

FAITH IN THE FOURTH WORLD: WHEN ONLY GOD REMAINS

A life without rhythm or meaning

Let us put ourselves in the presence of those men and women, those families and this people who embody the poverty of our time, heirs of the people living in poverty who, two thousand years ago, jostled with each other as Jesus Christ passed by or hid in the sunken passages outside the towns; Heirs of those living in poverty who populated the leper colonies and hospitals in the Middle Ages or sheltered underneath the cathedral buttresses; heirs finally, of the slum dwellers, and finally those in the shanty towns and the most deprived quarters at the beginning of our own century. Heirs that we still find today crowded into the outskirts of our cities, in the rubbish tips, banished to the most dilapidated dwellings in our villages, or isolated in the countryside.

What do the people living in poverty in the back alleys of our own time tell us about God, about faith in the God of the Gospels? Let us go down to this 'nether world', to the Beauchamp's home.

In the Beauchamp household, ten people jostle with each other, argue, insult each other all day long, or live as if under a thick blanket of sadness, without speaking, without looking at each other, each one caught up with their own preoccupations.

The parents, seven children, plus a son-in-law are thus crammed together, as best they can, into an existence where irritation and anxiety cannot but give way to despondency or the paralysis of insecurity. Life seems all the more erratic, without order or rhythm, because nobody is working, and school-age children don't always go to school. Mr Beauchamp, the son of a textile worker in the north who died young, has had thirty-six jobs since the age of twelve. In fact, he often had to beg for work, and then simply to beg, to help his mother feed his brothers and sisters.

At twenty-five, Mr Beauchamp is a husband and father, but as for work nothing has changed. Small, sickly, worn out well before his time, there is nothing for him but the lowly tasks of road sweeper, removal man and market stall erector. Then one day he collapses. Suffering for a long time from a gastric condition, he will rarely work again. However, for a long time

the Social Security refused to recognise his incapacity for work. It took him four years to sort out his situation, four years of food shortages, during which time his mother had to look after him. From then on, he became a shadow of his former self, ashamed, humiliated and housebound. No one has ever believed in him, why should anyone take him seriously at the Social Security? He does not even have any credibility in the eyes of his children!

His children no longer do what he tells them, and it is only by raising his voice that to all intents and purposes he manages to keep things in order at home. So, he is the one who has to do the housework, while his wife goes to the factory in his place. Most of the time he works in silence, taking more and more of a back seat. Sometimes, when setting the table, he forgets to set his own place. He looks after the others, especially his wife, but without saying a word. His wife has taken in his stead the humiliating path with employers who look down on you and your body weakened and deformed by poverty and ask you what you are capable of doing.

What does she know how to do? Coming from a large family, whose father unloaded trucks at night at Les Halles, she helped her mother bring up her brothers and sisters until she got married. She is not educated, has no trade. She is not very skilful either, as her joints are racked with pain. She finally finds a job as a storage tank cleaner in a small painting company. All too quickly she gets exhausted without managing to earn enough to support the family.

She perseveres for nearly four years until rheumatic fever disables her. Today, both parents are invalids. There remains the son-in-law, Jean-Philippe. He is twenty years old, but he too has no profession. How could he have one? He grew up in an emergency housing estate, condemned in advance as a child to remain at the bottom of the class, unable to learn as quickly as his peers who came from more privileged backgrounds. He never even reached the end of primary school, nor did he receive any vocational training. Nothing has prepared him for the world of work. He only makes periodic forays as a factory worker. It is lucky for him that he does not fall into delinquency, like so many other young people from his neighbourhood: perhaps this is thanks to the young Françoise Beauchamp, his neighbour on the estate? They got married, lived for a while in a furnished room, then, for lack of money, they returned to his parents' home on the emergency housing estate. So that makes ten people. But ten people who live on what?

With pensions and family allowances, they have a total income of 1,100 francs per month. That's 110 francs per month per person, less than 4 francs per person per day. At this level, any effort to organise family life, to arrange space and time, to keep things in order, maintain a rhythm of life, becomes a nonsense. In the Beauchamp household, they live from hand to mouth without ever knowing where the next meal will come from. They have lost their capacity to plan, and Mr Beauchamp sometimes sends one or other of his children to the grocery store five, seven or twelve times a day to buy half a baguette, a packet of noodles, yoghurts, Ajax, (but Ajax is only bought on benefits day).

Mrs Beauchamp remembers to keep the cardboard yoghurt pots that will serve as cups for coffee in the morning, but she lets the leftover pasta go mouldy in the bottom of the saucepans; she turns off the water heater to save electricity, but she boils the water to cook the noodles before she has even sent her daughter to buy them. Time is fragmented, life is broken up into moments, without connections or continuity. And people themselves are likewise disorganised.

Richard was supposed to have a new pair of trousers on benefits day, but they had to pay the electricity arrears as they had been cut off. That cost 720 francs, a fortune! So, for Richard, what had been a joy to provide for him what he needed, became a cause for pain and humiliation. Mr Beauchamp went to find him five or six times, sometimes with an old pair of trousers given by the neighbours, sometimes with the eldest son's worn-out trousers, or with the plan to let out an old pair of his own trousers. They ended up by coming to an agreement, but for many days afterwards the father did not speak to the son who he had been unable to satisfy. They would not speak to each other again, until Mr. Beauchamp was able to find a nearly new shirt for the boy. How did this man who, from the age of twelve had learned how to scrounge things manage to persuade a neighbour to give it to him? It is better not to ask, and Mrs Beauchamp knew better than to ask questions. She, too, calls on the support of neighbours to meet the basic needs of daily life. She borrows three lumps of sugar, a spoonful of Astra [margarine] to put in the pasta. She doesn't ask for more. Money and food haunt her, to the point of causing her forget, for several days at a time, to take care of her own needs, to comb her hair or to wash herself.

For her too, those around her take on an ever-changing significance. In the morning, she dresses the little ones with tenderness, talks to them gently, but very quickly fatigue, pain in the knees, wrists, finger joints, and the obsession with the lack of money take over. So, she pushes the children around, who are now nothing but a source of anguish, pain and annoyance.

And she can no longer look at or speak to or even smile at this faithful, self-effacing husband who comes to bring her a tablet, lets her taste the noodles, this man who is always on his feet, despite his illness.

She sits there on her chair without saying a word, rubbing her aching knees. When someone comes to cut off the electricity, she doesn't even react. Since there is no money... She sits there, staring into space, with no plans... or she looks at her sons who spend all day long, playing cards. Her sons who have just had a fight over a jacket. Patrick wanted to sell it to his youngest brother, not to give it away! 'You're not going to sell your jacket to your brother', the mother protests mildly. 'I'm not going to give it to him as a present am I?' Patrick replies. For him too, people no longer have a clear and lasting relationship. This youngest child, with whom he has just shared the dregs of the coffee pot and the last of the sugar, is a brother, certainly, but also an occasional source of money, or a rival. You cannot trust him on pay days when it comes to deciding on the most urgent expenditure. How do you make sure that the rival does not always get the better of the brother, the classmate or the friend?

God, there where we least expect him

So, for those of us who are looking for what people with a lived experience of poverty can reveal to us about God, what do we discover in the Beauchamp home to nourish our thought?

Where is faith in the God of the Gospels to be found in this fragmented, shrunken, meaningless existence that we have just glimpsed? Where is it in these hearts and minds that are slowly being drained and weakened?

It is not about glossing over things lightly, of claiming to see the signs of a school of thought, of a life of faith in for this 'people at the bottom of the pile.' We already embroider far too readily the virtues of poverty. The signs of faith, hope and charity do not seem to be so clearly manifested in the reality of the lives of Fourth World families. At the very least let us refuse, to entertain them for the sake of our own well-being or peace of mind.

Besides, what does faith mean?

To have faith is to have had a personal encounter with God, a personal encounter with Jesus Christ in your life, to have introduced them into your daily experience so that they remain present. It is to have entered into the story of God and of Christ, to know that God loves and saves through Jesus Christ. It is to hold that the love and salvation that come from God are

important, to admit that God has a plan for humanity, to want to take part in it and to be able to make a connection between our own lives and the story of God and Christ.

Is any of this possible for the Beauchamp family? Is it possible for all the other families who, like them, are slowly feeling their way forward through an existence where relationships between people are constantly changing, where a brother becomes a rival and the head of the family a humiliated person, where only the discouragement, the fear of everything and the pain that cannot be expressed remain constant?

How can you believe? How can you have faith in God, commune with his divine life, when no one believes in you and you can't trust anyone? How can you understand God's story when your existence is falling apart, made up of ups and downs, hot and cold, but with no direction or progress, and which stifles any sense of history? How can you make sense of the activities of your own daily life in terms of God's plan when no one helps you to make sense of the endeavours that have failed, the unspoken plans that have come to nothing in terms of participation in the salvation of the world, when you yourself only see the humiliating results of your own efforts, the disappointment brought to others, your inadequacies and incapacities, your exclusion from the hearts of others?

Faith seems decidedly impossible for these men and women who are always at a loss, always unable to stand back and get to know each other face to face, where each person can find a worthwhile identity to develop over time.

Impossible Faith and yet....

One grey winter morning, young Lucien Beauchamp entered the kitchen, holding a crucifix. In fact, there was only the body of Christ left, the wood has disappeared. 'You see, Dad', said Lucien, 'There's only God left. I'm going to take two pieces of wood, tie them together and make a cross for him'.

Impossible faith?

Christmas in the Beauchamp household was a day like any other, perhaps worse than any other. There was nothing to mark the occasion, not even a meal that would make you forget for a moment the misfortune and where everyone would have really eaten their fill.

Perhaps, in spite of everything, this spoiled Christmas helps us to understand the true meaning of the birth of Jesus Christ, of this Jesus who came among the poorest people to live and die so that they might live?

One evening, I asked Mr. Beauchamp this question. He lowered his head, did not answer. He thought about it, then said quietly: 'We have nothing, it's too difficult...' Then, after a moment, he said: 'Perhaps that is the mystery of the Incarnation'.

Then he said again, someone who had never spoken to us about God, who had never shown the slightest interest in religion: 'It's true that we need to be saved... we are people living in poverty'.

There is nothing more to say, nothing more to understand, all we can do is bow down, pray, and adore God who is waiting for us there where we do not expect him. To adore Jesus Christ who shows up there in a magnificence that we are not capable of imagining.

This is the revelation that comes to us from this weak, poorly clothed, self-effacing man who doesn't know how to express himself. Faced with this man and his people, what else is left to us, but contemplation and prayer?

'At Jacob's well, Jesus, tired by the journey, sat down...'. and to the Samaritan woman he said: 'If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water'.

How much of God's gift would we receive if only our lives were united with those people 'at the bottom of the pile'?

Excerpts from the book "Les pauvres, rencontre du vrai Dieu" ["The poor, meeting the true God"], not published in English