

Sparking Faith that Lasts

By Professor Haddon Willmer (author of *Entry Point: Towards Child Theology with Matthew 18*)

E R Braithwaite in *Reluctant Neighbours* (1972) reports a conversation he, a Black man, had on a train in USA with a white man, who had to sit beside him, since all other seats were occupied. Hence the 'reluctance'. Each bit of an awkward, prickly conversation provides the occasion for Braithwaite to reflect on his life experience. Late in the journey, the other man asks him about his religion: he has none he said (pp 175-178)

Braithwaite then tells how he was brought up in Christian faith, and being taught to pray was vital. But as he grew older, and specially when he was in serious difficulties, he found that prayer for help in crises did not work. He grew ashamed when in desperation he prayed, for it was 'a tiresome rigmarole in which I did not believe. And yet, at the same time, wishing for a miracle.'

His difficulty with faith was intensified by having been taught that he was created in the image of God, and yet all the images of God or the godly he had seen in his childhood were white – and his adult experience had shown him that white often oppressed and despised black (except when he was in the RAF in wartime). Not surprisingly, white people generally did not see God in him and treat him accordingly.

And when his daughter of 9 died despite his praying: 'The last vestige of my belief slipping away into the void of her final breath'.

This section of the book reminds us of what is a widely shared issue. Praying can be dangerous to believing, because it does not regularly fulfil what we suppose is its intrinsic promise.

Much prayer consists of requests, with the expectation of a real answer from a higher good power. The effectiveness of such prayer is vulnerable to observable testing in significant experience.

This is specially acute where a particular answer is desired because it is right and good. Sometimes we are told that 'No' or 'Wait' are also answers to prayer, but they are hardly good answers when we are praying for help against present and unquestionable evil. If there is no help, or if it will come too late, we hardly need a Greater Power to make that clear – we can see that for ourselves, so 'why bother the Master'?

The roots of this way of giving up praying and believing lie in childhood, and the way children are encouraged to pray.

We pray in need or desire for help beyond what is humanly available. We are told God is good, and loves us, and his care is to be trusted. We are told God can do anything.

Consequently we develop a way of relating to God which is asking and expecting to receive. Our going to God is spurred by hope of receiving, confirmed by the joy of consumption; but by the same token, undermined by a failure of supply.

All this raises the question: How else might people be brought up – and helped along in later life – without losing faith in this way?

To offer an answer, I enquire within: I ask myself how I have been able to live, at least with a kind of faith until now.

I was introduced to prayer, partly and only partly, as **asking God for what was needed**, and trusting God to answer satisfactorily. I was early aware of those who lived by faith, whose great model was George Mueller of Bristol, who ran his orphanage without making public appeals but simply prayed, letting God know what was needed. Help came so he could write the record that the children never hungered. My father was attracted by that kind of Christian living, but it did not work satisfactorily for us. My mother too often had to provide for four children on quite inadequate budgets. And eventually, my father left the ministry and went into work in factory and drawing room.

I asked God for help, change and rescue when I was troubled and my capacity for self-management was strained. Prayer never evoked speedy miracle and I gradually learned to wait in hope that things would get better of their own accord.

So I concluded that prayer for a Greater Power to change situations radically did not generally work and that it was not worth the rigmarole and make-believe of all night prayer meetings which aimed to press God into action – Elijah's God sent fire from heaven, but God for us, much of the time, seems more like Baal; and we should not behave like Baal's poor priests (1 Kings 18.26ff).

But I did not give up praying nor in believing in God and commending the good news of God in Christ. Happily, I found, or was given, other ways of praying than making consumerist request.

I am kept praying in a way – I am not a great pray-er, if there is such a thing – **by gratitude and joy in goodness in the world**. Instead of seeing God through the lens of what I want or need to get, I am shown God in what I am given – or better put, what we are given. For the best things I have been given in life are shared by others, and often come to me from and with others: Now thank we all our God...who from our mother's arms hath blessed us on way...

I was blessed by good state schools with some great teachers, and by being the sort of person who could benefit from what they offered. It was there that I came to appreciate a civilized well-ordered social setting. I was impressed, at home, church and school, by the example of people who knew it was more blessed to give than to receive, and who in quiet unheroic ways lived the prayer of Saint Ignatius,

Teach us, good Lord,
To serve thee as thou deservest;
To give and not to count the cost;
To fight and not to heed the wounds;
To toil and not to seek for rest;
To labour and not to ask for any reward
Save that of knowing that we do thy will.

I was thus inducted into ways of praying that did not get caught in frustration at the lack of supply, but rejoiced in the good. I was called to love, *as I was loved*: the love was there before I ever began asking.

Grateful faith in the grace, the free prevenient giving of God is at the root of my theological approach to politics: there is goodness, and certainly there is good possibility, a hopeful invitation, even in our social humanity. The goodness is detectable where there is an openness to gratitude, a practice of giving thanks. And the goodness sometimes bursts upon us as the gift and presence of God with us. So gratitude engenders prayer.

The Grandeur of God Gerard Manley Hopkins

GOD'S GRANDEUR

THE WORLD is charged with the grandeur of God.
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;
It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil
Crushed. Why do men then now not reckon his rod?
Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;
And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;
And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.

And for all this, nature is never spent;
There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;
And though the last lights off the black West went
Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs—
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent
World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.

In gratitude, I live with Hilary. I don't make anything of her being 'the weaker vessel', which is palpably untrue, but I am grateful we have a sense of being 'heirs together of the grace of life'. Life is a gift, engraced. And heirs live in the knowledge of what is already given, though it is not yet in their hands. It is living in this considerate grateful way which sustains prayer, not hindering it, but sparking it into life.

1 Peter 3:7

Husbands, in the same way be considerate as you live with your wives, and treat them with respect as the weaker partner and as heirs with you of the gracious gift of life, so that nothing will hinder your prayers.

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1 Peter 4:7-11

⁷The end of all things is near. Therefore be alert and of sober mind so that you may pray. ⁸Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins. ⁹Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling. ¹⁰Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms. ¹¹If anyone speaks, they should do so as one who speaks the very

words of God. If anyone serves, they should do so with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen.

So also I paint sometimes, walk in the dales, and enjoy conversation and food... and give thanks.

But there must be more than gratitude to keep prayer going, because there is not only goodness in the world. The world, and our human being, is not an unambiguous vehicle of goodness.

There must be **fortitude**.

In the way I was taught prayer, and learned in my own experience there was another enabling strand besides gratitude.

Asked about his religion, Braithwaite said he was not religious. But, his neighbour insisted, 'a man like you must believe in something'. If not God, as found in religion, in Church, what?

'Certainly, I believe in challenge.'

Braithwaite was challenged by many things all around him which limited him. He saw them as 'a challenge to myself, to my right to be fully myself, to realize my full potential'.

'Are you saying that just being here, talking like this is a challenge to you?'

'Sure. Your presence beside me challenges me to project my humanity....I am challenged to acknowledge your presence, talk with you, be courteous to you, as a man.'

My sense of being challenged – I am challenged, therefore I am – is akin to Braithwaite's but is not identical with it. But the idea of being challenged, in and by life, makes good sense to me. I was never shielded from it by the kind of Christianity I grew up in.

In Christian terms, challenge is more often seen as call. God does not come to us cooing like a comforting dove, but calls us to stand on our feet and answer like a human being. Jesus came calling people to turn and be ready for the coming kingdom of God. The call was a hard challenge: Deny yourself, take up your cross and follow Jesus.

We are given permission to pray 'Bring us not into the time of testing', but we are called to pray for God's kingdom to come, the kingdom where winning means losing.

Jesus was called by the Father in heaven to do the Father's will on earth, in oneness with the Father. The call includes the challenge to go to and through the Cross. So prayer takes specifically relevant form in Gethsemane, where the costly depth of the challenge is seen and not shunned. In this prayer, the element of request is subordinated to, even cancelled out, by

the readiness to take the cup and do the Father's will. Jesus did not shy away from the challenge of evil, operative in the human world, which makes the darkness of God-forsakenness. Praying in faithful response to the call thus includes the silencing and negation of prayer at inescapable points along the way.

So we human beings are challenged by God's call to those he engraces.

Jesus was also challenged by other people and by the contexts of his earthly life. There was no escape from this challenge by flight to God, because God sent Jesus back into the fray, to be with others.

I grew up with this Jesus, as the centre of faith, as Lord. The challenge of his call to me, presented even to children as a call to follow Jesus in the way of the Cross, could not be satisfied by what could be done in church, piously.

I grew up singing hymns like

1. Jesus bids us shine with a clear, pure light,
Like a little candle burning in the night;
In this world of darkness, so we must shine,
You in your small corner, and I in mine.

2. Jesus bids us shine, first of all for Him;
Well He sees and knows it if our light is dim;
He looks down from heaven, to see us shine,
You in your small corner, and I in mine.

3. Jesus bids us shine, then, for all around,
Many kinds of darkness in this world abound:
Sin, and want, and sorrow—so we must shine,
You in your small corner, and I in mine.

This maybe the first hymn I ever heard, along with Jesus loves me: this is know.

It stays with me. It is not a child's hymn that fades away in adulthood. Nor a child's hymn that tempts us back nostalgically into a No-More-Time. It was a good hymn for a small child because it does not become unfit with age. Rather it illuminates life for

the child so that in his inevitable growing up, he has some wise direction. And when he is old, he does not feel he needs to forget the advice of his mother and father.

Proverbs 1.8: Hear, my son, your father's instruction And do not forsake your mother's teaching; Indeed, they are a graceful wreath to your head And ornaments about your neck....

That is, listen to your father while he is talking to you. And keep to your mother's teaching long after she has given it. Children want teaching that will last into adulthood and beyond, not something they will give up in a year, or when they get to be teenagers or leave home.

My mother sang this to me, in the early days, in the dark years of the Blitz, when I was three or four.

It had sense in it then. I see the sense more clearly now. It has guided my life – how?

Jesus – not 'Jesus loves me', though that is truth hidden in this hymn - but 'Jesus bids us...' Jesus loves us by bidding us, giving us his command by word and living action. Jesus does not love us by indulging us but by claiming our living action in his whole way. We are inclined to be deaf to Jesus' bidding. We prefer a more permissive, non-Lord.

Jesus bids *us*...not me. This is very important. The bidding comes home to me, and makes demands on me, but only with and through the us. I am in my small corner, and must shine there, and you in yours. From my corner of the square I can see the light that comes from yours, and take strength and perspective from seeing that. I have my responsibility in my place – no one else is me, or in my corner – but I am not alone, not doing something unique.

Jesus bids us *shine* – the light shining is the image around which the whole poem is structured. It is a very simple poem, but it has great virtue as a work of art, which engages us, gives us joy, helps us to notice and remember it. It deals with one aspect of shining in each verse, and altogether achieves a comprehensive unity, in twelve lines. Take it as a check list for living – it covers a lot of essential ground.

First, it calls for quality of light – pure and clear, not a smoky polluting candle. Candle of course dates it. It is a hymn rooted in a time before electric light, certainly before it became normal. The whole business of getting light in the dark was constant work, in the home; everybody knew what a candle was and how it worked, and what to do about it. And they valued it, even though it was little and gave only a little light.

Then it says we must shine first of all for Jesus..... He calls us to shine, and keeps an eye on our shining. He cares if our light is dim. We are partners and servants of the Lord who bids us shine.

Jesus is the source of the light we shine with, not its consumer. The light is the love of God in Jesus that reaches to the ends of the earth, and is not stopped even by the Cross. Jesus wants us to shine 'for all around', in a quite realistic, down to earth, everyday way, to dispel the darkneses of 'sin and want and sorrow'.

God lights the world; in the end the glory of God will fill the earth as the waters cover the sea. We are not God. We are not creator, judge or redeemer of all the earth. So don't waste time and pervert the order of things by pretending otherwise. Each of us is in his corner, has vital but finite responsibility.

And,

As a child, I sang with the church

John Bunyan's Original Version

1. Who would true valour see,
Let him come hither;
One here will constant be,
Come wind, come weather
There's no discouragement
Shall make him once relent
His first avowed intent
To be a pilgrim.

2. Whoso beset him round
With dismal stories,
Do but themselves confound;
His strength the more is.
No lion can him fright,
He'll with a giant fight,
But he will have a right
To be a pilgrim.

1906 [The English Hymnal](#) Version

1. He who would valiant be
'Gainst all disaster,
Let him in constancy
Follow the Master.
There's no discouragement
Shall make him once relent
His first avowed intent
To be a pilgrim.

2. Who so beset him round
With dismal stories,
Do but themselves confound—
His strength the more is.
No foes shall stay his might,
Though he with giants fight:
He will make good his right
To be a pilgrim.

3. Hobgoblin, nor foul fiend[,]	3. Since, Lord, thou dost defend
Can daunt his spirit;	Us with thy Spirit,
He knows he at the end	We know we at the end
Shall life inherit.	Shall life inherit.
Then fancies fly away,	Then fancies flee away!
He'll fear not what men say,	I'll fear not what men say,
He'll labour night and day	I'll labour night and day
To be a pilgrim.	To be a pilgrim. ⁱ

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/To_Be_a_Pilgrim)

And,

Just as I am, thine own to be,
 Friend of the young, who lovest me,
 to consecrate myself to thee,
 O Jesus Christ, I come.

In the glad morning of my day,
 my life to give, my vows to pay,
 with no reserve and no delay,
 with all my heart I come.

I would live ever in the light,
 I would work ever for the right;
 I would serve thee with all my might;
 therefore, to thee I come.

Just as I am, young, strong, and free,
 to be the best that I can be
 for truth, and righteousness, and thee,
 Lord of my life, I come.

With many dreams of fame and gold,
 success and joy to make me bold,
 but dearer still my faith to hold,
 for my whole life, I come.

And for thy sake to win renown,

and then to take the victor's crown,
and at thy feet to cast it down,
O Master, Lord, I come.

This hymn meets us all in our strengths, not our weaknesses (Bonhoeffer). It awakes and endorses the

And

How firm a foundation, you saints of the Lord
Is laid for your faith in His excellent word
What more can He say than to you He has said
To you who for refuge to Jesus have fled?

Fear not, I am with you, O be not dismayed
For I am your God, and will still give you aid
I'll strengthen you, help you, and cause you to stand
Upheld by my righteous, omnipotent hand

When through the deep waters I call you to go
The rivers of sorrow shall not overflow
For I will be with you, your troubles to bless
And sanctify to you your deepest distress

When through fiery trials your pathway shall lie
My grace, all-sufficient, shall be your supply
The flame shall not hurt you, I only design
Your dross to consume and the gold to refine

The soul that on Jesus has leaned for repose
I will not, I will not desert to His foes
That soul, though all hell should endeavor to shake
I'll never, no never, no never forsake

And

Begone, unbelief,
My Savior is near,
And for my relief
Will surely appear;
By prayer let me wrestle,
And He will perform;
With Christ in the vessel,
I smile at the storm.

Though dark be my way,
Since He is my Guide,
'Tis mine to obey,
'Tis His to provide;
Though cisterns be broken,
And creatures all fail,
The word He hath spoken
Shall surely prevail.

His love, in time past,
Forbids me to think
He'll leave me at last
In trouble to sink:
Each sweet Ebenezer
I have in review
Confirms His good pleasure
To help me quite through.

Why should I complain
Of want or distress,
Temptation or pain?
He told me no less;
The heirs of salvation,
I know from His Word,
Through much tribulation
Must follow their Lord.

How bitter that cup
No heart can conceive,
Which He drank quite up,
That sinners might live!
His way was much rougher
And darker than mine;
Did Christ, my Lord, suffer,
And shall I repine?

Since all that I meet
Shall work for my good,
The bitter is sweet,
The medicine, food;

Though painful at present,
'Twill cease before long,
And then, oh, how pleasant
The conqueror's song!

And with that hymn, I got into the story of John Newton.

Hymns like this are frank about how challenging the challenging of the life of faith in Christ is, and how hard is the path, though not as rough and as dark as my Lord's.

These hymns rejoice in the good now, and in its increase, but they are not corrupted by a triumphalism that skips over the want and distress, temptation and pain, as though there is no bitterness. Such songs, which we now sing, do not give us words that get near to illuminating life as it comes to us, and so singing them gives us little wisdom and courage for 'the living of these days'. But that phrase comes from a hymn I only met much later, but it chimes with what I was given as a child.

God of grace and God of glory,
on thy people pour thy pow'r.
Crown thine ancient church's story,
bring its bud to glorious flow'r.
Grant us wisdom, grant us courage,
for the facing of this hour,
for the facing of this hour.

2 Lo! the hosts of evil round us
scorn thy Christ, assail his ways!
From the fears that long have bound us,
free our hearts to faith and praise.
Grant us wisdom, grant us courage,
for the living of these days,
for the living of these days.

3 Cure thy children's warring madness;
bend our pride to thy control;
shame our wanton, selfish gladness,
rich in things and poor in soul.
Grant us wisdom, grant us courage,
lest we miss thy kingdom's goal,
lest we miss thy kingdom's goal.

4 Save us from weak resignation
to the evils we deplore.
Let the search for thy salvation
be our glory evermore.

Grant us wisdom, grant us courage,
serving thee whom we adore,
serving thee whom we adore.

And, certainly from my early days,

And

1 Standing by a purpose true,
Heeding God's command,
Honor them, the faithful few!
All hail to Daniel's Band!

Refrain:

Dare to be a Daniel!
Dare to stand alone!
Dare to have a purpose firm!
Dare to make it known!

2 Many mighty men are lost,
Daring not to stand,
Who for God had been a host
By joining Daniel's Band. (Refrain)

3 Many giants, great and tall,
Stalking thro' the land,
Headlong to the earth would fall,
If met by Daniel's Band. (Refrain)

4 Hold the gospel banner high;
On to vict'ry grand!
Satan and his host defy,
And shout for Daniel's Band. (Refrain)

I heard the stories of Daniel, in the lion's den, and his friends in the fiery furnace, and the message was made clear: dare to be a Daniel. Read what Tony Benn says about this hymn in his book, *Dare to be a Daniel: Then and Now* (2004).

Daniel is typical of the Bible stories I was told, often vividly. The ethos of the biblical story as a whole is challenging. We see people who are called by God to live with him faithfully in a challenging world: Abraham, Moses, Joshua, Gideon, Samuel, David, Elijah, Nehemiah, the prophets and apocalyptists; and then the Gospels, Jesus, Peter, Paul, Stephen and so on. Through these stories I was inducted into a

challenged life, both the negative challenge of fallenness, evil and death, the contradiction of hostile human and superhuman powers, and the positive challenge in the call of God. Faith was primarily taking the risk to meet the challenge; faith as comfort was a necessary help, subordinate to meeting the challenge (Heb. 4.14-16).

I was naturally timid, but the Gospel did not indulge my hanging back; instead it colluded with my nature, awakening the latent adventurous ego and competitive imagination in me. A religion without challenge that offers us inner peace is not the only way in which Gospel gets lost in our appropriation of it. A religion which challenges 'to be the best that I can be' may lose the Gospel in self-aggrandisement of some kind. Instead of denying self – where the challenge of the Gospel comes home to the person – the self is indulged. Religion is then valued as a platform for showing off. Jesus ruled that out in Matt 6.1-6, but the temptation to magnifying self is all around us in religious practice and in doing good (rich people like to give money for a building, because it will bear a plaque with their name on it, rather than support running costs of a project, whose only memorial is in heaven, in the memory of God unseen - remember the story of Thomas and Gundaphorus in the *Acts of Thomas*). The Gospel is easily lost in the corruption of the pulpit or platform: if preaching is 'truth through personality'ⁱⁱ John the Baptist's principle, 'He must increase, I must decrease' is reversed. I have been preaching since I was 13, and like others in those days, would have liked to model myself on Billy Graham, though I lacked the physique – my hand was too small to hold a big black floppy Bible as he did, and I did not have the voice or his confidence. Every time I preach, the ego is there trying to subvert the Gospel. That is one challenge. Another challenge in preaching is how with such poor equipment to give a faithful expression to the Gospel – how to speak five words that allow people to hear God (1 Cor 14.18,19).

Challenge comes not from threat against us, so much as the call from the pioneer of our faith. (Hebrews)

Answering the call is less protecting ourselves, than in giving ourselves in response to the 'mercies of God' (Romans 11.33-12.2)

Press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Jesus Christ (Phil.3.7-16).

The sacrifice and suffering involved in responding to the call of Christ in the world as it is swallowed up, not denied but carried, within the 'surpassing value' of knowing Jesus Christ our Lord.

The sufferings of the present, the struggle against adverse powers, are not worthy to be compared with the glory about to be revealed to us. A glory already shining on us, as we find ourselves living in the love of God (Romans 8).

So back to the beginning of this piece

Braithwaite was taught religion from the starting point of praying for what we want and validly need. And he persevered with it spasmodically until it was plain it did not work, and it did not fit with his sense of what befitted his dignity as a human being. That sense was theologically valid: God creates human being after his image, and calls us to be his partners in service and glory. Humility and being united with the crucified Lord are not realized in denying the divine call; they are the ways in which it is affirmed against the challenge of evil in the world, and is being worked for in living.

So I want to suggest that we should stop educating children into faith by making so much of prayer as request to an all-sufficient supplier. We should offer them a better, more Christ-like, more human way of seeing themselves; something truer, more practicable, and more sustainable to grow into.

By all means, teach them to say Thank you, and to mature in gratitude, as they become aware of the multiple graces, social, material, spiritual, which give them their being in joy and hope and love.

(This carries the corollary that we do all we can to see they are grounded and enabled by all graces, and that no stumbling blocks stunt their growth in gratitude.)

Thanksgiving must always have in view challenge and call, for only that will protect it from slipping back into the demanding mode, underneath the polite veneer of gratitude.

The grace that calls us, and that we receive and live from when we are following the call, is significantly different from the grace that supplies without also challenging.

(The earth taken as giving without calling is the earth exploited to destruction; the grace of the earth which gives us and other creatures resources for living calls for understanding, respect and care on our part.)

God in Christ leads us in the human way, living gratefully out of the abundance of gift in meeting the challenge of creaturely need and the obstacle of shortfaling human being. 'You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ who, though he was rich, yet for your sakes became poor, that *by his poverty* you might become rich' (II Cor.8-9)

To hear, when we are young, this call of God in Christ to a truly human, social, life in truth, responsibility and hope of sharing in the perfect love and glory of God gives us, young and old, the beginnings of a faith commitment which can meet the challenges of growing up into adult world and there getting closer to God in Christ, rather than giving up.

What kind of church is needed to enable this kind of growth?

Not what we too often find.

ⁱ The only pity was that we used the softened version of 1906 by Percy Dearmer, rather than John Bunyan's original from 1684. So we lost lions, hobgoblins and foul fiends and were left with an exhortation, 'Let him follow the master' and ends with self-affirmation, 'I'll fear not.... I'll labour'. That is not a bad thing in itself but it makes the whole poem the self-standing possession of any individual singing it in 2013. In this form it has been stripped out of its original context like a detachable asset. It gets rid of a rich and

mysterious history and leaves us celebrating the littleness of our selves. It is not a good bargain.

Bunyan's original points in a different direction. The difference can be seen in the first lines: Bunyan said '...see', Dearmer changed it to '...be'. Bunyan invites anyone who wants to see true valour to 'come hither' and look at someone other than himself. Before I start protesting my determination to *be* a pilgrim, Bunyan invites me to *see* someone who has already gone a long way on the Pilgrim road, so that I can find out what I might be talking about.

Bunyan did not write the poem to serve as a hymn of self-dedication which is what Dearmer gives us. He wrote it to sum up what can be seen in the people whose stories he tells in *The Pilgrim's Progress*. Before we find the text of this song (on page 247 in the Oxford World Classics edition), many stories of pilgrims have been graphically told. At this point in the story, the pilgrims suddenly come across another one called *Valiant-for-truth*, bloody sword in his hand, who had just seen off three assailants in a three hour fight.

Greatheart, the pilgrims' leader, gets him to tell them how he decided to leave where he was born, Dark-land, near the City of Destruction, and to go on a whole-life on-foot journey through the world, towards the Celestial City (the same journey all the pilgrims are on). His parents tried to dissuade him, telling him of all the discouragements he would meet on the way, but he would not relent. By the time he is telling his story, he had already got through many of the things they threatened him with. These things are told in more detail in earlier parts of this colourful book: the slough of despond, the dark mountains, the Hill Difficulty, the Lyons, and also the three Gyants, Bloodyman, Maul and Slay-Good; the foul fiend haunting the Valley of Humiliation, the Valley of the Shadow of Death, where the Hobgoblins are, and where the Light is Darkness; Gyant Despair in Doubting Castle and finally a River with no Bridge just in front of the Celestial City. And besides all these troubles, his parent said, he would meet unhelpful people, like Deceivers, lying in wait to turn good men out of the Path. Moreover, they warned him, many people had tried to go on this pilgrimage before and had come back, 'befooling themselves for setting a Foot out of Doors in that Path' – because they decided it was leading them only into trouble.

'And did none of these things discourage you?' asked Greatheart.

'No. They seemed but so many Nothings to me.' So, 'I believed and therefore came out, got into the Way, fought all that set themselves against me, and by believing am come to this Place'.

Thus the Poem, which we now sing, is placed after Valiant-for-Truth's account of himself, to give emphasis to his story and to help us to get the point of it. The poem does not immediately challenge us to say, I will be a pilgrim. First it says, see what a pilgrim is,

especially when he is 'a man of his Hands' – not a man who talks and emotes but fights his way along the path.

Is it a weakness of much of our Christian preaching and counsel that it is strong on challenge and instruction to individuals to decide, to commit, to act, to be and weak on giving us something to see, to consider, to meet and to receive?

We are obsessed with ourselves – which according to Luther was the heart of sin, when we are curved in on ourselves, incurvatus in se. It is not surprising. I live with my self all the time, and I am more sure of my self than of anything else in the world; it seems I have more chance to know who I am and to manage my life than anything else around me. And I am more interesting to myself than what is outside me.

II

John Bunyan wrote *Pilgrim's Progress* in prison (1661-1672), where he was because he would not promise to refrain from preaching. He travelled round Bedford amongst radical Baptist and congregational churches that were illegal at the time and a great annoyance to the authorities who wanted there to be one national church, and no dangerous sects.