

Heaven and Earth are One

Bryn Jones

"To have faith is to have wings." James M. Barrie

'Throw me the ball!' one child called.

'No, to me, to me!' shouted another.

All the children were excited. It was a beautiful summer day for our picnic by the river. Families were chatting away happily, busily unpacking their picnic lunches while the children played. It was warm and peaceful.

Suddenly I saw a commotion develop just along the riverbank. One little girl had waded through a very shallow part of the river to the other side. Then she had moved along the bank as she played, only to find, now that she wanted to come back, that the water was deeper here. The frightened child was crying, shouting for Dad's help. Mother was trying to calm her down, but there were so many other voices saying different things that the child was becoming increasingly confused and upset.

Then the child's father waded out with several other young men, forming a line across the river, and laughingly picked up the child and passed her along the line. By the time she was put down on the bank she too was laughing; the fear all gone. A living bridge had made both sides one.

Who has not at times felt the cold hand of fear in adverse circumstances? Then our fear has increased because, when we have gone before the Lord, he has seemed so distant-like the child's father on the far bank, with what seems like an unbridgeable gulf between. In our confusion we cannot think of any reason for this feeling. Deep down we know God is not fickle or temperamental, so we feel bewildered.

It is here we discover that in exercising our *priestly* ministry we close the door on fear. God has made us a holy priesthood: 'You ... like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ' (1 Peter 2:5).

Don't be frightened by the word 'priest'. In Latin it is *ponti fex*, meaning 'bridge-builder'. In everyday experience our priestly ministry of worship bridges the gap between heaven and earth. Time and space are no longer governing factors. The Spirit has bridged the two worlds.

The spiritual sacrifices we offer him are our surrendered life and God-centred praise and adoration. We worship him from a love-filled heart. And as we worship, our heart is stilled, the fears dispelled and the love of God fills our soul.

'Fear not' are two of the most frequently used words of Jesus. Fear gives us a distorted view of our circumstances, suggesting all kinds of gruesome possibilities. At times there appears to be an unholy conspiracy between our circumstances, feelings and mind. They work together to paint pictures of possible outcomes to our situation that can be quite terrifying.

As a child I would often visit my grandmother for several weeks during the summer holidays. She lived in a little cottage along an old disused railway line, right out in the country. When coming home from the town, the bus would drop me by the little river about half a mile from the house, and I would have to walk the rest of the way. The narrow, winding path between the trees was great fun in broad daylight, but if I was late back and dusk fell, the whole scene changed. The moon cast shadows that turned the trees into giants. The wind in the branches became moaning creatures of the night. In the rustling of the leaves I envisaged a monster creeping after me.

I would run as fast as my legs could carry me, arriving at the house out of breath, to be greeted by Gran, who covered her anxiety with a stern look because she had warned me to get home well before dusk. Now she would be waiting for my excuses.

'You were afraid. You've been running again.'

I would try to steady my heavy breathing and pretend that I hadn't been afraid, that like a big man I had walked all the way.

Of course, the following day in the bright sunshine I would play among those same trees, shooting at the crab-apples with my catapult. In the daylight there were no monsters that I couldn't deal with.

The unknown, the darkness, the night sounds all conjure up ills that will never be. But the worshipping soul knows what it is to dwell constantly in the light of God, where fear has no place, where grace reassures, where life is secure, where hope dwells serene.

The night-time circumstance can become a God-filled hour. You can find with the psalmist that God can visit you amid your pressures and bring peace where fear would try to control. Instead of the trembling of fear there can be the song of praise: '*By day* the Lord directs his love, at night his song is with me—a prayer to the God of my life' (Psalm 42:8).

Worship draws us into the consciousness of his presence where fear cannot stay. God is *always* with us. There is never a moment when we need fear that he has left us alone.

During the day it is easy to forget the moon and stars. We think only of the clouds and the sun, or the blue sky, because we tend to be aware only of the visible. That's why, at night, no-one remembers the sun. We think instead of the blackness of the night and the brightness of the stars.

But paradoxically, we are often most conscious of the invisible God during times of pressure and difficulty. Seeing the dark circumstances, we cry out for the sunshine of his presence. It is at our point of need that we become most aware of our inability to handle our situation and therefore look to him who is invisible.

It is in the night-time of life that the glory of his person shines the brightest. This does not mean he isn't there in the good times. He is there at all times and we need to train ourselves to walk not by sight but by faith.

It is worship that makes us conscious of the reality of his person and presence at all times. I remember this lesson coming home to me during a long and exhausting ministry trip. Sometimes people have a wrong idea of itinerant ministry. They see it as travelling to exotic lands, with plenty of opportunity to see the world. The reality is often very different. I have frequently visited countries where, from the moment of arrival, I have seen only the inside of meeting-rooms, and by the time I board the plane home, all I have seen of the country has been on the drive from airport to house or hotel and back.

This particular ministry trip was like that. From the moment I stepped off the plane I had been rushed from one meeting to the next. I had been away two weeks and was feeling intensely the absence of my wife and children. I longed to be with them again. I had spoken on the telephone but that had only served to make me miss them more acutely.

This evening I had retired to my room early and was listening to the sounds of the family downstairs enjoying themselves, children and parents laughing together. I felt the intense loneliness of those who spend a great deal of time on the road, be it salesmen, business executives, preachers, politicians, whatever. As the happy conversations continued downstairs, I imagined what each member of my own family back home might be doing at that moment.

Quietly I turned to the Lord and allowed him to fill my mind with a sense of his presence. 'Father,' I said, 'I'm so alone at this moment.'

Before I could say any more, I seemed to sense his smile, and quietly the inner voice said, 'Not alone, surely? I'm here with you. Enjoy fellowship with me.'

I remembered how, years before, I had been four weeks nonstop holding an evangelistic campaign in which many people had found Christ. Every day there had been folk to be counselled and followed up. Though so busy, I had felt so alone. Then I had received a letter from an old man who prayed regularly for us, and he closed his letter with these words: 'May the smile of God be ever upon you.'

That's our God. We're never alone-his smile is ever upon us. And with that remembrance, my heart swelled with love for God and in that lonely bedroom I worshipped.