Anthony Harvey

Back in 1980, Anthony delivered the Bampton Lectures in the University of Oxford – a learned and very sophisticated exploration of the 'constraints' that shaped the actual historical particularity of the life of Jesus. In the first of these lectures, he sets out an agenda which may at first hearing sound obvious but in fact has some very far-reaching and challenging implications. 'Utterances that are interminable or spasmodic; artistic works or performances without recognisable form; leadership which appears random or impractical – all these fail to communicate because they do not work within the constraints imposed by the rhythm of human activity and the conventions of culture and civilisation' (*Jesus and the Constraints of History,* p.7).

What a very revealing catalogue of thigs! Anyone who knew Anthony will recognise in it something of the distinctive sensibility that was his – the impatience with windy talk, the awareness from the inside of the logic and discipline of artistic performance, the longing to see policy shaped by consistent principle and urgency of vision. These are the words of a man who could be described as in some ways 'fastidious' – but the word is not adequate or just if it suggests a chilly perfectionism. He was someone whose passion and honesty could be uncomfortable; but for him, budgeting for that discomfort was one of the things that was necessary if the imperative of truthful and just communication was to be achieved. The heart of the argument in these lectures – due surely for a reprint and a renewed discussion and appreciation– was that if Jesus was to be seen as not only truly human but *effectively* and *transformingly* human, he was bound to work within such constraints. Only so is a connection made that might turn out to be lifegiving. The least effective speaker, performer, leader is the one who can't accept constraint, who can't work with the grain of things to open up the common currency of speech and culture to its own capacity to become new, welcoming, transfigured.

Anthony's intensely moving autobiography offers so many instances of his commitment to work with that kind of incarnational constraint. He moved in and out of the corridors of established religion with a remarkable freedom, able and willing to speak as a native of these worlds, while questioning and enriching them in all sorts of radical ways. His account of what he tried to do at St Augustine's Canterbury – including his honest assessment of its limited success –ought to be mandatory reading for anyone involved in ministerial education. In all sorts of ways the Church wasn't ready for much of what he

sought to do; and perhaps it still isn't. The idea that a theological college ought to have a professional artist in residence as part of its community life was startling in the 1970's; it's not obvious that it would be any less startling these days. But it was a crucial element in Anthony's makeup that he considered 'the single-mindedness and utter commitment of the artist to his craft (*Drawn Three Ways, p.80)* as one of the best possible inspirations and reproaches that a candidate for ordination could be faced with in understanding their own calling.

In other words, communication and commitment go together. The committed person makes contact, bridges gaps – risks leaving the comfort of easy words and habits in order to find a transforming language by working on the transformation of a wounded and struggling social world. Anthony's passion for the healing of grotesque social inequity and disadvantage was not first formed in the crucible of the immensely demanding work of the *Faith in the City* enterprise: it was rooted much further back, in everything that drove him into theology and priestly ministry – and matured in a range of pastoral and personal experience, including the deep challenges of marriage to an outstandingly gifted and vulnerable wife (whose voice is to be heard poignantly on so many pages of the autobiography), and the unhealing wounds of personal loss in the family. Commitment once again, commitment and constraint and the long and hard winning of shared understanding, in private and public. Commitment which does not depend on solutions and happy endings but on the obstinate renewal day by day of the embrace of the world as it is, in the name of a just, truthful and compassionate vision of things. Holding that vision is a costly matter: it is given expression in a poem by Julian that Anthony quotes in his autobiography (p.96), a poem about a patient in a psychiatric unit who has undergone electro-convulsive therapy, The last lines of this poem are: " 'Freed", they firmly said – "from her obsessions" – Severed from contemplation.' To be 'severed from contemplation' as the price of some sort of mental equilibrium was not Anthony's ideal any more than Julian's. And his most lasting monument in this Abbey, the statues of the martyrs on the West Front, testifies to his alignment with all who have looked for truth rather than survival in their faith.

Which is why – despite his own avowal in *Drawn Three Ways* (p.152) – it's not clear that it would be fair to see him at the end of his life as more a stoic than a Christian. The stoic does not look outside this world for sources of resilience, true; and Anthony's growing scepticism about what kind of truth could be

ascribed to a God such as classical doctrine seemed to be so confident about might well lead to that sort of position. But the stoic is not normally characterised by so ready and indignant a response to suffering, to the situation of those with nowhere to call home, those with no secure future here or in the DRC; so imaginative and generous a self-giving to the world. Anthony saw himself as a 'stoic' because he could see no obvious tokens of consolation beyond the human spirit; but he *behaved*, unselfconsciously, as someone who knew that there were resources for human compassion beyond the individual's will and understanding. He says at the end of the autobiography that, like Graham Greene, he 'doubts his disbelief', and wonders whether he will yet find a way to acknowledge that resource in terms not completely alien to the language he has been speaking in church all his life. It is a typically humble, inviting, tentative and revolutionary gesture towards God, and all the more powerful for being so.

Back to the Bamptons for a moment. In the lecture on 'The Intelligibility of Miracle', Anthony writes of the miracles of Jesus in the gospels as 'an attack on those limitations of the human condition which seemed most intractable, most inexplicable, and most stubbornly to prevent mankind from moving into that better world which is surely intended for us in the further purposes of God' (p.118) – the limitations of death, illness, mental disintegration, oppression and exclusion; and he quotes a Polish Marxist writer on miracle as something that can only happen when 'everything we are and possess' is committed' (119). We simply do not know what will happen when such total acceptance of the constraint of who I actually am is drawn together and offered to – what? To the agency from which everything new and everything compassionate flows? However he expressed his faith and doubt in those last years, no-one could be in two minds about Anthony's willingness, then as throughout his life, to make just that offering, in just that hope of miracle: not miracle in the sense of an interruption of things that proves a point, but miracle as the epiphany of what may be communicated to the whole suffering world by the embrace of all that is there to be embraced, its limits and losses and glories, its martyrdoms, private and public, its urgent call for the gift of solidarity.

Constraint; commitment; communication: Anthony Harvey's ministry and witness were shaped by all these. And the legacy he has left of spiritual and social vision – the vision which, as he boldly says (DTW 169-70), should be so compellingly life-giving that we could not abandon it even if we found that its

foundation were not what we had thought – this lives and bears fruit and will do so for a very long time to come. ‘What can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal.’

Amen