

# The Dark Night of Unemployment: Reflections on Experience

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What has Athens got to do with Jerusalem? asked Tertullian.<sup>1</sup> What has unemployment got to do with spirituality? asks many a Christian today. The true answer is 'much in every way'; but the general assumption, like so many other things in our split society, is 'nothing at all'. Here, like everywhere else, we are divided: not merely in terms of class or economics but in terms of a fundamental dualism such that spirituality and religion are hived off into safe areas, and spirituality and politics inhabit entirely different worlds, just like 'church' and 'work'. But a 'theology of unemployment'<sup>2</sup> is needed, and needed urgently. I am not sure that I am in a position to provide that, but I do want to record our experience of unemployment, in order to give more of an inside picture than is usually possible of the spiritual implications of unemployment.

For there is a triple catch. The experience of unemployment (and redundancy – the word is painfully accurate) can be so devastating, so crushing and confusing, that it is impossible to find any words to express it. Secondly, the numbers of unemployed people are so fluctuating that it is virtually impossible to organise any concerted action or speech. (In any case, the experience itself presses against that). Thirdly, it is clear that the great majority of unemployed people are not highly educated, so their voice is not easily heard. I would like to speak of this twilight world of half-life, not – I regret – to offer solutions (I am no economist), but at least to speak for those who cannot, and to give a rather different impression of the matter 'from the sharp end'.

In the first part of this article I want to describe some of our physical difficulties, and to analyse the effects this had on us; in the second to explore the way we were helped to look at the whole experience spiritually. Impressionist quotations are interspersed.

## Part 1: What went on

First, some background. I have been ordained sixteen years, and worked in Manchester, Nigeria, Nottingham, and latterly as Chaplain at Magdalene

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1 *De Praescriptione Haereticorum* 7.

2 A. E. Radcliffe, in Face to Faith, *The Guardian*, 2nd December, 1985.

College, Cambridge, where my contract came to an end at the end of September, 1985. We had already sent off for information on more than thirty advertised posts, and applied and been short-listed for four. None seemed right. We moved out of our college accommodation at the end of August, to allow for redecoration for my successor and his family, and took temporary accommodation kindly offered by one of the Cambridge churches. At that stage there was just one possible job in the pipe-line to be investigated in the Autumn, and we envisaged a possible three-month break in employment. Three days after moving I saw the advertisement for my present post as Lecturer in Biblical Studies at the Selly Oak Colleges in Birmingham. Two months later, we realised that accepting this job would involve a break of eleven months. Our temporary accommodation turned out to be for rather longer than the original 'short-term break' we originally imagined! And the 'year off' I had unconsciously wanted was very, very different from the relaxed sabbatical I had fantasised about. In almost every possible way, we have become different people as a result.

'I am the true vine and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he trims clean so that it will be even more fruitful . . . Remain in me, and I will remain in you'.<sup>1</sup>

At first, of course, there was a wonderful sense of relief, in not having the responsibility of a job. I had also just completed work on a compilation of spirituality.<sup>2</sup> But at the same time there were the Unemployment and Supplementary Benefit forms to fill in. A major exercise, if ever there was one! Details of all savings and accounts, Building Societies, Investments, etc., etc. Partly, I felt, fair enough. But partly, I felt, I have never been asked or had to answer all these questions, never been investigated so thoroughly in my whole life. But the real hurt was in discovering that because we had been saving solidly over the years in order to buy a house, we had more than £3,000, and were therefore not eligible for Supplementary Benefit. We could have been living in a house of our own, and driving a Rolls-Royce and still claimed Supplementary Benefit if we had had less than £3,000 in the bank. But because we only had savings, and not the reality, we had to get down below £3,000 before we could claim. So we were entitled to the princely sum of £49.25 per week. I recall reading Michael Moynihan in the Church of England Newspaper around that time, and thinking, 'Yes, that's what we're worth; that's what we're worth to society; that's what we're being reduced to: £49.25 a week'.

'Child as he was, he was desperate with hunger, and reckless with misery. He rose from the table; and advancing to the master, basin and spoon in hand, said: somewhat alarmed at his own temerity: "Please, sir, I want some more." The master was a fat, healthy man; but he turned very pale.

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1 John 15:1-4.

2 Roger Pooley and Philip Seddon (eds.): *The Lord of the Journey: A Reader in Christian Spirituality*, Collins, London 1986.

He gazed in stupefied astonishment on the small rebel for some seconds; and then clung for support to the copper. The assistants were paralysed with wonder; the boys with fear.

"What!" said the master at length, in a faint voice.

"Please, sir," replied Oliver, "I want some more."

The master aimed a blow at Oliver's head with the ladle; pinioned him in his arms; and shrieked aloud for the beadle . . .

For a week after the commission of the impious and profane offence of asking for more, Oliver remained a close prisoner in the dark and solitary room to which he had been consigned by the wisdom and mercy of the board.<sup>1</sup>

Of course, when you're working, the question of worth arises much less. 'And anyway, who's interested in the meaning of the experience of the unemployed when they have a job themselves?'<sup>2</sup> You feel you're getting paid, whether it seems adequate or not. You have a role, a place, but above all the buying power so necessary in today's secular consumer (and consumptive) society, into the values of which Christians of all shades have been sucked as much as anyone else. But when the connection between work and payment is severed, the real question of identity and worth replaces that of justification by work. When you have a job, there is no need to distinguish between the two separate questions of: Where is my identity based? and What is my value to society? When you haven't got one, there is. But even having discovered in recent years how much more deeply in Christ my identity is based than I knew before, the fact that the apparent answer to the second question about value to Society is 'nil' made us feel so raw and vulnerable that the first question, too, was thrown up in the air with ever greater violence.

The house seemed like a God-send at first; and in a deeper sense it continued to be so, for, as a sacrament is an outward sign of an inward grace, so it was an outward and physical sign of an inward and spiritual diminishment – and consequently, and totally paradoxically, enrichment. (But what was so for us is not so for many at all). The front room in the autumn was wonderful; but last winter was not the one for living in a cold house! Damp and cold were our daily companions. Mould turned the bedroom ceiling black over the months; pictures wrinkled and shoes developed a truly tropical mould; the ice on the windows was so thick it was impossible to scratch; ice formed in the toilet, and the towels never dried out – leaving the hot water in the bath from the morning was the only way to keep some warmth; the windows in the children's bedrooms were immersed in damp, and the ceiling fell in leaving a 4 feet x 2 feet hole to be repaired; damp – if not water – so saturated the outside staircase wall that it seemed to run up and down and flood the brickwork in minutes; the kitchen became so cold that ice formed in the sink in the mornings; my wife found it so cold that

1 Charles Dickens, *Oliver Twist*, chaps II-III.

2 A. E. Radcliffe, *loc. cit.*

she could not stay there for more than twenty minutes without chilblains beginning to bleed and feet freeze; the living room open fire – to which we had looked forward so much – ate up the coal at the rate of £1-£2 per day, and heated the 10 square feet in front of the fire. I recall preparing a sermon one day, and feeling myself getting progressively colder, while the fire blazed a few feet away, and shivering all evening, even after preaching in a warm chapel.

‘We do not want you to be uninformed . . . about the hardships we suffered . . . We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired even of life. Indeed, in our hearts we felt the sentence of death. But this happened that we might rely not on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead.’<sup>1</sup>

I do not say this to criticise or reproach anyone. We were very, very grateful to have a roof over our heads so near the centre of town, and still so near to the children’s schools. It was simply our situation – and that of perhaps a couple of million in this country, let alone elsewhere. So we had no difficulty in understanding how pensioners could freeze to death, because they could not afford to heat their house. Our fellowship was with those in rooms and houses where paper peeled off the walls, where living in one room was the best way to keep ‘warm’. We knew what it was like not to have anywhere else to go to. We might have been offered alternative accommodation, after three months, but by that stage we had just managed to ‘settle in’, and could not bear the thought of moving all over again, when that would take us away from familiar schools, and when we would have to move again in a few months anyway.

‘As many as 30 per cent of children in Britain are living below or around the official poverty line, according to statistics just released by the Department of Health and Social Security, writes Robert Taylor. The number has risen dramatically since 1979, from 2,370,000 to 3,880,000 – a jump of 64%. Up to 400,000 children now live in households existing below the Supplementary Benefit level (£68.80 a week for a two-child family, after rent) [we got £59.35 per week for a three-child family]. Since the DHSS statistics were drawn up, the position is believed to have become worse.’<sup>2</sup>

‘A spokesman for the DHSS said: “The figures in Birmingham are increasing all the time. In 1981, 49,000 children had parents claiming benefit – that has now risen to 78,000”.’<sup>3</sup>

‘The Child Poverty Action Group’s latest report argues that, with the explosion in unemployment, around two million children now depend on supplementary benefit – a four-fold increase from 1965. By 1984 benefit rates for an unemployed couple with two children had risen by 14 per cent in real terms. Average earnings on the other hand have risen by around 40 per cent.’<sup>4</sup>

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1 2 Corinthians 1:8-9.

2 *The Observer*, 2nd November, 1986.

3 *The Birmingham Daily News*, 4th November, 1986.

4 *The Independent*, 22nd December, 1986.

In two other respects, we experienced great inconvenience. Thinking we were only going to be there for a while, we only managed to get car parking space a quarter of a mile away, entailing a seven minute walk across two of the busiest roads in the centre of town. Getting the children to school in the mornings was a major hassle – but moving elsewhere would have been more so, and we did not want them to change school for a year we could see was going to be difficult in any case. The other frustration – which, again, we had idly looked forward to! – was the absence of a phone in the house (we could not have paid the bills in any case), consequently our relative inaccessibility and our frequent need to use public telephones. Of the three nearby, one was regularly out of order, and another was a card-phone; and the novel cuckoo-tune accompanying calls seemed more like a comment on the whole system and on our situation than anything else.

Part of our confusion was that we were still in Cambridge, still in touch with college Fellows and friends. Geographically, we were close; but economically, socially and spiritually, we felt miles apart and worlds away, despite being still ‘in touch’. My company had largely been that of academia: privilege, wealth, ability, influence, power, style, quality – as the world and I too easily estimated it. Now we were living at the opposite end of the spectrum. I would go to the city library to read the papers and keep warm, and see the faces of the same old regulars. I would see familiar college faces in the University Library, and wonder whether I was still ‘one of them’ or not. I would make light-hearted conversation, and say we were ‘getting on all right’, but feel I could not really begin to open my heart. How would they understand our deprivation? Did I? Who were we now?

Unavoidable, this distancing, isolation, separation, bereavement. Difficult enough to explain to others, let alone ourselves. What was going on? Had God indeed led us into this wilderness of disorientation?

And why? No, I didn’t want to cling falsely to old contacts and colleagues; and, yes, we knew that God was leading us on; but yes, I did miss the old securities; and yes, we were in a no-man’s land. Like any bereavement, we had to go through the process ourselves; many could support and a few understand; but no-one could exactly wear our shoes.

‘The Israelites started wailing and said, “If only we had meat to eat! We remember the fish we ate in Egypt at no cost – also the cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions and garlic. But now we have lost our appetite; we never see anything but this manna!”’<sup>1</sup>

I never really sorted out which was worse; signing on every fortnight in the dole queue, or actually collecting the money in the local central Post Office. Neither was an encouraging experience. The dole queue seemed like the valley of the shadow of death, the faces those of hopelessness, the queues those of pointlessness. The offices were as bare and stark as could be

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1 Numbers 11:4-6.

– only three black reclining chairs, in addition to the usual stack chairs (actually, the Supplementary Benefit office was rather more well-appointed!) Presumably not worth spending too much government money on such set-ups. Making the environment too comfortable might give people the wrong idea . . . .

Only once did I meet the same (rather well-dressed) person for one or two fortnights running and have a conversation with her. And I was interested that, even when I had only spoken a few sentences, she said (looking at me rather seriously), ‘You’re educated, aren’t you?’ (presumably meaning, ‘You shouldn’t be here, should you?’). The assistants behind the counter were on the whole friendly, so long as there was nothing out of the ordinary to report. I was very well received at my first signing-on interview, both in Cambridge, and in Birmingham when we transferred. The only problem was the various stages that followed of transferring pieces of paper into cash. That took longer, much longer. Any change in circumstances involved extra pieces of paper, further explanations, more delay in waiting for payment. It simply took so long for things to work their way through the system. Much simpler simply to fall into the routine. It was even quite a while before I discovered that the Department of Employment (dealing with Unemployment Benefit) and the Department of Health and Social Security (dealing with Supplementary Benefit) were two quite different enterprises.

In one case, while waiting for a reply to a letter, and having by then realised (been told) – during a painful process of cripplingly anxious and frightened waiting – that it took time for things to reach their destination, I decided to leave it a while. When I came to raise the matter in the end, still not having heard anything, I was asked why I had waited so long before mentioning it . . . . You can’t win. There were only a couple of times that I had to raise my voice to press a point, because it was clear that I was being taken for a fool or a nuisance; but both these times I felt that the assumption was that the customer (the unemployed) is wrong unless proved right. On one count I was right; on one count I was wrong. On the whole, I appreciated the clerks’ patience in what undoubtedly seems to be a tiresome job.

When you have been used to efficiency, to letters being answered at least reasonably quickly, to having questions and queries dealt with promptly, it is odd, annoying, upsetting, disturbing to have to come to terms with the fact that nothing will happen very fast. Two examples. (1) My own Unemployment Benefit came through quickly and efficiently; but it was three months before (having raised the matter) I received Unemployment Benefit to cover my wife. (2) On a much more serious level, it took five weeks for our benefit to be transferred from Cambridge to Birmingham: five weeks during which we received no benefit at all, and when we survived by selling carpets and one or two items in the house we had just moved into, and on Child Benefit; five weeks of phone calls and waiting, weeks of being told that there would be no problems, of beginning and

going through the old routines again at the new address, of being told that one office was looking after it, and then that office stating that it was the other office's responsibility. People said it was never worth sending a letter; but I had always imagined that was the better way to do it; but then we were not on the phone . . . And even when we did have a phone in our new house, it seemed to make less difference than I'd hoped. This is not to say that I was ever treated curtly; on the contrary. It is only to say that even such relative deprivation is not easy to live with.

If the atmosphere of the dole queue was one of boredom, that of the Post Office was one of banality. Every time I queued to collect our benefit, I resented very heartily the fatuous inanities of the Post Office Video service advertising and the insurance company leaflets alongside: endless double-your-money enterprises, saving for retirement schemes, Cliff's latest, double glazing, nest-eggs and windfalls of one kind or another. I don't know whether it was my sense of sanity (frequently put in doubt by the whole experience) or of poverty that felt most affronted. Absurdity of absurdities, says the Preacher, all is absurdity. Even I with my lack of economic and social sense, could feel the element of social control in the fortnightly signings-on and payments. But at the same time, I was caught; half feeling like a beggar, half knowing that it was for precisely such a situation that I had been paying my tax and stamps all those years, half being deeply grateful not only for the £100 per fortnight but also for the milk tokens for the children. Precisely: three halves don't make a whole. I sensed we were living with contradictions all the time. I got used to feeling sick the night and the morning before signing on (and knew of others who were literally so); I never got quite used to the unwanted identity of having no social identity by virtue of being unemployed.

I am not knocking the system. That such benefits exist at all is a miracle (and I often hesitate to use the word) of modern social commitment. (See the DHSS document 'Which benefit?': 60 ways to get cash help). Neither the complexities nor the abuses argue against it. The concept is an almost unique corporate and secular expression of the classical Biblical commitment to the poor. The only problem, as with so many great ideas, is the actual execution. The practice too easily lags behind the ideal.

For myself, I felt it was less important for me to have any old short-term job than for many other people to get a sure long-term post. Any job I took would be one less for anyone else in greater need; and, in any case, I felt my ministry should continue to be available primarily for the church. So I found myself helping out voluntarily in a number of ways – taking services, quiet days, talks, lectures and seminars (I was pleased about this) for a wide range of groups and churches. For while people rant and rave about the number of unfilled job vacancies, they rarely reflect that in many cases there may be 100-200 applicants for any one position. Nor do they reflect on the unbelievably destructive experience of applying for job after job and being turned down (especially if you are the wrong colour, or age, or sex, or style), again and again and again – or (just as likely) being told

'We'll let you know' (and hearing nothing), or (just as likely) not hearing anything at all. Nor do they reflect on the virtual absence of jobs in many areas<sup>1</sup>; nor the cost (sometimes in terms of marriage breakdown: the South African parallel is not far to seek) of one person going in search of work in a different area. But I digress. For at least part of our conviction was that we had been brought to this point to share the experience of the have-nots in the most material and physical and practical way possible. As preparation for my present job in Selly Oak, with a commitment both to the universal mission of the church and world-wide response to situations of crushing suffering, it was quite stunningly apposite. To put it rather more strongly, God called us into the fellowship of the unemployed so that we might discover how dehumanising is 'the spiritual devastation it leaves in its path'<sup>2</sup>, and how deep and close is the humility and grace of God who hears the cry of 'this poor man.'<sup>3</sup>

'He who oppresses the poor shows contempt for his Maker.

Do not deprive the alien or the fatherless of justice . . . Remember that you were slaves in Egypt.

What do you mean by crushing my people and grinding the faces of the poor? declares the LORD, the LORD Almighty.

We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves.

Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom?<sup>4</sup>

So talk of scroungers made us very angry: not because there aren't any (our experience taught us that there are those who know how to work the system very well; but then recent disclosures reveal exactly the same practices in the Stock Market; but then the idle rich usually have a little more than the idle poor), but because the whole mentality is one of suspicion, because of the assumption (like that of the disciples) that someone or someone's parents has sinned and is to blame. In fact, it is clear that many do not take up benefits to which they are entitled<sup>5</sup>. No-one who has tried to live on £50 a week will ever accuse anyone else of scrounging. In this respect,

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1 A colleague who is Rector of Holy Trinity, Birchfield (Birmingham), tells me that 95% of 1985 school-leavers in his parish were still without any job after a year. Emotive language notwithstanding, I put that alongside the Daily Mirror's report of 5th January, 1987, that Government figures indicate that 'since May 1979 . . . 94 per cent of jobs lost have been north of Watford'.

2 A. E. Radcliffe, *loc. cit.*

3 Psalm 34:6.

4 Proverbs 14:31 and 17:5, Deuteronomy 24:17f., Isaiah 3:15, Romans 15:1, James 2:5.

5 'Not all those people who are entitled to social security benefits claim their entitlement . . . Only about half of those who are estimated to be eligible for family income supplement (FIS) claim it.' *Social Trends* (16th ed. 1986), Central Statistical Office, p.82.



the unemployed are at times the scapegoats of a society where a person is judged by the size of his salary (cf. the regular statement that 'Roger is doing very well . . . he's got a very nice job in . . .'), where the labourer is frequently not worthy of his hire, where the security of his position is subject to the whim of the Director, but above all where 'full paid employment is no longer necessary to the new means of production being introduced in advanced economies'<sup>1</sup> so that labour is entirely dispensable.

'If the Lord had not been on our side – let our family say – if the Lord had not been on our side when people misunderstood us, when their suspicions and puzzlement flared out against us, they would have swallowed us alive; the flood would have engulfed us, the torrent would have swept over us. The raging waters would have swept us away. Praise be to the Lord, who has not let us be torn by their teeth. We have escaped like a bird out of the fowler's snare; the snare has been broken, and we have escaped.'<sup>2</sup>

"Many thousands are in want of common necessities; hundreds of thousands are in want of common comforts, sir."

"Are there no prisons?" asked Scrooge.

"Plenty of prisons," said the gentleman, laying down the pen again.

"And the Union workhouses?" demanded Scrooge. "Are they still in operation?"

"They are. Still," returned the gentleman, "I wish I could say they were not."

"The Treadmill and the Poor Law are in full vigour, then?", said Scrooge.

"Both very busy, sir."

"Oh! I was afraid . . . that something had occurred to stop them in their useful course"; said Scrooge. "I'm very glad to hear it . . . I help to support the establishments I have mentioned – they cost enough; and those who are badly off must go there."

"Many can't go there; and many would rather die."

"If they would rather die," said Scrooge, "they had better do it, and decrease the surplus population."<sup>3</sup>

1 *Unemployment in British Society is a Kind of Spiritual Death: A Challenge to the Nation from the Ashton Council of Churches*, (Chairman: the Revd. A. E. Radcliffe, Ashton Rectory, Ashton-under-Lyne), p 3.

2 Psalm 124.

3 Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol*, Stave I. cf. 'Shock Rise in killer heart disease' (Birmingham Daily News): 'A huge rise in the number of deaths in Birmingham has been blamed on unemployment and ignorance in inner city areas . . . Blood pressure problems are 70 per cent higher in the central authority than the rest of England. The catchment area of the authority includes Sparkhill and Sparkbrook, where as many as one in two of the population are unemployed'.

The sense of powerlessness was absolute, and is perhaps the most comprehensive aspect of unemployment.<sup>1</sup> In this respect, the Citizens' Advice Bureau (conveniently located across the green from us) proved to be a real source of friendship and support. Not surprisingly, since it performs an important social function, its grants are being reduced. When dealing with bureaucracy, I could not but feel I was dealing with 'others'. When visiting the C.A.B., I felt I could talk without fear, in confidence, to sympathetic ears. An example:

Since we had only moved out 'temporarily', into a two-up, two-down house, most of our belongings were in store. When we began to receive Supplementary Benefit, having reduced our capital by the necessary amount, we became entitled to claim for furniture in store, which I duly did. The reply came: there would be no grant because we did not fulfil the necessary requirement – namely that of trying to find somewhere where we could house all our belongings. (This incidentally illustrates another factor: you only discover what the rules are after you have started playing the game; sometimes, each new move introduces a new rule). Absolute disbelief on two counts: (1) no-one had come to ask us or discuss this with us; I assume it was concluded from the fact that we were still at the same address; (2) I did not even need to check (though I did) that unfurnished accommodation in that area of town (a) did not exist and (b) would have involved the Council in vastly higher rents than that we were already being assisted in paying. The next thing after writing back to query this (as entitled) was to receive a letter from the Appeal Tribunal in London stating that my case would be heard within the next two months. I crumpled. I had not intended my letter to be an official appeal; I could not bear waiting five or six weeks for the matter simply to be turned down; the time stated would have been virtually impossible, with my wife on a course; but, most of all, I felt the trap of not having any 'middle-men' between myself and officialdom, of there being nothing between an informal query and an official legal tribunal – apart from the C.A.B.

I went to discuss the matter with them – and very nearly wept. I felt so raw and powerless. I needed somebody of good-will to know how we felt. Between us we realised that the reason for the decision was probably that we needed to have less than £500 in savings in order to qualify. But part of the hurt was that this was not stated. Part of a deep comfort was to realise that the C.A.B. lady I was talking with had made it part of her Christian commitment to help part-time in that way. I cannot express how deeply

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1 'No sex please we're jobless' – headline, *The Birmingham Daily News*, 27th August, 1986. National spokeswoman Zelda West-Meads is quoted as saying, 'It (unemployment) is particularly a strain for men. Many see their masculinity tied up with the work they do and when that goes they may find themselves impotent [I typed important!] – it's a double blow'. The connection between social powerlessness and sexual impotency is clear, though the shock-horror headline betrays the seriousness of the issue.

touched I was that, in a sense, I had found the hand of Christ in deep gloom. So we paid up. We got further notes stating that the Arbitration Officer had decided that his decision was correct. So no point in appealing anyway. Should I have contested it?

'The position generally is not hopeful for clients, bearing in mind the Government's social security policy. Claimants, whether they are the unemployed, pensioners, single parents, newly redundant, sick or disabled, have no reason to believe that the future will be any more encouraging than the past'.<sup>1</sup>

I vividly recall walking round a near-by furniture store, with salesmen eagerly buzzing around us, assisting, smiling, eager to sell. I asked one if they offered any credit plans. 'Oh yes, no problem'; out came the calculator. I walked away, looked around a bit more. I started talking to another of the salesmen. 'The problem is the money', I said. 'Ah', he replied jokingly, 'isn't it the same for all of us?' 'Yes', I said, 'but we're unemployed'. End of smiling faces, end of conversation. Warmth turned to ice. I have never felt an atmosphere change so fast.

But perhaps the hardest cut of all in the whole experience came right at the end. We had waited five weeks for our benefit to be transferred. One payment came through a week or so before I began my present job. So I duly returned my UB40 claim form, to say I did not wish to claim Unemployment Benefit or Supplementary Benefit any more. The next day, the very next day, they were on the phone to us to check whether this was correct, and whether I was commencing work. Whether or not they needed to get unemployment figures down for the beginning of September, I do not know. But that lightning response made me feel very sick and cynical. It was the only time in the whole eleven months that anything ever happened fast. A fine farewell guillotine.

## **Part 2: What went on in what went on**

Strictly speaking, unemployment is meaningless. It is an experience of meaninglessness; an assault on meaning. It is an exclusion from society quite as effective as colour is an exclusion for many. It is a kind of spiritual death.<sup>2</sup>

I remember sensing fairly early on that it was like an extended retreat – full of consolation and desolation. I recalled Ignatian retreats I had made: the ways I had been confronted with all kinds of buried and suppressed personal material, and there, under direction, had the opportunity to repent; and the ways God had met me 'sought – unsought' in sheer self-giving grace. I recalled Morton Kelsey's reference to Jung's story of the clergyman who came to him with a nervous breakdown, and was told to spend the evenings quietly in his study, all alone, and did so, playing the piano and reading. When he did not improve, Jung said 'I didn't want you with

1 Sam McQueen, *Cambridge Weekly News* (date not traced).

2 *Unemployment in British Society is a Kind of Spiritual Death*, p.7.

Hermann Hesse or Thomas Mann, or even Mozart or Chopin. I wanted you to be all alone with yourself'.<sup>1</sup>

Stopping work was also, initially, for me like the opening of Pandora's box, or like some of Bunyan's experiences. 'About the space of a month after, a very great storm came down upon me, which handled me twenty times worse than all I had met with before . . .' 'And now was I both a burthen and a terror to myself . . .' 'I should be sometimes up and down twenty times in an hour'.<sup>2</sup> Deep, unconscious, irrational fears and fancies, horrors and terrors. Presumably I am not the first nor the last unemployed person to have been assailed by the arrow that flieth by day or the sickness that destroyeth in the noon-day. Even so soon, I realised I would not survive on my own. I was sensing very quickly the spiritual implications of unemployment.

So I sought out a nearby Roman Catholic sister with whom I was currently doing a course on Ignatian spirituality. Certainly, without her guidance, I don't know what would have happened. Of course, we have many Christian friends; and many nearby were immense sources of strength. But few perceived what we were going through spiritually. We didn't want to keep on telling a sob-story of self-pity; but any who visited us appreciated. Some imagined that living by faith would be 'happy all the day'. Perhaps it should have been. They expected us – and I did, originally! – to feel all sorts of things which we hardly ever did. This all conspired to increase the sense of isolation. But, as we were led to see, our experience was to be of something else, of another dimension with another purpose. And it was *that*, that something so un-Protestant, that identification with the emptiness and desolation of the earthly Christ, that was so difficult to convey. Perhaps it could only have been a Roman Catholic sister who could help us see that. But it was that alone that enabled us to make any 'sense' out of our experience at all; and helped us to appreciate something of the sufferings of the genuinely unemployed (Matthew 20:7!) the world over.

'The decisive battles of God's kingdom are fought in solitude . . . There are dark and destructive powers, old hurts come up with new vigour, bitterness against people who have wronged us; there are feelings of emptiness, frustration, rejection. The passions and urges of the body assert themselves . . . But there are also the invitations of grace: God's joy and peace, the call to deep love and surrender, the desire for a truer and richer life. Many of these movements, which usually lie low underground, come to life and we have to face them . . . It is the time to get into touch with the deeper layers of our mind, the disguised temptations, the silent invitations of God'.<sup>3</sup>

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1 Morton Kelsey, *Encounter with God*, Hodder & Stoughton, London 1974, p 182.

2 John Bunyan, *Grace Abounding*, paras. 96, 149, 191.

3 Joseph Neuner, S.J., *Walking with Him. A Biblical guide through thirty days of Spiritual Exercises*, Gujarat Sahitya Prakash, Anand, India 1984, pp 4-5.

So our first lesson was – and is – to be passive before the Lord. ‘The Dark Night’ (of the Ascent of Mount Carmel) is precisely the passive night, when God is at work in us beyond our control, and what we had to do was to allow him to work in us through the things that were happening to us. The physical hardships were (as usual!) the material context in which God was intending spiritual fruit. But how hard!

We were sustained and repeatedly nourished by a number of scriptural images:

- By the theme of the Shepherd of Psalm 23, which had been our leit-(NB pun!: =‘leading’) motif prior to leaving my last job. We had a strong sense that God was going before us; it only gradually became clearer that the ‘green pastures’ to which we believed he was leading us were primarily himself, rather than any external countryside.

- By the theme of the wilderness, to which, it seemed, the Shepherd had led us, and through which, we trusted, he would keep us. The aspect of retreat also prepared the way for this understanding of our ‘interim’ experience. Allied to this was our sense of being (in many ways, literally) ‘out in the cold’, of being ‘disengaged’ and ‘dis-located’, of being put in a cocoon, or put in cold storage for powerful shock treatment. In the language of Zion, it was a time of ‘being laid aside’.

- By a number of overlapping themes of the ‘year’. Professionally speaking, it was possible to disguise my feelings by speaking of an academic ‘sabbatical’; but it became increasingly clear that the intention of the year was not to be academic, but rigorously personal and spiritual (to separate the inseparable). Right at the beginning, my wife had a sense of it being a ‘fallow year’; and right at the end, I had a picture of the whole year as a ploughed field overshadowed by the wings of the covenant. As part of this healing process at a ministers’ week at The Hyde, a person praying with me (as I wept for so many of the ‘lost years’ – quite ignorant of our circumstances), saw the year as a Year of Jubilee. Strange and wonderful, like all God’s actions, I thought; never as I would have imagined, but rich in blessing, all the same.

- By our frequent sense of involvement with Elijah, being reminded now of the widow of Zarephath as our children collected sticks from the park to light our fires with; now of her cruse of oil that did not fail, as we shared our last piece of bread or cake with someone, only to find that there was more, or that someone had left a bag at the door; now of giving what we did not have, and yet finding that we were given in return, and in one particular instance feeling that we must give a cheque for Aid to Russian Christians, even though we knew that we had nothing in the bank, and with breaking heart sensing that we had again really touched the meaning of sacrifice; now realising the vital spiritual lesson that the cruse is never full, but only contains sufficient to share with someone else.

And all along, we felt we were like Elijah, being fed at the brook Cherith, where the waters had dried up, by the ravens, by those very birds of the air whom God feeds himself (Matthew 6). It is impossible to express

our sense of gratitude and love and disbelief(!) to those who sent gifts and money anonymously – whether it was money or St. Michael's Gift Tokens from A Nonny Mouse or A. Christian, or very generous gifts from people we had known over the years, or – as touchingly as anything – a bowl of poinsettias on Christmas Eve, itself a vision of life in death, light in the darkness and hope in despair.

'Wishing to strip them . . . of this old man and clothe them with the new which is created according to God in the newness of sense, as the Apostle says, God divests the faculties, affections and senses, both spiritual and sensory, interior and exterior. He leaves the intellect in darkness, the will in aridity, the memory in emptiness, and the affections in supreme affliction, bitterness, and anguish, by depriving the soul of the feeling and satisfaction it previously obtained from spiritual blessings'.<sup>1</sup>

For, yes, the greatest sense was of kenosis, of being emptied, stripped, reduced, and not merely humbled but humiliated. This material fact, which is the regular accompaniment, not only to unemployment but to many of life's harshest inflictions, Sister K. enabled us to see as the opportunity for identifying with Christ in his own humiliation. That is, she enabled us to see absence as the sign of Presence, not-having as the sign of Gift, abandonment as the sign of Grace. Perhaps this is what theologians mean by 'seeing as'. It is absolutely not a denial of the situation, not even really a way of transcending it (spiritualising it to make it all feel better), but rather entering it in the Spirit of the Christ who 'did not seek his own'. Our meditations thus took on the shape of the hymn in Philippians 2, which took on a completely new aspect and gave us new eyes to God's ways of dealing with us. The circumstances were unalterable; and they were also the opportunity of being re-shaped. It hardly even *felt* as if we were being re-shaped; it only felt as if we were all the time handing everything over to God – which is sometimes not-feeling, sometimes great cost, and sometimes joy.

So I think that by – so to say – agreeing to be shaped by the Spirit in consciously identifying with Christ's self-humiliation, we were also offering ourselves further areas of identification, taking on further identities. Spiritually speaking, it was passivity all the way; and it was so also physically, much of the time, quite apart from the fact that I think we went through various stages of shock as it became clear that we were going to have to live through a winter of considerable abasement.

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Where have we been taken? In many ways, of course, it is not for us to say. I can only say what I feel we have learnt, and what I know we have not fully learnt!

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1 St. John of the Cross, *The Dark Night*, 2.3.3, in K. Kavanaugh and O. Rodriguez (trs.) *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, Institute of Carmelite Studies, Washington, D.C., 1979. The whole of Book 2, chs. 1-10 is relevant.

1. Almost inevitably, as we shivered and prayed, and lit candles for colour and faith, we were in spirit with Irina Ratushinskaya, Galina Barats, Lidiya Doronina and many, many others in prison for the sake of the Gospel. It was not simply some appreciation of their situation, it was the sense that they were bearing in the body the death of Jesus, that they were 'always being given over to death for Jesus' sake', so that his life might be revealed in our all too mortal body.<sup>1</sup> It was the sense of a common sharing in a common destiny in Christ. It was the fellowship of need; and the sense of closeness with those for whom we prayed was at times quite extraordinarily powerful. I think we touched something of the power of true weakness, and thereby something of the emptiness of apparent power.

Which reminds me of the question we were continually asked: What are you doing? I remember one particularly painful conversation along those lines, which as usual caught me near the bone. I tried the usual answers: that I had not been involved in academic work, that it seemed important for other things to have priority, that sheer survival took a lot of time, that I had been involved in various occasional offices, but that we had mainly been trying to deepen our relationship and intimacy with God. It sounded so hollow. Or did those things – that thing; the be-all and end-all of life – being in Christ – usually seem to matter so little, to require so little time and commitment? I knew why it sounded wrong – I was defending myself, protecting myself against expressing the hurt I felt at the distance between us, at what is central. He went on twiddling his fingers as I spoke, and I knew that my answer did not satisfy him any more than his question satisfied me. Because, in the end, we have been concerned with not-doing, but with being.

2. One of the really lovely paradoxes – which we have almost as soon lost sight of in trying to survive a house purchase on Supplementary Benefit! – was that we were able (ie we decided it was right, as an act of commitment) to keep giving at the same rate at which we had been doing at twice the income. The cruse of oil again. We both appreciate aesthetics and beauty, colour, life and matter, richness (as opposed to riches). But now we were feeling sorry that we could not give more, even though we knew it might be the last penny in our pockets at the moment. It was deeply strengthening to know that what we were giving was absolutely right, no matter what we felt.

The reverse of this is that we (!) began to discover how to receive. Whether we were given small or large gifts, we thanked God. Everything – Supplementary Benefit and milk tokens included – was a gift; we became increasingly a gift to each other. In that, part of what became our regular supply was from the very Sister and community we were visiting for counsel and wisdom; and we found ourselves continually baffled by her statement that it was a privilege for them to share our experience *with us* (but I realise it was a simple parallel to our finding it a privilege to share

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1 2 Corinthians 4:10-11.

with unknown believers around the world in their need). We discovered, in short, that it is often the poor who are able to give most. One month I brought back from them: two pounds of sausages, two pounds of lean bacon, two oranges, a pot of rice salad, a pot of cole-slaw, cheese, honey, baby beets, custard powder. Such detailed care and love! Food fit for a king! But it is the giving and receiving of such specifically material help that is in the end the real touchstone of faith (cf. the letter of James!). We bless God for that.

3. The further paradoxical truth which sustained us was a combination of themes: namely, that it was in the wilderness that the year of the Lord's favour was made known. It is in the presence of our enemies that the LORD prepares a table before us. 'The planting of the Lord' so often takes place in the desert; 'in the wilderness shall waters break out, and streams in the desert'.<sup>1</sup> And then, having planted his garden, he sets about pruning the trees, even when it doesn't feel as if he's threatening to take the axe to the root of the trees and 'cut it down'.<sup>2</sup> In this sense, God was using our experience of unemployment to continue his 'strange work' of refining, and to draw us into closer relationship with him. It was a permanently stretching work, in many more senses than one! The 'dark night' is not a 'spiritual' experience that goes on isolated from everyday events; those events are virtually the dark night which God is seeking to illuminate with his presence. So, for us, my Resurrection Sunday wife and my Good Friday self (to polarise matters somewhat falsely), it was the year of the Lord's favour not only despite hardship but precisely because of it. That is why I emphasise, in this account, that we are not trying to arouse guilt, but simply to say: this was our experience, our theology and God's and our mission to say: this year - and not ours only, but the experience of many of the unemployed, and that of, well, is it more or less than two-thirds of the world?

'That the trial of your faith, being much more precious than of gold that perisheth, though it be tried with fire, might be found unto praise and honour and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ.'<sup>3</sup>

'A man's anxiety and affliction in this burning of love is more intense because it is doubly increased: first, through the spiritual darkness in which he is engulfed and which afflict him with doubts and fears; and second, through the love of God which inflames and stimulates and wondrously stirs him with a loving wound . . . In the midst of these dark and loving afflictions, the soul feels the presence of someone and an interior strength which so fortifies it and accompanies it that when this weight of anxious darkness passes, it often feels alone, empty and weak.'<sup>4</sup>

Precisely. No thanks to us, as John Newton says somewhere, whose faith is as weak as water. We both knew at times the huge difference between

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1 Isaiah 61:3, 35:6 (AV).

2 Luke 3:9, 13:7.

3 1 Peter 1:7 (AV).

4 St. John of the Cross, *The Dark Night*, 2.11.7, as above.



the exercise of faith and the feeling of faith. Indeed, much of the time, we felt we were living out of faith as much as in faith. But that could not – does not – destroy God's faithfulness. I became increasingly convinced that faith is a commitment to be won each day. It was – is – never possible simply to live off the interest on the capital of past faith.

I conclude with a final frequent picture, which symbolised much for us. Looking out of our front room window (when it was warm enough to go in there), we used to observe the lines of human consumer-ants walking, trudging, hurrying from one shopping centre to another across the green (I typed 'greed!') laden with 'this world's goods' the other side of the road outside our house. I looked and I wondered at our enforced separation from that whole process, feeling a fine mixture of envy and superiority, thinking of all for whom 'purchasing-power' is a tired and jaded mockery, and asking 'Why spend money on what is not bread, and your labour on what does not satisfy?' But that is what our society is set up for; that is what people are educated for; that is what work is directed to; and that is frequently what the church testifies to itself.

But there is a hollowness at the heart (economically speaking as well as spiritually!), and only people of a faith which has been refined in the fire are going to be able to testify to a Grace, Mercy and Love which is richer than all else, and which is found in all else, in not-having no less (and perhaps much more) than in having. This was where we began to sense the poverty of our contemporary riches, the way we devalue past riches, the riches of many of those who are poor, and the absolute wealth of the poetry of pain. Irina speaks for our time: for the whole world, and not just (though potently) for Russia. But there are so many poor who are simply poor, and have no way of finding a way through their poverty to any other riches of life. The gospel is for them, and we, without them, are not made perfect. Mission which is only as deep as action and doing (or even their well-being) will never be commensurate with the depths of people's hearts, and with their being which itself springs from the eternal Being of self-sacrifice. We must be drawn ever more deeply into Christ, in whatever way he chooses. The spirituality of unemployment (let alone all the other world issues) itself demands from believers a deeper spirituality. That is the imperative for today's mission.

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**Postscript:** Since the above article was written, figures have been released indicating that the number of people living on Supplementary Benefit has more than doubled since 1979. Frank Field, Labour M.P. for Birkenhead, was informed by the D.H.S.S. that 'In February, 1987 . . . the total number of persons dependent on supplementary benefit was 8,350,000'. Comparative figures are: 1979: 3,980,000; 1981: 4,840,000; 1983: 6,130,000. Mr Field claims that 'the increase since 1979 has been greater than the rise which took place between 1948 and 1979'. (*The Independent*, 21st July, 1987).