

GILLIAN COXHEAD - ENTERING THE MESSY BEAUTY OF LIFE

The author is married with four sons and works as an Accident and Emergency Nurse in a childrens' hospice. A frequent visitor to the (now sadly closed) Carmelite 'Tabor' centre in Preston, she is also a volunteer at the local L'Arche community and has many years of parish experience.

I am at a point on my journey where my spiritual life is no longer neat and tidy. God cannot be contained in my nicely constructed compartments, and paradox has become a recurring theme. God, it seems, is everywhere and nowhere, yet every day I experience God in the somewhere.

In the A&E department where I work, we give out bravery stickers to the children. I have often thought I would like to have some printed that say, 'That's love' or even 'That's God'. Why? Because in all the messy beauty that is real life and indeed death, I see the love of God shining through. Thomas Merton once wrote: 'Who is going to tell these people they are shining with God's love? How my heart echoes those words!

So, where is this 'somewhere' of God's love? It is in the somewhere of the group of teenage boys caring for their intoxicated friend - one holding the vomit bowl, another rubbing his back; in the somewhere of the elderly mother caring for her alcoholic adult daughter; in the somewhere of the elderly frail husband who tells of how he wakes at least four times a night to turn his wife as she is unable to move for herself; it is in the somewhere of the next-door neighbour who just pops in several times a day to check on a sick friend; in the somewhere of the person who knows they can't fix it but stays anyway. Would they understand if I gave them one of my stickers? Maybe not. It seems they are simply doing what is fundamental to our human nature responding in love to the need of another -and it is so pure that they don't even know they are doing it. Now THAT'S LOVE!!

L'Arche communities are places which live out this vision in a most beautiful and ordinary way. Here, people simply live together, share life, do what folk do in households everywhere, and live with the tensions of difference. L'Arche offers a vision which rejoices in the unique contribution and value of all individuals, whatever their ability or disability.

Through my involvement with our local L'Arche community, I have the opportunity to share in their regular eucharistic service. Here again, I experience the 'somewhere' of God's love shining. Without fail, one member of the community announces at the end of the service, 'Isn't he gorgeous, give him a clap!' This uninhibited affirmation is directed at the priest. How often do we experience this kind of spontaneous outburst of love on the average Sunday morning? In this person's eyes, it seems everyone is gorgeous. And it would not be unusual for the community AGM to be interrupted, simply to proclaim the beauty of those present. How refreshing!!

The service is often chaotic and unpredictable, and yet there is such reverence and dignity. One member is so eager to receive communion she goes right up to the priest and altar, gleefully rubbing her hands together as she waits for the moment of reception. Here, anticipation and excitement are expressed without inhibition. In this environment, everybody's contribution is valued: one day, when the usual accomplished pianist was missing, a community member who could not, in theory, play a note - volunteered to lead us in worship. To everyone's delight, the keys were played with an almost mystical sensitivity, and we all sang along gloriously out of tune. Now THAT'S WORSHIP. Recently, I heard a bishop explaining how he had a bit of a reputation for baptising all comers. His reason for this was he believed that those who bring their children for baptism genuinely want what is

best for them. Now surely that's love. I was tempted to respond by jumping from my pew and shouting, 'YES!' Of course, I am far too inhibited; yet how I agree. In my experience, it is fundamental to our human nature to desire what is best for those we love and with whom we share life. It is true that my idea of what is best may be very different from another person's, but each idea is no less genuine and sincere than the other. Surely this desire for what is best for another is God's love shining.

I have noticed that the majority of people coming into hospital are accompanied by another: a friend, relative or even stranger. Somebody who seems to be saying, 'I want what's best for this person, I am presenting them for healing'; without words they are saying, 'I will be with you, I will accompany you in your pain, I love you. It seems that Christ was willing to meet people where they were: in the border lands of human existence. He also knew his need of solitude, but even for Christ this was not protected and could often be interrupted by the needs of those around him. We believe that humans exist in order to be in communion with God and with God's creation, namely each other. Then our call must be to journey ever more deeply into the nitty-gritty of human existence, trusting that it is here we will see and meet God in all his various disguises. The border leads us to the centre, and becomes the centre, where all is one. God is indeed everywhere, nowhere and somewhere.

We know that the traditionally held view is that we meet God in a particular way through the sacraments, liturgy, prayer, meditation, silence - through what we might describe as the activities of religion - and this would certainly be my experience. However, I also know that God cannot be contained in any of these 'holy' rituals. I find myself increasingly uncomfortable when I am offered a method of prayer or meditation or a faith course which seems to claim some kind of monopoly on the achievement of union with God. The danger then is that the method becomes the 'it'; and the very things of religion which have so much value in revealing God to us can become obstacles and even false gods'. We start to say: "This is the way', even the only way', and: 'If you are not going this way, you may never arrive.'

All these expressions of God's presence, though, are of course special gifts and give great consolation. But what I have noticed in myself is that when I have a sense that the veil is lifted, and I have an experience of communion with the accompanying surge of well-being, I want to keep hold of the moment with both hands. We must attach before we can detach. We need to have the moment, enjoy it, and allow it to transform us before we can let it go. This, we are told, is the path of freedom, the journey into the vastness of God. Our desire to be at one with God, and with all that is, seems to be endless. Our call is not to live in some kind of aloof detachment, but to enter fully into the messy beauty we call life!!

It was the end of Mass, and I had gone as always to light my three candles in front of the statue of St Therese. An elderly gentleman was ahead of me. I stood back, not wanting to impose on his space, but he saw me out of the corner of his eye and stepped to one side. I moved forward and took my candles as he was lighting his; he held his lighter out to me and lit my candle; then we both stepped back and prayed in silence; then he turned to me and said, "We had better pay for them now, no 'buy one get one free' here!" We both laughed and then he took my hand and held it for a moment and off he went. Did he know he was shining with God's love? First the invitation, then he shared his light, then we prayed together, then we laughed, and finally he blessed me.

Amen