of your run-of-the-mill preachers, although on first hearing him you might be tempted to think he was run-of-the-mill, or, as they say these days, 'suburban-mediocre'. Looking up at him in his fine pulpit you might be tempted to think, 'He is saying nothing.' You might even imagine he was saying fine phrases without putting too much body into them. In other words, you would think him empty, the utterer of drained cliches. Many a listener has been deceived along that line, I can tell you. However, let me say this: listen along for a time and you will be first intrigued, then captivated, and finally delighted. I can certainly promise you that, for I myself have been in those various states of listening.

To tell the truth the man had extraordinary histrionic abilities. You know, of course, what histrionic means. Roger in his famous Thesaurus has the disappointing and almost

laconic synonyms, ‘theatric, theatrical, acting, actors’. THE SHORTER OXFORD ENGLISH DICTIONARY goes into the matter more thoroughly, using terms like ‘stagey’, ‘acting a part’, ‘pretence’, and the like. It concludes by quoting John Cowper’s couplet:

‘Histrionic numm’ry that let down
The pulpit to the level of the stage.’

I hasten, of course, to deny that this is all histrionic means. To me it is better than that. It is the noble use of great words. It is the mellow and golden phrases, done to a turn, and issuing in magnificent succession, trumpeting from the throat of the preacher. It is one idea moulded finely, followed by another idea, and then yet another, until one is caught in a remarkable succession of ideas. It is that sort of thing which makes magnificent preaching, and makes it altogether tolerable—if not exciting listening.

Mind you, I am not an undiscerning man, and sometimes i did catch a touch of the theatrical, a flourish here and there which seemed to me to have come more out of conditioned reflexes rather than directly from the heart, but I felt uneasy, almost guilty that I had had such unworthy thoughts, and I quickly put them aside. After all it was the substance of what the preacher was saying that put me to shame. It was all about judging others, being wrongly critical, and the like. So ! learned to put down such thoughts. In fact I soon learned to mortify them, which, as you know, means to put them to death.

It is at this point I should introduce the parrot. Like myself he was a great admirer of the preacher. To look at there was nothing particularly magnificent about him: the parrot, I mean. In other words he was not as brilliant a bird as was his master. Even so he was not mediocre. He had his soft pastel greys and pinks which betrayed his origins. He was known as a ‘galah’, having come from that species, and

even as I remember this I am forced to chuckle, for in Australianese the term ‘galah’ is a disparaging one. Sadly enough Fontana/Collins’ DICTIONARY OF AUSTRALIAN COLLOQUIALISMS has the following comment: ‘Galah: An ass, nincompoop, sometimes in the expression “mad as a gum tree full of galahs”.’ It then quotes indigenous authors using the term in this disparaging way. I refrain from making the actual quotes because I feel they demean this whole species of fine and remarkable parrots.

Yet at the same time I am compelled in all honesty—to recount my experiences of galahs in the outback of the land of Australia. It is remarkable to come across a flock of these birds. Their noise is raucous, persistent, unending. They are calling to one another, but mostly they are demanding personal attention in the face of all others equally demanding attention. You might think it impossible for one galah to ignore the thousand other galahs in similar position to itself, but this is just what it does. One bird will hang by one claw of one foot. In fact it will cling by the shiny black tip of a single claw, hanging out both its wings, and the other leg—claws and all—and it will flutter in the most alarming manner. All the time it is performing this remarkable feat it will be screaming raucously—along with its 999 mates—‘Look what I can do! Look what I can do! ‘You expect any moment that it will fall, and be unable to recover itself; that its end will be a tangled, battered mass of black beak and pink-and-grey feathers on the hard, inhospitable ground beneath.

No way! This will never happen. The bird will accomplish amazing—even alarming—convolutions. It will flutter remarkably, twisting and turning its body, wings, and helpless loose leg, and cavort in such a way that you would think it might strangle itself or become so dislocated that it could never put itself together again. Yet nothing like this ever happens.

When the thousand birds have had their bit of megalom-

maniacal showing off, they recover in a moment. They return to normal. They come back to being rather graceful patches of grey and pink on their gumtree branches. There is a moment of gleeful satisfaction at their histrionic successes, after which another moment of preternatural silence in which, no doubt, there is an outward but insincere pretence of penitence for the outrageous show. Then they take flight, filtering out of the great eucalypts and wheeling towards the eternal west, much like a mobile sunset—pink, of course, with touches of grey and cloudy fleeciness.

You must forgive this departure from our story, but my memories have quite moved me. In one way they have nothing to do with the particular galah of whom we especially speak. That galah was a rectory galah, or a manse galah. Or perhaps he was a parsonage galah. Anyway, he had a history of belonging to this one preacher for many years, and was quiet for a parrot, and grave enough into the bargain. He was certainly none of your raucous and showy bush galah. He would sit above the shelves of books and look down calmly at the preacher as he went about his work of preparation. He would squint down as though trying to read the very print itself, though doubtless this is impossible for a parrot.

The preacher himself derived an amount of satisfaction from the parrot. It was as though he had a perpetual spectator to his work, a permanent and perennial observer who missed nothing he, the preacher, was doing. Anyone would find life gratifying enough if he were to have a constant, interested audience. So the preacher accepted, with due modesty, this approval of the parrot. Often, then, when he had shaped up a fine phrase, or simplified a tortuous thought, he would smile up at the galah and say, 'Oh hello, cocky!' and whilst the parrot itself rarely responded to other communications, it would generally on these occasions give a downward motion of its beak and

head which could easily have meant, 'I acknowledge the communication.'

The fame of the preacher grew. Ministering as he did in one of the more social parishes of his great city, he would have admirers who crossed many a suburb to listen to him. He now took for granted what had once been to him a coveted means of bringing his message, namely National Radio. You could hear him at 10:00 am. weekdays, quietly guiding your thoughts in his devotional study, until you too, or at least some of you, would feel the urge to make the pilgrimage to the church of his preaching. This church was rapidly becoming one of the few famous houses of the homily. In a way the preacher himself, though modestly aware of what was happening, was unchanged by the fame which was fast becoming his.

Perhaps it was the evident fame that stirred the galah. He was aware that the very thing his ancient tribe has perfected to a fine art was also the quality (unconsciously of course) of this eminent preacher. This may have been why his beady black eyes followed the preacher around his study as he practised his art for the Sabbath. When the preacher's hand went up in a gesture, so did the head of the bird. When the preacher raised a hand in solemn declamation, a leg of the bird would lift reflexively from its perch, and splay its claws in imitative gesture.

At first the thing was just faint imitation. After a time it became enthusiastic imitation and even mindful miming. There was no question of mindless mimicking, for the parrot was really into the matter. He was there as much as the preacher, who for the most part was unaware of the metamorphosis of his bird. He did not realise that the parrot was changing from a moronic parrot into an enthusiastic feathered divine. We would be going too far to say that he felt about his subject as deeply as the preacher, yet he seemed to do so. It would be an exaggeration to say that

he grasped theology in its essence, yet he made a fine show, appearing to do so, and this in depth.

In those early days the preacher was scarcely aware of him, the galah. So absorbed was the divine in his preparations that he would rarely spare the bird a glance. He was unaware that when he would make a disturbed gesture to his. (imagined) congregation, the bird itself would ruffle its feathers and go into agitated actions. He was unconscious that when he would make a sweeping bow of emotion that the bird likewise would open its wings, thrust forward its head, and imitate the bow. Most of this passed the preacher by. Yet, as psychologists tell us, even unconscious awareness has its affects upon us. Quietly, yet powerfully, the actions of another accomplish deep effects within us. This is precisely what happened in the case of the minister, that is to say in the conditioned case of the parrot.

Some Sundays when he was staring down at his magnificent congregation, and when he was in process of preaching, he would hear his voice as though it were that of the galah. At first, slightly mystified, he would toss off the thought with an impatient gesture of his magnificent head. (He had a special barber who knew how to bring out the nobility of his client by the very way he cut the hair, thus bringing, so to speak, another weapon into the spiritual armoury of the great man.) Gradually, however, the idea began to penetrate that he was, in some sense, echoing the parrot. In the first instance of course the parrot had echoed him. This was mainly in gesture rather than in word, for the parrot had few words. Knowing the idea to be quite ridiculous he did not have much difficulty in coping with it, and—given a moment of recollecting concentration—he was soon away into his histrionic exercises.

Alas! He could not wholly rid his mind of the matter. One Monday morning—after a tiring yet gratifying Sunday he chose to regard his parrot in an exercise of meditative

contemplation, and what he saw disturbed him deeply. As he regarded the parrot, so, equally, it regarded him. At first he thought the parrot was actually thinking about him, as he about the parrot, and then he realised with a sense of shock that this was not the case. The parrot was faithfully imitating him. He was moved by this deep devotion. How well he knew the adage, 'Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery.' After a time he shook himself from his reverie and said, 'Hullo, cocky!'

For a moment the parrot considered the matter and then answered politely, 'Hullo, cocky!'

The preacher thought. 'Well, of course, the parrot is not going to say, "Hullo, preacher!" After all, we are not conversing. It is just a parrot imitating. 'So he stood, experimentally lifting one hand in the air, and declaimed, 'My dear people.'

To his immense surprise—even shock—the parrot said, 'My dear people.'

After that the preacher sat down. The bird was already on its perch, but even so it made a gesture of lowering its body to perch level. The minister was amazed. He then made a clever move. He took a book and opened it. This the bird could not do, but the man of theology noted with uneasiness that as he scrutinised the text, so did the bird. At least this is what it seemed to be doing. He found it a bit unnerving that morning to do the things he had normally done, only to have them, in essence, imitated by the parrot. Of course he had a certain sense of pride in owning a parrot who was so imitative, if not as intelligent. After a time he became accustomed to the fact, and simply accepted it. It was even a matter of pride to be able to say, 'I and the parrot are one!'

Even so the discovery had made its deep impact upon his own soul. He would often invite the feathered creature to imitate some rolling phrase he had coined, some magnificent idea he had manufactured, and with due gravity and wholesome objectivity the bird would duly respond. The

preacher noted with astonishment that the bird could speak with all the enthusiasm, gravity and affects that he himself used. He shook his head in wonder, but decided to keep the secret wholly to himself.

There were other matters I might mention, although some of them seem irrelevant, and yet you may perceive some connection between them and the narrative which now follows. The preacher—we must for obvious reasons always leave him unnamed—had a wife who showed little response to her husband's preaching. She listened to him dutifully, seated as always in the front pew, but no deep impressions seemed to be made upon her. Some may even have thought she was indifferent to the man. In fact her face betrayed nothing. Had you sought to discern her reaction or response you could read neither approval nor contempt. She just listened. but then again she may not even have listened. Anyway she attended the morning sermon regularly. although, to tell the truth, she had never been seen in the church for the evening services. The other matter is that she rarely, if ever, visited her husband's study. Also she left firmly alone the rector's companionate galah. She had never accepted the fact of a bird living perpetually in the house, and so her husband had to carry out the feeding of the parrot, the cleaning of its perch, and the renewing of its water supply. His daily chore was to vacuum the litter of nibbled corn and sunflower-seed husks.

Back, however, to the parrot: the metamorphosis in it was astonishing. It had by now quite perfected the art of imitating its master. It had become—so to speak—his very alter ego, so much so that the preacher. far from being astonished any longer, had come to regard the authentication of his actions as residing in the imitation of the bird. In a way it was pathetic, because the man himself had been so competent. We must remember of course that he alone fashioned the sermons. Also we must not forget the substance of what

he preached, for it too was his. No parrot could invent that! Yet even there he seemed to be developing a dependency upon the bird. When at a later date I discovered this I was greatly alarmed, and events proved the dire need for such alarm.

I go further. I describe the day when the parrot first attended a preaching service. I have erred in not previously describing to you something of the domestic life of the parrot. It was quite free to go where it wished. The windows of the study were opened during the day and it could—if it wished—venture outside. It could even—if it so desired—flutter up into the trees. Very rarely did such a happening take place. For the most part the parrot stayed inside. It ignored the garden, and certainly it abstained from the larger life of the parish. Whilst the preacher was not what you might call 'a parish man', i.e. one who undertook regular visitation of his people, yet of course he had from time to time made certain visiting tours. Not so the parrot.

The parrot simply flew into the church, and seated itself on the Ladies' Guild Banner. As you are probably aware. that sort of banner has a cross-piece on the upright pole from which the banner hangs, and it was perfectly natural for the bird to seat itself there. Its entrance had been unnoticed, for any fluttering of its wings was drowned by the triumphant music of the organ. (This sort of music was always a good mindsetter and highly prized by the preacher.) So it sat there, for the most part unobtrusive and quite silent during the prayers, Scripture readings and the hymns. Only when the preacher softly cleared his throat to announce his text did the bird come to life. It first of all craned forward and secondly turned its head on one side, as is the fashion of parrots, as though they are asking a silent question.

Then the antics began, or, should I say, the histrionics. I had quite come to love that word, and undoubtedly it fitted the bird, if not the preacher. Yet the preacher—though

totally unaware of the parrot's presence—was having deep problems. He was feeling that in some way he was echoing the parrot. It was as though he were the parrot and the parrot him. If the parrot had not gone through its imitative actions the whole matter would have passed unnoticed, for only a few adults and a sprinkling of children had observed the presence of the bird, and before the time of the sermon the children—according to the custom of the church—had gone off to another place to be kept quiet. Thus only a few noticed the parrot; that is until the sermon began. Gradually eyes were drawn to the parrot and his grave antics, so that the preacher became desperate to know why on this day people did not keep their eyes glued to him, and only him. He dared not risk a backward glance to the object of the people's attention, but kept on bravely with his monologue.

Alas! It was no monologue. It was not a dialogue, but what you might call a twin-monologue, or 'a shared experience'. It may even have been called a 'parallelologue'. Yet in all of this the parrot uttered not one word. Its actions constituted pure and perfect miming. Some of the audience were grave about the matter, and others bubbling within with great mirth. Only vagrant tears betrayed the mirthful, and here and there an audible gasp or two. Apart from that the service proceeded, but at the door the usual remarks were—for the most part—missing. No adulating, 'Wonderful sermon, pastor,' or 'Oh pastor, I found that so helpful.' Embarrassed or partly veiled eyes met those of the preacher, only to be hastily averted. The minister felt quite puzzled, that is until going into the church his eyes beheld the miscreant bird, head bowed forwards in sobriety and apt reverence.

One of the congregation leaders—elder or warden I know not—spilled the beans to his pastor. The preacher was inwardly horrified, but outwardly decided to make a joke of it, and laughingly shrug it off. Even so he went to the house with heavy heart, where his wife and children met him with

merry eyes. When he fled to his study the bird was already there.

'What have you been at?'' he asked, and the parrot repeated his question back to him.

For some moments he sat dejectedly, pondering the tragedy of the morning. Finally he decided to face the music, and went to lunch.

For the next few weeks there was no repetition of the event. He securely locked the windows prior to the service, and left sufficient water and seed to occupy the bird. You will scarcely believe me: when he returned each time, there was the parrot on his desk, gravely contemplating some opened book or even scanning chance notes left upon the table. The parrot was obviously compensating for its enforced absence from divine worship.

The day, however, arrived when the parrot was missing. Nearly on the Sabbath morning. It had disappeared. The sympathetic family searched for it, but nowhere was it to be seen. Perhaps the cat had got it, or the dog next door, or even some larger predatory bird. They did not know. The preacher was slightly ruffled by the loss of his friend. Even so he went to the church, and the service soon soothed him. as always, of course, it had soothed others. Only when he began to preach did he realise the parrot was present. This time he let his gaze swivel to the Ladies Guild Banner. There, surely enough, was the galah. Swallowing hard, he ignored the parrot and commenced his sermon.

For weeks he had been going through a strange experience. It had felt as though he were turning into the parrot, and the parrot into him. He was being transmogrified into avian being, and the bird into human spirit. Outwardly the two were as they had ever been. Inwardly there was a change of substance of hypostasis. It was curious and frightening experience. We cannot be sure how the parrot felt about it, but to the preacher the matter was weird and uncanny.

Sunday by Sunday he had heard his words sounding emptily in his own ears, mocking him, so to speak. When he made a gesture the shadow of the parrot was about him. He would sense its imitative actions. His hand would rise histrionically, and at the same moment he would sense a parrot wing in the same gesture.

The real problem was when his own words began to sound empty to him. He was realising that they belonged to the parrot and not him. For the parrot—so to speak—they were natural. They were real. Doubtless what he said was true, but then it sounded empty. The parrot may have been safely locked into the study at sermon-times, but even so he was the silent listener, the unseen imitator, the genuine utterer. It were as though the parrot had become the preacher and the preacher the parrot. Whilst this mystified him, it also enraged him, and then, curiously enough, gave him huge thoughts of unbelievable release and freedom.

You will not believe me, of course, if I tell you that the parrot now began to echo every statement he made. It was a curious matter. In that large church it was as though the preacher was being echoed. His sentence would finish and the last word would be repeated. In fact all the words were repeated, but then difficult to be heard. Likewise every action and gesture would be repeated or mimicked. The congregation was, by turns, appalled, delighted, hysterical, penitent, amused, shocked. The preacher's wife quite lost her usual control and indifference, being sympathetic on the one hand, and richly delighted on the other. Sometimes she seemed to be in silent sorrow, but most times she wept tears of joy, inhibited as that joy was because of wifely reverence to her man.

From that day a great battle grew between the preacher and his galah. He took to locking it up on Saturday evenings. He would not then return to his study on Sunday mornings but developed the habit of staying with his family

over breakfast, and even later. As time for service drew near he would get somewhat desperate. He wondered whether this unwelcome alter ego of his might somehow escape and turn up in the service. When it did not he was relieved, but then his sermons never seemed quite the same. Not that many were disappointed, for doubtless they were grateful for whatever was given to them. They knew themselves to be unduly privileged to listen to so competent a preacher.

The wily western bird took to slipping out on Saturdays, and quietly taking up its post in the church on Sunday mornings. Trying to shoo it away was fruitless. Once, when it was dislodged from the Ladies Guild Banner it took up its stand on another banner of lesser significance; the Men's Society Banner to be precise. The Sunday came when it alighted in the pulpit before the preacher climbed the many steps which led to such homiletical elevation. It perched behind the book-rest, and scarcely had the hymn finished 'the minister's head just appearing over the pulpit and it began to preach without waiting for the clergyman to begin his address.

There was not one there who did not understand this miracle. There was no laughter. There may have been fear, shock, and even dismay, but none laughed. Nor did the preacher, standing behind the bird, shocked as he was, grim and yet pathetic. It was as though he were meant to stand there, speechless, and listen to the bird. Anyway he was transfixed, rooted to the spot, and that was that.

If I told you that the bird gave a coherent sermon, and that his histrionics suited his words, then you would call me a liar. What is more you would immediately link the whole matter with the occult, and call it demonic. A spirit, you would say, spoke through the bird. What then I have to report is that the bird did not give a coherent message. It did not support its arguments with Scriptures. It surely did give an exhibition of histrionics, but they seemed to be so real, so

sincere, so earnest, as though the parrot were seeking to succeed where perhaps its master had not. All I know is that the bird drew from the rich treasury of a hundred or more of its master's sermons. How incongruous some of its statements were I will never be able to tell. I think everyone wanted to laugh, hugely, and yet the state of shock continued. The congregation—rooted to their pews—listened when another audience might have risen up and thrown the parrot out, or maybe wrung its neck. Yet who could blame them? Events like this rarely happen in true life, and maybe, never!

An ordinary and yet strange thing happened. Whilst the parrot was still burbling away the preacher left the pulpit. This was scarcely noticed, since the parrot was the primary focus of attention. Quietly the preacher made his way to the woman who was his wife. She was strangely silent. Her indifference had gone, and she was not amused. When he whispered something to her she slipped from the pew. He held her arm, steering her from the church. They were gone before the congregation was aware. The parrot preached on.

After a time the parrot ceased its strange articulated mixture of ideas, concepts, aphorisms, and pot-luck theology. In fact it !lapsed into silence. It continued to regard the congregation gravely, then, in a sudden act, flew off. It flew out of the church. It flew up into a tree. Suddenly—for all the children saw it—it hung on a branch, upside-down, and by the tip of one claw. Then it began to screech with a shrieking one can only call sheer hysteria. It called time and again for attention. One child went so far as to say that it actually shrieked, 'Look at me! Look at what I can do!' Naturally, that sounds too rich to be true, but I have often received a similar impression when looking at a treeful of galahs. Of course it may have uttered these words. I cannot be dogmatic, however.

The congregation was strangely muted when it flowed

from the church. No pastor was there to greet it. In fact— except to the leaders of the church—the pastor did not again present himself. The family somehow slipped away from the church rectory (or was it the manse or the parsonage?) and were not seen again. I have heard that the family actually went overseas, into another country. I have even heard that there they became genuine and dedicated missionaries. I cannot be sure of that, not having traced the fact, but recently I met the whole family in a country place in the State in which I live. The children had grown into healthy maturity. The wife of the former preacher seemed to me to be a most relaxed person, whilst I could scarcely recognise the preacher himself, so changed and altered was he.

Now comes the shock! He was still a preacher. I mean he was still a minister. I rigidly kept away from asking questions about his parrot, and about the events of the past, and particularly of that famous Sunday morning service, but he seemed quite happy to bring up the matter himself. Oh yes, they still had the parrot. Very grateful they were to it, too. Why? Well, anyone should understand why. They were, as a family, grateful to that clever bird. It had helped the family immensely. They harboured no grudge against the preaching parrot.

If that were not enough of a shock, the family warmly asked me to stay on until the Sunday. The wife of the preacher said, 'If you really want to hear something such as you've never heard before, you stay for the Sunday.' They even offered to put me up. Now—strangely enough, you may say—I did not remain until the Sunday, despite their gracious invitation. Frankly, I was scared. I did not altogether like the look in the eye of my past minister. I fancied that if I stayed we would have no histrionics, no polished delivery of a famed orator, and no splendid nuances and flourishes as he drove home his exquisite points. I had the fearful feeling that he would be direct to the point of

bluntness, and uncompromising to the point of inescapable logic. I had the distinct impression that listening to him would be highly dangerous; that what I would hear would reflect the changes I observed in him and his family. If I were not extremely careful my own life might be vastly changed by the truth and power of his present teaching.

That of course would not do. If we were to have that kind of preaching again as—indeed they used to have in times of old—then the face of the church might be changed, and those changes might even penetrate society itself, effecting all kinds of reforms, and whatever! What then would that do to our current and kindly traditionalism? I do not say that I beat a hasty and undignified retreat. I did not, but in my own way I put distance between that preacher and myself as rapidly as possible. I am not fool enough to misjudge a man. I can catch the gleam of fanaticism in the eye as well as the next man.

And yet, on reflection, I am not sure. Thinking of that relaxed wife, and the smiling preacher, and the grinning children. I am not at all sure.

THE THEOLOGICAL STUDENT

He could not consciously remember having any anger against God, although he knew most people did have some anger. He had once spent some minutes thinking about the whole matter, but he easily gave it up. He had no anger, but then also he had no love—for God, that is.

When his friend Francis asked him at the seminary why he had studied theology, he just shrugged his shoulders gently, smiled his soft, disarming smile, and gave no answer. When Francis persisted, he asked him, ‘Why then do you study theology?’ He watched amusedly whilst Francis went into a passion of explanation. In the heat of that passion Francis forgot to ask Demetrius in return why he studied theology.

For the most part the students were busy with life, and busy with Study, and they didn’t go too personally into reasons for being in seminary. It was generally understood that you would not be in seminary if you did not have ordination in mind, and of course most did.

Demetrius was brilliant. No one doubted that. His university course marked him out as an unusual scholar, what with all his distinctions and credits. In a way the seminarians were quite proud of him. They may have envied his

accomplishments, but he was the kind of man who made no stir with what he did.. It is to be doubted whether anyone hated him, even if no one appeared to have special love for him. They recognised his abilities, and left matters there.

He, for his part, seemed to like that. He went on his quiet, steady way, studying, doing research, and getting his degree. Nothing seemed to disturb him. Nor did he envy others: perhaps because he had little reason to do so. He completed his seminary course with distinction and honours, and took a considerable number of prizes. It was quite amusing to see him go forward at the call of his name to collect prizes for firsts or seconds, though rarely seconds.

So he was a man covered with honours. The church leaders seemed to expect great things from him and they suggested ordination. He said he would want to think about that a little more, as it hadn't been in his mind. They were somewhat surprised and even a little disturbed, but agreed he should have time to do so.

After a year or more, he agreed to ordination, and he was made a deacon. Later he was ordained a priest, and being in clerical orders it was suggested he take a parish. He shook his head at that. For the moment' he did not wish to take a parish. They understood, they said, for he was finishing his doctorate in theology, and perhaps wished to concentrate on that.

Just prior to completing his doctorate they suggested he might like to be a lecturer in the seminary. The thought seemed to intrigue him, and he said he would need time to think about that. When he received his doctorate he thought he ought to do theological research studies in Germany, for he had a liking for Teutonic theologians. Also he had a number of particular matters which he desired to research.

He was never short of money, for his family was a wealthy Greek family, and looked after him well. They belonged to the Greek Orthodox Church, but did not seem to mind the

fact that he was ordained in another church. So with their support he continued his studies.

Francis his friend barely made his way through seminary training. He became a curate in a parish, and was very busy. He loved people very much, and was always anxious to help them. He had a high view of God and His love, of man also, although he had a very Augustinian and Pauline view of man, namely that man was incredibly depraved because of his fall into sin when he rebelled against God. Demetrius was not amused at this theology. He seemed to be quite detached about the various theological views, although he was deeply interested in them all.

The closest thing to friendship that Demetrius had was his relationship with Francis. He knew Francis was no scholar, but also knew that Francis had a passionate regard for the truth, and was always trying to learn more of it. For this reason Demetrius would lend him appropriate books. For example, if Francis was gripped by the theme of justification, then Demetrius would work out a good reading plan, and supply his friend with the appropriate books and journals, marking off the related articles for him. For this Francis was most grateful.

Demetrius puzzled him greatly. He appeared to have no ambition. He just liked studying theology. He never seemed to put it to any use. Whilst, from time to time he lectured in theology, he rarely preached a sermon. He never seemed to be attracted by the idea of a relationship with a woman, or by the thought of marriage. He was teased about these things, but took the teasing good-naturedly and calmly. He just went on with his life.

He refused the offer of a lectureship at the seminary, but received an offer to take up the position of librarian. The seminary had a vast library, and one filled with antiquarian

treasures. His salary was modest, but he seemed to care little. Perhaps his family supplemented his income. He was most helpful to the students in directing them to the materials they needed. For himself, he took the opportunity to extend his reading, although he seemed indifferent to obtaining further degrees. In fact he had all the degrees he needed, and the few articles he wrote were highly respected throughout the theological world.

Francis had a deep affection for his friend, but was continually puzzled by him. He never detected the slightest warmth in regard to preaching, or even teaching. He wondered how Demetrius could be a priest and yet not want to take a parish, take up a chaplaincy, share in some social work, or give himself to personal counselling.

When he questioned Demetrius, the man would give his quiet smile and wave it off. 'Not my cup of tea,' he would say, and Francis would have to accept that.

One day when Demetrius gave him this answer, he suddenly felt compelled to ask, 'What, then, is your cup of tea?'

Demetrius looked at him thoughtfully, but simply said, 'I really don't know.'

Francis was quite shocked. 'Every one has a cup of tea,' he said sturdily.

'Do they now?' said Demetrius non-committally, and smiled again.

This time, when he left his friend, Francis was disturbed. There had always been an uneasiness in his mind about Demetrius, but it had been mostly unconscious. Now it surfaced. He took the conversation away in his mind, and thought about it. It worried him until Rene his wife detected something unusual, and made him open up on the score.

Rene was a discerning person. She had been a deaconess at the seminary, and had done part of the course with both Francis and Demetrius. She was an uncomplicated person,

and generally spoke her mind with vigour.

'He has never experienced God,' she said. 'That's his only problem.'

Her statement shocked Francis. He could not imagine a person studying all that theology without knowing God.

'Mind you,' Rene said, 'it is not that he is a wicked man. He doesn't have anything against God. He just doesn't know Him.'

Francis stared at her, aghast. Next time he and Demetrius talked, he blurted out what was on his mind. 'Do you know God?' he asked. 'I mean, do you know Him personally?'

Demetrius seemed slightly amused, but remained serious out of regard for Francis. 'I know a lot about God,' he said, 'but I don't think I have ever wanted to know Him.'

Francis looked as though he would have liked to hold both hands to his ears, but he struggled on, bravely. 'You mean to say,' he said, 'that you, who have studied more theology than any of us, don't really know God, and that you don't want to know Him?'

Demetrius nodded. The smile had gone, but he was gentle enough. 'As yet I don't want to know Him,' he said. Then he asked, 'Why should I?'

Francis seemed too overcome with inward emotions. He just kept staring at Demetrius, and after a time went away. Demetrius looked after him thoughtfully, but the moment passed and he was his old detached self. He immersed himself in one of the Teutons, Moltmann to be precise. He quite liked Moltmann.

Francis kept thinking about the matter, but Demetrius didn't.. When Francis broached it again, Demetrius looked at him thoughtfully, but did not seem to mind.

'Whether a person can know God or 'not,' he said, 'doesn't figure in my thinking. I am sure some believe they know Him, and that some believe they don't. They may be right:.. they may be wrong. I have no way of knowing.'

‘Are you an agnostic?’ asked Francis, astonished.

Demetrius thought about that. ‘Probably not,’ he answered.

‘Then an atheist?’ Francis said.

‘I really don’t think there are atheists in fact,’ Demetrius said.

‘I am sure everyone needs to think there is a God, and so they do.’

‘And is there a God?’ Francis asked, looking closely at his friend.

‘Oh, I would think so,’ Demetrius said. ‘I have always operated on the idea that there is, but then I have never been in belief or unbelief as such. I simply want to know all I can know.’

This thought was beyond Francis. He left quite deep in thought, and Rene had to rouse him out of it. ‘You’ll never get any change out of Demetrius,’ she said, ‘so don’t lose any sleep. That’s the way he’s decided to be, and that’s the way he is.’

This reasoning, too, was beyond Francis. He was a bit awed at his wife’s discernment. He busied himself with ministry, which was personal, in the study, and in the pulpit. That made him feel happy. Rene liked him that way, and she was a good wife, as well as a good teacher. The women loved her, and she helped them greatly.

He just feared going near Demetrius. He had discovered a Demetrius whom he had not known, but he supposed Demetrius had not changed. That was how he had always been, and it was just that Francis had not understood him. Rene did, but then she was undisturbed by her knowledge. Francis was greatly disturbed. He thought, he prayed, he even wept.

One day he had an idea. He talked with Demetrius. He had gone to him for reading material on the subject of suffering, and Demetrius had listed some reading for him. On the strength of the subject, Francis asked his friend whether

he had gone through great suffering.

‘Goodness, no!’ Demetrius said. ‘I’ve lived a very quiet life. Quite sheltered in fact.’

‘If you had suffered, then you could be quite angry with God. This would explain a lot.’

‘Angry with God!’ Demetrius exclaimed. ‘For goodness’ sake, why should I be angry with God?’ He looked calmly at Francis. ‘How could you be angry with someone you don’t even know?’

‘Perhaps you don’t know Him because you won’t,’ said Francis. ‘Perhaps you are angry and don’t know it. Your anger then would have turned you against Him.’ He could not fathom the calm smile that was on Demetrius’s face. ‘It may be that as a babe or a child something happened Which shocked you, and now you cannot cope with the thought of God.’

Demetrius was unruffled. ‘I can cope-very well with the idea of God,’ he said, ‘but I admit I have no desire to cope with Him, Himself. I ask myself why I should know God. What I want to know is who and what He is, what He thinks and what He does.’

Francis was astonished. ‘Why would you want to know that, if you don’t want to know Him?’ Demetrius seemed uninclined to answer and Francis left, gripping the reading list in a passionate hand. He exploded that night in the bedroom with Rene.

She was calm and .dispassionate. ‘You can’t make a person want to know God.’ Then she looked at him curiously. ‘Don’t let it get to you,’ she said, ‘and for goodness’ sake don’t play the counsellor with him. You’ll get nowhere.’

She was deeply in love with Francis. She liked his unswerving honesty, his unfailing integrity. She envied him. For herself, she knew she vascillated quite a bit. She was uncomplicated, but when things became complicated, then that was the time she vascillated. She played time off, trusting that

things would sort themselves out, and since they generally seemed to do so, then for this reason she didn't look too critically at her own failures in total integrity.

Francis was like a dog with a bone or a terrier with a rat. Demetrius did not appear to mind his persistent questioning, and answered as often as he could; always calmly, too. He never seemed to have bursts of passion, and certainly never any deep feelings, either positively or otherwise. He was not exactly mused with Francis's interrogation, but then he showed no resentment.

At Synod meetings, when sharp issues arose; it became customary for the body of representatives to appeal, time and again, to Demetrius to give a detached and objective view 'of a subject. He was good at this. No one ever questioned him on the matter of partiality. He seemed to have no axe to grind. Some didn't like this. Old Carrickdove, the City Archdeacon, reckoned Demetrius was totally unfeeling, always emotionally uninvolved.

'Can't come at the man,' he often growled, but he, no less than others, was always keen to hear his comments. They were so fair, and Demetrius seemed to get to the heart of the matter.

'Too cold for me,' Carrickdove complained, '—he feels about nothing.'

This appeared to be the fact. At the same time the Synod appreciated the theological priest for his acumen. Francis, for his part, seemed perpetually troubled. He would stare at Demetrius in puzzlement, sometimes sigh, but he never gave up. He was going to get to Demetrius—whatever.

One opportunity came when Demetrius's father died in a crash. The circumstances were strange. The police thought there were elements not above suspicion. Demetrius seemed slightly moved by the event, but saw nothing suspicious in its happening. Francis went with him to the funeral, conducted in the Greek Orthodox ritual. There Were many tears,

and. some wailings. Demetrius moved calmly amongst the family, but his calmness disturbed Francis. The family did not seem to mind. They knew their Demetrius.

After the funeral they were driving back to the seminary. Francis said, 'You didn't appear to be too moved by it all.' 'Didn't I?' Demetrius said, stating ahead.

Francis concentrated on his driving. 'Nothing ever seems to move you,' he said, and there was a trace of anger in his voice.

Demetrius was still staring ahead. 'I guess we never know how we are in our depths,' he commented quietly.

Francis was startled. He had never thought of Demetrius talking about 'depths'. It comforted him a little. He sighed. 'Well, do you reckon he is in glory now?'

Demetrius said gently, 'Do you mean, is he in heaven?' He began quietly to spell out the theology of death, and the theology of life-after-death. Francis's heart went cold. He jabbed his foot on the accelerator.

When they reached the seminary Demetrius alighted. Francis said, 'What on earth do you have, apart from theology?'

Demetrius looked at him thoughtfully. 'Theology is plenty to have,' he said.

Francis snorted. 'One iota or God is worth tonnes of theology,' he said, and shot off, the tyres leaving a smidgen of rubber on the road. Demetrius stared after him for a time. Then he shrugged and went inside.

One day Francis and he discussed celibacy. Demetrius said he wasn't a celibate, nor was he opposed to celibacy.

Francis exploded. 'You never seem to side with anything,' he said. 'You just collate all the knowledge you have, but you never do anything about it.'

Demetrius gave him a thoughtful stare. 'Of course,' he said, leaving Francis bewildered and uneasy. Francis talked with Rene. She said she understood that.

‘He is committed to nothing,’ she said, ‘and to no one. Except, of course, himself.’

‘I have never seen a sliver of ambition in him,’ Francis said.

She nodded. ‘He thinks ambition is too paltry. I think he despises it, or maybe just disregards it, like everything else but ‘himself.’

Francis said, ‘He doesn’t even seem to have self-regard.’ Rene smiled. ‘Where is your Pauline-Augustinian theology?’ she mocked lightly. ‘In us all there is a hankering for our own glory.’ She quoted Milton’s words:

*Fame is the spur that the clear spirit doth raise,
(That last infirmity of noble minds),
To spurn delights, and live laborious days.*

Francis always frowned when he didn’t understand his wife. Today he scowled. ‘I can’t imagine what you are at,’ he said.

What alarmed Francis—and others, for that matter—was the lobbying that went on for the office of the next Archbishop. Dr Arnold, the present Archbishop, had tendered his resignation because of age, and the Diocese was discussing the next man for the job. There was the usual jockeying of the various parties, but the name that came up so many times was that of Demetrius, although he was quite young.

Francis knew why many wanted him. They knew he was stable theologically, and they knew he would not favour any ecclesiastical or ‘theological party. Francis went cold and stiff inside when he thought of Demetrius being an Archbishop. He kept remembering Rene’s words, ‘He doesn’t even know God.’

He talked with his friend. Demetrius was amused by the

pre-election lobbying. He knew his name had been put forward. ‘It would serve them right if I were elected,’ he said. Francis had never heard him laugh in quite that way. ‘It wouldn’t matter all that much,’ Demetrius went on. ‘If I were elected I guess I could do the job as well as most. But then, what is the point?’

‘What do you mean?’ Francis demanded, his eyes widening. ‘Wouldn’t you accept the position?’

Demetrius wasn’t smiling. ‘You and Rene say that I don’t know God. You may well be right. I think an Archbishop should at least think he knows God. I am sure all clergy ought to believe they know God. However, there have been many who haven’t, and they haven’t much cared. Maybe I don’t care on the whole—about knowing God, I mean—but then being Archbishop wouldn’t be good either for me or the church.’

Francis felt his heart miss a beat. ‘Then there is a “good”,’ he said quickly, ‘and if there is a “good”...’

Demetrius had already cut him off. ‘I’m not interested in the Archbishop’s office,’ he said. ‘I don’t favour ambitious men taking on that responsibility.’

Francis and Rene discussed the conversation, going over it carefully. This time Rene was puzzled. ‘He’s a bag of mystery, that one,’ she said.

The new Archbishop was an import. Also he was a scholar of the first water. He and Demetrius seemed attracted to one another. The Archbishop shrewdly appraised his leading theologian. He was interested in Francis’s friendship with the theologian. After a time he offered an Archdeaconry to Francis. He seemed to have some affection for the blunt cleric and his discerning wife. A trifle bewildered Francis accepted the honour and the work that went with it. He wondered whether Demetrius would see this as ambition. Demetrius seemed to think nothing about it. In fact he was busy about becoming married.

To the surprise of many he took a wife, and they were to all appearances quite happy. Francis and Rene 'knew it wasn't just in appearance. The new pair was most contented. Lisa was no theologian, but she was a person of joy and that seemed to suit the calm Demetrius. He went on gathering theology, sometimes writing articles.

Then the tragedy happened. On holidays Lisa fell or slipped over a cliff. She was battered and dead by the time the rescue helicopter reached her. Rene comforted Demetrius, but he seemed undisturbed. It was Francis who noted a new look in his eye, and who heard a new note in his voice. But after some weeks the look went and the voice was back to normal. Demetrius seemed to be his usual self. Francis thought he would test out his friend's famous objectivity. It couldn't hurt, surely.

Demetrius, for the most part, ignored his tentative probes. He came out with a startling statement.

'I have never really wanted to know God,' he said. 'I have always wanted to know about God. For that matter, about man and about the universe—creation, if you like to call it that. I have just wanted to gather as much information and knowledge as I can. I still want to do that.'

'Yes,' said Francis, bewildered, not understanding his friend, 'and why is that?'

'I have always wanted to know as much as God,' said Demetrius. He stared at Francis. 'That's all,' he said abruptly, remaining quite calm.

Francis was stunned. 'I can't figure why,' he muttered.

'Oh,' Demetrius said, 'that is quite simple. If you know as much as God, then you know all you need to know.'

'You mean you are equal with God!' Francis stared in frozen horror.

'A man is a man, and God is God,' said Demetrius in a soft voice. 'You can't alter being a man, but you can be 'more and more of a man when you have more and more

knowledge.'

'Like hell you can!' said Francis. 'The more you know, the less of a man you are.'

Demetrius wasn't smiling. 'That is quite brilliant for a man of your calibre. Fortunately it is not true. We have been given good minds, and we ought to use them. Wisdom grows where knowledge enlarges.'

'Piffle!' said Francis hotly. He was wishing Rene were with thorn. She would know what to say. This was the first time Demetrius had talked like this: perhaps it had to do with Lisa's death. He felt about in his memory for a quote from Paul. 'Knowledge puffs up,' he said savagely, 'but love builds up.'

Demetrius looked at him as though seeing Francis in a new light, or perhaps for the first time. 'You certainly seem to have Paul on your side,' he said, 'but it isn't as simple as that. Love can use the knowledge it has, and the wisdom that it brings.'

Francis subsided. After a time he said gently, 'So, Demetrius, you have both love and wisdom.'

He saw the empty look in Demetrius's eyes. 'I didn't claim that,' Demetrius said, and his voice was cold, and—for that matter—tired.

Later, when they were discussing the matter, Rene said, 'He must be nearing the end. He must be running out.'

Francis didn't understand her. 'He's lived on one thought,' Rene said, 'to know as much as he can. He told you that. He wants to know all a-man can know.'

'But why?' Francis demanded. 'Who would want to know everything?'

Rene too was puzzled. 'I guess nobody knows why anyone does anything. Maybe the drive is hidden too deeply to discern it.'

Next time he and Demetrius met, Francis went straight to the point. 'Why would you want to know so much? What

would its value be?’

Demetrius didn’t answer the first part of the question. To the second he said, ‘Every man should fill out his capacity. That’s what I am doing.’

Francis said, ‘You have hardly touched your emotional capacity. You never filled that out.’ He didn’t wait for a reaction. ‘Do you want to be as God?’ he asked, some heat in his voice.

Demetrius shrugged. ‘To the contrary. I want to be man. The more I contrast with God, the more I am truly man. God is wholly other than man. So if I learn all I can, then I can relate to God on that score.’

Francis felt like stopping his ears with his hands. ‘That’s blasphemy,’ he said. ‘You just can’t decide that this is how things are. Man is not man in his own right. He cannot be himself apart from God, but only in God.’

He could tell that Demetrius was rolling his words over in his mind, seeking out some category to explain them. He would never let ideas confront him. He had to master them, and this he did without emotion.

When he didn’t reply, Francis suddenly burst out, ‘Are you angry with God? Are you wanting to get back at Him? Are you cutting yourself off from Him?’

Demetrius’s eyes and voice were mild. ‘I wouldn’t think so,’ he said. ‘All I know is that as a small child I made up my mind to know as much as I could, and that’s what I am determined to do. You use theology for your own ends. You use it to proclaim your message,’ to pastor your people, to heal those whose emotions have got beyond them. I don’t use anything for anything. I just know. I don’t even have to use my knowledge. Wisdom just comes and I live it.’

His words were a steel barrier suddenly flung up against Francis. Later When he talked to Rene, Francis said, ‘I suddenly thought of Paul’s words, “The natural man receives not the things of the Spirit, for they are foolishness to him.”

Also Jesus’ words, “Except a man be born anew he cannot see the Kingdom of God.” Rene, he doesn’t even see the Kingdom.’

In the night, when he awoke suddenly, all his thoughts were rushing up against him. He wanted to share it with Rene but she was peaceful in sleep, and he let her be. Memories of others rushed in on him, men who were professionals in their ministry. He wondered whether they had even begun to know God. Making such assessments troubled him, because he felt judgemental, and that was not his desire.

He remembered the man in seminary who had said, ‘Well, I see this Diocese is going in this direction. I am moving in the opposite direction, but if this is what is to be, then right now I do an about-turn and join ‘em. You just have to join ‘em.’ Francis had been amazed, and for some years he had watched the man. He was a Vicar of Bray, without doubt. Francis found it difficult to talk with the man. He could never forget the words of this time-server.

Others had come to his memory. One was a man who said his mother could not decide whether he ought to go on to the stage or enter the ministry. The ministry had won—or lost—according to the way you saw it. The man was a consummate actor. He was only one amongst the politicists. They were the ones who always sensed which way the wind was blowing. They worked hard—if deviously—in their ascent up the ecclesiastical ladder. These worshipper power, the high places, and the plaudits of men, which they graciously acknowledged, or pretended nothing of the sort was going on!

Even so, there was no one like Demetrius. He had no thought of party politics, of fame or achievement; only this strange drive to know more and more. Sometimes Francis felt he was living in a nightmare. He could somehow cope with the ambitions of some, the professionalism of others, but never with this drive of Demetrius to know more than a

man had ever known, and just about as much as God is thought to know.

It was the coming of a plain evangelist which changed things. Tony Arkrew was an ordained man, seminary trained, and quite a good theologian., but he seemed to laugh at theology—anyway, at the kind of theology which. had occupied Demetrius so thoroughly. This intrigued Demetrius, who—so far as Francis knew—had never been intrigued by anything. He was not only intrigued: he respected Tony and his reasoning. Francis, Rene and Demetrius had never heard anyone with the original views Tony had on the Scriptures, doctrine and theology. In fact it seemed absurd to call him an evangelist, so unlike the typical evangelist was he.

‘What arrested Demetrius was the strange statement that Arkrew made one day. He said, ‘God doesn’t reason. He is most simple.’ Demetrius was startled. It was the first time that Francis had witnessed such a reaction.

‘Repeat that,’ he said, and Tony did. Demetrius pondered it. ‘Quite remarkable,’ he commented. He went off thoughtfully.

Francis asked Tony whether he thought Demetrius .knew what he was getting at.

‘Oh yes,’ he said, ‘he knew I meant that God doesn’t have to work anything out. He knows. He doesn’t have to plan in the way that we do. He just knows a thing and it is so. He never comes to know anything. Anything that is, is because He knows it thus.’

It was shortly after the incident that Francis noticed a change in Demetrius. He was not as calm and settled as he had always been. Sometimes he would ask Tony to come to the Greek Orthodox services, and he would sit, listening and watching, as though he might discover something. He carted Francis around to other places too. To Francis’s surprise he

even asked Rene to share in what seemed to be some kind of theological window-shopping. He found nothing to fit what must have been a need, and probably the only need of this kind he had ever known.

It was Rene who first realised that Demetrius was unsettled. ‘Tony’s ideas have taken the heart out of his work of knowing theology,’ she said.

In Synod Demetrius did not seem to be quite so detached. He was still objective, but it was as though he was weighing up different views, and questioning the validity of some of them. At the same time he seemed to look closely at members of Synod, both the lay-persons and the clergy. It was as though he were discerning their approach to’ theology. At times it almost seemed that professionalism worried him. Demetrius had never been known to worry about things, especially things such as professionalism. He would have explained his attitude as one of realism. He would have shrugged his shoulders, denied any Cynicism, and wondered what the fuss was about, if anyone had complained, and of course no one had. Folk had known and accepted his realism.

One day Demetrius talked to Rene about Lisa. ‘It was strange,’ Rene told Francis. ‘It was like a person who has been bound and numb getting loosed and circulation coming back into him. It was ‘both painful and joyful. Demetrius seemed in terrible pain, yet wonderfully. joyful.’

When they told Tony, he just nodded. ‘Sounds like the new birth to me,’ he said.

Another day Demetrius talked about his father. He asked Francis how he viewed death. Francis was surprised, because Demetrius had been so calm about death—Lisa’s and his father’s. Now it was as though it were all just dawning on him. Francis noticed with a sense of shock that when Demetrius talked about Lisa there were tears in his eyes. Tears came to him, too. From that time Francis, Rene and Tony became Demetrius-watchers. They stared steadily at a

gentle miracle that was happening before their eyes.

Two months later the Synod was startled by something Demetrius said. He had been appealed to on some social issue and the way of representing their view to the Government. Demetrius had never been known for an outburst, and in a way what he did was not an outburst, but it was untypical of him. His voice sounded passionate, and to some even critical.

‘You’ll never make it that way,’ he said strongly.. ‘Political pressure isn’t Christian. It’s all against the Gospel. Weakness is the only power we have, so we had better use it.’

Francis noticed the Archbishop talked quite solidly to Demetrius after the session, during the morning tea break. Demetrius seemed thoughtful, but not disturbed. At lunchtime he and Tony got together, and they were both animated. Francis had never seen Demetrius animated.

A few weeks later Demetrius invited Francis, Rene and Tony to his place for an evening meal. Francis and Rene saw that Demetrius had brought out photographs of his father and Lisa. He seemed content to look at them during the meal.

While they were eating, Demetrius suddenly smiled whimsically. The smile startled the three of them.

Demetrius said, ‘This is a sort of Messianic feast.,

No one said anything. Rene felt her heart beginning to race. Francis’s eyes were bright, and Tony looked curious.

‘I imagine you have noticed in T.V. cops-and-robbers or cloak-and-dagger plots that they always end up with a celebration meal. They get into some restaurant; or even at home, and have a victory meal.’

The three nodded. Demetrius grinned. ‘This is a victory meal,’ he said. ‘I’ve come to life I’ve been regenerated.’

Francis’s heart seemed to stop. Tony nodded calmly. ‘I thought it was coming on,’ he said. ‘That other thing was

impossible. Knew you couldn’t keep it up.’ He heaped icecream on his fruit salad.

Rene felt the tears coming and stopped them. They were all silent. They all seemed to be in a dream and time was irrelevant. It drifted around them as Demetrius talked.

‘It may sound silly to you, but when Tony said that God doesn’t get to know anything, and that He doesn’t have to reciocinate as we do, then I was startled. My whole life was built up on the idea that getting knowledge of God, man and creation would set me up at the highest point-of authentic human being.’ He grinned. ‘A human being is a human, being.’ He waved a hand. ‘I know it isn’t original, but it’s powerful. I saw nothing wrong in becoming the best human being possible. Then Tony knocked out the whole basis of my life’s endeavours.

His eyes clouded a little. ‘Now I can see that in my ignorance I was incredibly arrogant. I argued that I didn’t want to be equal with God, but I was building up a horrible tower of Babel in my mind. Its bricks were concepts, and its mortar was knowledge. I really thought I could get knowledge and understanding that would place me above everything.’

His shudder was almost imperceptible, but it sent a thrill through, Rene. She wanted to weep with huge horror and frightening joy. Tony stared, fascinated, and Francis was immolated with a strange heat.

‘That must be about the most hideous pride a human creature can know,’ said Demetrius.

Tony nodded. ‘It’s Eden and the serpent all over again. Man really wanted to evaluate everything—God, man and creation—and be correct in his knowledge of all these things. He didn’t want to be evil, only someone in himself.’

‘All those years of theology!’ Demetrius said, as if it was incomprehensible. He looked at Francis and Tony. ‘You fellows were the real theologians,’ he said.

Tony smiled, and there was a bit of sadness in it. ‘Think what you can do with your treasure troves of useful knowledge. With the new view it can be twenty-four carat gold.’

Rene smiled in a feminine way. ‘Let me get us some coffee,’ she said brightly.

Francis knew she was on the edge of great weeping, and he steadied himself. ‘Get it quickly,’ he said. ‘We need that coffee.’

The three men had one mind. They kept thinking how proud a human heart can be, and how arrogant a human mind. Francis saw the whole thing as a horrible white cover of unbelievable self-righteousness. Tony saw it through the eyes of realism: this is how human beings are, in their gross pride. Demetrius sat still, thinking about Saul of Tarsus describing himself as the foremost of sinners, when all the time he had thought of himself as blameless before God and man.

He knew that if he kept looking at himself as he had been, and if he looked without the fact of grace, then for the rest of his life he would struggle in some terrible morass of guilt and remorse. Somewhere in his mind, in his theological memory, a phrase dredged itself out: ‘Not having my own righteousness’. It startled him for its very aptness. It also released him in the last. There were now no bonds.

Rene was coming in with the coffee on the tray: Just for a second he thought it could have been Lisa. It was not really having known Lisa that had showed him he had not known God—that he had only known about Him, just as he had only known about Lisa. With a warm sense of joy he understood that he knew God. Also he knew Lisa. For that matter, he knew Francis and Rene and Tony. This was the true knowledge, the true wisdom.

As he took the coffee—along with milk and sugar—he felt it almost to be the ultimate Messianic feast.

‘Coffee’s good to celebrate,’ he said, and they all knew what he meant.

SOLILOQUY

THE Old man leaned his head against the pew. He did this gently, settling down for the session which was about to begin. He always prepared his body and mind for the sermon, or, as they would say these days, ‘the address’. The hymn had finished, the people were calming themselves and like him setting themselves up to hear what would be said.

He smiled faintly, for he had a dry sense of humour. Some even called it grim, but underneath the signs of old age he was young enough to see the humour in grim situations. He was not a man of severe spirit, but he was strong in his views: very strong. He knew some were settling down to not hearing, and it was that thought which brought the faint smile.

The preacher was unknown to him. The aged listener had never lost his interest in young preachers. He still felt that faint quickening of the pulses which told him a young Spurgeon might be up there in the pulpit and in the making. Maybe a Whitefield or a Wesley, or even a Martin Luther. He sighed at the thought and memory of these great men. So few like them today, so few!

When the young man gave out his text, the old man felt a touch of sadness. The way a man began the message

generally told him the quality and measure of the person. A man either had authority or he did not. This young man certainly thought he had authority that was evident. But the authority lay in the gifts and talents which were his, not in that grand delegation from God which gave special stature to frail human flesh. He saw that the person in the pulpit was strong minded.

Yet he was not brash. He had chosen his text not as a foundation for great exposition, but as a launching off pad for his own thinking. The old man admitted admiration for the preacher. He was not timid, but confident. He had something strong to say, and the world had better listen! So the old man listened. but knew what was about to be said. Just a few paragraphs of speech and he could generally predict the rest.

That predictive ability worried him faintly. Few books held him these days. No sooner would he commence reading than he would know the end from the beginning. Plots were so few, and novels so many. It was the same with the T.V. Only occasionally did someone create a plot that was different and new. Script-writers seemed to follow one another slavishly. Actors seemed almost homogenised. He could predict the gestures, the inflections of tone, the way they would handle emotion. He knew most of them were trained in the same school of acting. It seemed always to be emotion, and so rarely powerful passion. Again, it was only occasionally he saw a really great actor, and thrilling acting.

Deep down he chuckled. He knew he 'was' getting old: otherwise he would not be so critical. Few things moved him deeply? because-greatness seemed to have been swallowed up in a generation which was busy about life on the surface. People seemed so occupied in food, clothing, sport, and screaming music. He knew his criticism was often unfair. Never had people played so much sport, never had so many been occupied in music, but so much of it was linked with

getting money and fame that there was little time for grandeur in it all.

But of course the young man in the pulpit was on his way, and so one must hear. He listened earnestly, fighting back the desire to close his eyes and let the words flow over him. He knew what it meant to a preacher to see a person with closed eyes. It was anathema. It even seemed impolite, as if it were rudeness both to God and the proclaimer. So he smiled gently and lifted his strong blue eyes to the earnest and angry young man.

He refused to let the preacher's theme irritate him. Irritation, he knew, was just a synonym for frustration, and frustration was a covering word for anger., i.e. anger at being restricted. He fastened on the young man's enthusiasm. In this case it was a passion for justice. 'Good on you,' the old fellow said in his mind, 'good on you for caring about the world, its evil and its injustice, especially its injustice.'

Well, the young man cared: he cared about injustice. The colour began to rise in his cheeks, and with it the pitch of his voice. His eyes glowed, and in a thrice he was away. So much wealth in the West, so much poverty in the Third World countries. So little care by people, and so much to be done. He, the young preacher, was overwhelmed by the unfairness of it all. There seemed to be a suspicion of hot tears in his eyes. The aged listener felt gratified. 'People still feel strongly,' he said, and he restrained himself from the rubbing of hands together. A little imp of glee danced somewhere in his mind.

He was thinking, with an inward grin, 'Never has so much been given so often to so many in all the history of the world, as is being given today.' He knew, of course, that he was right. It was mainly a twentieth century phenomenon. Plagues, famines, earthquakes, wars and disasters had largely passed by unnoticed in other centuries. Here and there a philanthropist of note had made his contribution, but for

the most part governments of nations had done little. Occasionally it was politic for them to do so, but in these days giving was very much a run-of-the-mill matter.

So the young man did not need to be quite so angry. True, as a matter of degree, giving was by no means maximal, but it was now a fact of life. Recently the young rock-and-roll community of the world had given a hundred million dollars to the relief of the starving peoples in Africa. He greatly admired their entrepreneurial skills in raising so much money. As for himself, he had not been greatly attracted by the swaying, rocking, screaming audiences and musicians. He still believed money could be given generously without so much fuss. Still, what the young man was saying was certainly true: we could all give more!

It was not cynicism which made him temporarily withdraw from the hot flow of words. What was being said was predictable. The young man might not even know it, but he was voicing the thoughts of his seminary lecturer, and much of it was theoretical if not theatrical. The listener thought he could hear the mentor himself coming through the words of his student. Well, that was fair enough, even though repetitious.

The old man excused himself for slipping away into soliloquy. His heart loathed cynicism, but it loved humanity. It loved humanity no less than the irate young preacher, and maybe it loved even more. He knew that some questioned his love on the horizontal level of life. They complained that often he did not seem concerned with the needs which others had.

‘Needs!’ he would growl to himself. ‘Needs! It is not what a man needs that matters most, but what he is, especially when life seems to deny him fulfilment of needs.’ There, seated in his pew, he held the preacher in one ear whilst his mind dashed off to contemplate other things. He was not ashamed of the critical faculty within himself which scorned

unconsidered utterance, and demanded depth of thought and reasoning. He had little time for the idolatry of needs, or the thinking which assumed that persons were unduly suffering because they were denied perpetual comfort.

He wrenched himself back from his wayward thoughts, and deliberately concentrated on the preacher. He not only wanted to be fair, but wanted to will the young man back to the things which had launched him into training for the ministry of word and sacraments. He knew the young man had a history and was not being fair to himself. In being fair to his mentor he had smothered his original drive for proclamation. The fire for the Gospel was being used in the service of social justice.

The old man sighed: in former days there had been social justice also. People were not lacking then who cried out for better conditions, and less cheating on the human race. He acknowledged the right of a man to act fairly in an unfair world, and to call for reasonable justice, even if he would never get it! Yet, was this the thing which mattered most? How much guilt was there in social-justice people—guilt for their own good living when others starved and suffered? How much was genuine compassion in their hearts? ‘How much was Some form of self-atonement and no true constraint for acts of genuine love?’

When he sighed the second time he found himself grinning, whimsically. ‘I must not turn out to be a sigher,’ he thought, ‘sighing over all that is humanity, and the way it goes about living.’ So he gave up sighing. Instead he decided to give the preacher a break, and himself Also. He would go off unashamedly into soliloquy. He had been a preacher—indeed still was one—and knew that if a preacher could not keep his audience gripped then that was his own problem. Given in some folk set themselves not to hear, most would hear even in spite of themselves. Well, he himself was old, and so felt he was entitled to a little digression from an issue

which did not seem to be central to humanity, let alone theology.

It was then the memories began to flood into him—memories of other days—and his recall was fine and sharp. He was surprised at its strength and power. He began to think of his mentors, teachers in the time of his youth, his young manhood, and even into early middle age. These instructors were of two classes, firstly those who had confronted him personally, 'from the pulpit or the lectern, in churches or conferences, in theological halls, and other places scattered throughout the world. The second group was those who had spoken to him through their books.

Suddenly they were with him, in this church building, unseen by others, but like some powerful host of great minds and stout hearts. He saw them, one by one. Most of them were middle-aged or older. Not a few were quite aged, silverhaired or bald, faces gentle and smooth, or seamed with wrinkles, and wise in the eyes. The strange and wonderful thing was that he could recall the times and occasions when these men had spoken to him, taught him, impregnated their wisdom into his heart and mind.

On this occasion that old Canon, or this aged Archdeacon, or the frail but noble Bishop had preached from the Scriptures. as though there, and there alone, was the true word of God. But then—in a sense—the Word had become flesh. It had taken root in the depths of this man and that, and it caused them to tremble, to preach with power and deep conviction. There was little apologia in the modern sense of the term, i.e. trying to show how reasonable was the Gospel.

These men knew/here was little that was reasonable except to living faith; so 'they wasted little time trying to coax Or woo or inveigle into the truth. They proclaimed from high pulpits or low lecterns the true word of the living God. Some proclaimed it with gentle compassion, firm exhortation, and

winsome love. Others proclaimed it sternly, like some rugged prophet of old,- fearful of compromise, trembling for those who refused to hear, and confronting them with a decision On the matter. A few were brilliant with eloquence, but for the most part directness of speech and power of exhortation had been the order of the day.

By their ministry God was presented. The postures and stances of the men proclaimed that they were servants of the living God, and they trembled to introduce their own human opinions, to be clever and to entice the minds of their hearers. They seemed to know that the word of God would do its own work, and that they had no need to impress, cajole, threaten or coax. The word itself was a two-edged sword which would cut on one side of the blade for the salvation of the hearers, or on the other for their judgement, and this according to whether they had an ear to hear or not.

'Ah!' he said to himself,. 'there were giants in the land in those days.'

Tears came to him—part of his dotage he assumed—and they flowed down inside him. They were tears of gratitude, tears of satisfaction, and tears of joy. 'Where would I have been, and where would I now be, without such men?' he asked. In the same moment he knew there were equally great women too: his mother, his special aunt, wives of preachers and teachers who had imbibed the greatness of Christ and his eternal Father, women of the Spirit who in their inimitable feminine way had brought to him the love and nobility of the Gospel.

The flow of tears increased, but in them there was no sorrow. Why had so many made their contribution to his life? Why was he—of all men—so wonderfully blessed? He knew in the moment he asked the question that it was because he too had been destined to preach greatness. He shrugged his shoulders at the thought of greatness. He doubted whether he was great, but he knew he was inhabited by greatness, the

greatness of God and his Gospel.

He too, all his life, had quivered unceasingly at the greatness of the treasure which had been given to him. In the quivering there had been astonishment, wonder, and fear— a fear/hat he would fail. Oh yes, and he had failed. At times he had been afraid of those who opposed him. He had seen their dislike, their abhorrence of him, their scorn, and even their disgust. What he knew, nevertheless, was that it was misplaced. He could not remember ever setting out to please man. Frightened he may have been, but he had persisted, knowing the pressures and tensions of their opposition, knowing how some of them hated him and would have destroyed him, were that possible.

In some the hatred had turned to love, the anger to gratitude, and the scorn to wonder. In spite of him perhaps, yet through his utterance, they had been ushered into the presence of the eternal God. At that moment his spirit cried, ‘Yes, but I was taught by great men and women. I sat at the feet of godly mentors, and I imbibed at rivers of living water, flowing because of the passion of love, the intensity of devotion, and the insistence on integrity.’

Somehow, even through these glimpses of glory, the preaching of the young man broke through. He could see the eyes, hot with anger at injustice, condemnatory of those in the pews, staring down as though he would force them into the actions of justice. The old man deliberately withdrew into his old world, and his old companions. He let his mind rove over the great books on his own study shelves.

What great men they were! He could name them as powerful thinkers, teachers of substance, purveyors of truth in the grandest dimensions. Paul’s writings had gripped him irreversibly, soaking his mind and forming his theology. John had brought him into a world of love and of deep devotion to both Father and Son, and for that matter honour and love to all men. Peter had unfolded the mystery of suffering. John

the Seer had given him the key to history, the judgements of God on the human race, and the grand finale of all history.

Time and again he had been drawn back to the prophets, and he had even envied their ruggedness, their clear proclamation, and their insistence on the inflexible will and purpose of the immutable God, One ‘who was, and is, and is to come’. He realised that these had been one—these writers of the Scriptures—with the writers, teachers and preachers of two Christian millenniums. There had been the apostles and prophets of the early church, preaching and writing. Then there had been the apostolic ‘fathers, the sub-apostolic fathers, the deep minds of the medieval period, the brilliant discoveries of the Reformation era, and those men of practical holiness and healing wisdom—the Puritans.

In line with them had come the saints of the Evangelical Revival, the powerful Wesleyan proclamation of the Gospel, and the impassioned evangelism of men such as White field and his brethren. These had triggered off that same passion for redemption which had sent missionaries out in an unprecedented drive across the entire world, a movement which, even to his own day, had not been expended, nor had its passion exhausted.

Above all this the young man doggedly pursued his plea for justice. He insisted on his egalitarian gospel. He wanted justice for the oppressed, and for persecuted minorities. He called for reform in some areas, and tolerance and love in others. He spoke up for oppressed women, for the right to abortion, the freedom of homosexuals, the lifting of heavy oppression by domineering parents and police and governments. Only when these things came about would man be happy, woman be free, and young people live in joy and serenity.

Of course the old man heard him. He heard him sadly, acknowledging the problems, but not accepting the solutions. In some kind of nostalgia for the old days he turned

back to his old friends, grateful afresh for their instruction and training of his mind and heart and spirit.

He was grateful also to the good Lord for the hours and days, weeks and months and years that he had been spared from death, and given good life to preach the Gospel of grace, of redemption and holiness, and of ultimate glorification. Even so he could not stay in that past. He lived in the present—though for how long he knew not—and this angry young man in the pulpit was part of his present. He must attend to him, and not seek withdrawal from the age in which he lived, and in which he could still live and move and speak.

‘I was taught,’ he told himself and the preacher silently, ‘to believe that man has an evil heart when he is separate from God, and human greed and selfishness, pride and ambition, all combine to bring misery into his world. God is not the purveyor of injustice, nor does He fail to see it, and act in His time and in His way, but woe to the man who stands above human evil and speaks as though he were God, and he were free of the same things that he condemns! Anger little becomes man whose own heart is so devious, and whose judgement of others is Often the expression and off-loading of his own guilts. In judging we are judged, and one judges purely—only One—and He is the true Lawgiver.’

He knew the young man would not hear him, and anyway the message was all but spent. Soon the congregation would gather up itself for the final hymn, and be out into the sunshine. There they would discuss the weather, the current sport, the little things of ‘eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage’. They would generally avoid the more weighty things such as human evil, divine judgements, death and the eternity beyond. For the most part modern congregations—as also many of the past—chose to speak of matters mundane and personal pleasures.

This time the old man closed his eyes without shame or

fear. He was tired. Life had been a long battle. Many of his dreams had not been comforting. So many nights he had seemed to battle with all the forces of hell alone, although he had always known God to be in the wings, His Son to be interceding and intervening against dark evil, and the Spirit to have compassion within him. He had had to battle the indifference of mankind, the ambition of his brethren, the scorn of the polished, and the ignorance of the calloused and lustful. He sensed the battle was coming to its conclusion, but a thought faintly worried him, for it was evasive, straining away from his spirit.

He caught it. He suddenly knew why the young man troubled him. In all his judgemental utterance there was no apocalyptic, no revelation of the sovereignty of God. The young man was straining, drumming up his own resources to bring the world to rights. He was—underneath it all—angry at God and impatient with Him for not having acted quickly, for not using His great powers to effect freedom and love and peace in all the world.

He said to himself thoughtfully, ‘He had no Cross in his preaching, no suffering of God in His Christ, no knowledge of His passion for sinful man, no sense of His participation in its woes. His demand for justice has failed to understand the holiness of God, His patient working out of redemption amidst the perversity of human wills, and the actions of supernatural evil powers. He has been simplistic, over-simplifying the issues, not patient enough to penetrate the’ mystery of God and the mystery of man, let alone the mystery of evil.’

The young man had finished. In fact he had announced the hymn without adverting to prayer. The old man felt the congregation rise, but he remained seated. Somehow there was no tug to sing with them. He scarcely heard the words or even the tune of this unfamiliar modern song of protest. Yet he did not feel himself to be a stranger in what—after

all—was his own world. He continued to sit, his eyes closed.

Then it came to him—that final of all understandings. Something leapt out at him through a recall of memory. Of course! Now he comprehended, and in comprehending a warm stream of love flowed through him. Of course: it Was the great finale, the summing up of all things in Christ, Christ's filling up of that which had been empty, and the harmonising of every detail of history, the reconciling of all things into one integrated whole.

He saw it all in the heavens above as though he were there with the Seer—John—himself. He saw the clash of armies, of evil wheeling on the right wing and the left, 'seeking to encompass the people of God and to destroy them. He saw the judgements of God rain down upon the earth, upon the principalities and powers, rulers and authorities both terrestrial and celestial. He saw the anger of men and evil creatures at the judgements of God, and although the heavens sang 'Just and true are thy judgements, O God! They are true and righteous altogether', yet evil gnashed its teeth, and exploded its blasphemy and venom towards the throne of God.

His spirit rejoiced. 'O God, You are faithful and true. You bring Your plan to its right fulfilment! You justify Yourself in the face of .millenniums of anger, scorn, bitterness and false accusation by men and fallen angels! You are the God of all grace, and in the end it is Your holy love which triumphs!'

He did not know how close was that end, the end which would be his beginning, forever! People passed by him in the pew and in the aisles, and he sat so peacefully, his head resting on the back of the pew. They were sure he was asleep, and they graciously refused to disturb him, but he was far from asleep.

His eyes saw what they had for so long desired to see: the King was coming! There could be no doubt about that. Above him were chariots of fire, the golden clashing of

songs and music, the triumphant sounding forth of great golden-throated trumpets, and the glory of the Father attended on the returning Son.

His whole being tensed, and his pulses throbbed. He was standing erect, his blue eyes blazing toward the coming splendour. 'It is you, O Lord!' he cried, and the pettiness of man in his multifarious needs, and the anxieties of other human beings, and the drivelling inanities of their self-concern suddenly evaporated as a mist does before the blazing sun. The praises about him blasted the foolishness and frailties of inverted mankind, and all creation began to sing its voluminous praises in glory to the Eternal.

Those who passed by to shake hands at the door with the young preacher, and to voice their comments, saw an old man in utter stillness, eyes closed, head resting.

One of them thought, 'How quiet he is! How peaceful!' There was a note of wistful envy in the thought.

Inwardly he was not quiet. All the resources that had been given to him were thrusting upwards in adoration, praise and joy such as he had never known.

'O come! O come!' he cried. 'O come, Emmanuel!' The preacher had come in from the vestibule of the church, and was looking at the old man. There was something about the peace of the man there that disturbed his viewer. The preacher leaned forward. 'Wake up, grandpa!' he said, with some jocularly. 'Wake up! It's all over!'

The sidesman touched his arm. 'Don't call him "grandpa" ,' he said. 'You mustn't speak like that. Do you know who he is?'

The visiting preacher shook his head. 'No idea whatever,' he answered.

The sidesman spoke the name of the old man, spoke it with loving reverence and much awe.

The young and passionate preacher, when he heard it, started. His eyes grew round. 'Him!' he said, and his awe

was suitable.

‘Yes, him!’ said the sidesman..

They both stood silent, staring down at that peaceful person.

‘Sir,’ said the preacher respectfully, ‘wake up! It’s all finished.’

He wondered for a moment at the substance and quality of the sermon he had just given, especially in the light of the man who had heard him. Well, it was finished too, as he had told the old man, but the man did not stir. Far from them, his whole being was filling with glory and incessant praise.

The preacher touched the old preacher, laying his hand on his wrist, but the wrist was cold, and the body was more still than ever a body is in life. Some memory stirred in the young man, some vagrant thought from Bunyan:

And when he had passed on to the other side. All the trumpets sounded for him.