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A reluctant Samaritan: reflections from Carlo Levi's *Christ Stopped at Eboli*

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Carlo Levi, doctor, organist, painter and political activist, was exiled in 1935 by Mussolini to Lucania, a remote corner of southern Italy. I consider the enormous impact his skills made on the primitive life of the area, and how, when the peasants believed that 'Christ stopped at Eboli', the town north of their region, and no Christians or outsiders were interested in them, Levi gradually, through his immersion in their life with practical, undemonstrative service, gave them new hope. Finally I consider the vital importance of practical service as a true reflection of Christ's active love for a world and for suffering people without other hope.

EXILED POLITICAL PRISONER • NEGLECTED REGION • PRACTICAL SERVICE • CONFIDENCE • HOPE • WORTH

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Between Campania and Apulia in southern Italy lies the mountainous region of Lucania, remote from the tourist route and the rest of civilisation, a region neglected and backward, stretching south down to the Gulf of Taranto. It is the region to which the writer, doctor and painter, Carlo Levi, was sent as a political prisoner for three years in 1935 for his uncompromising opposition to the Fascist regime of Mussolini, a region portrayed in his book *Christ Stopped at Eboli*, published in 1946.[1]

Eboli lies just to the north of Lucania whose inhabitants for centuries had known themselves to be abandoned by the authorities, lost in a past of violence, brigandage, feuding, lost in the lingering disease of malaria, plunged in pessimism and a feeling of being totally discarded. When Carlo Levi says 'Christ stopped at Eboli', he is referring to the local people's sense that they were at the edge of caring civilisation, and at the limit of the interest and involvement of governments and spiritual authorities. Eboli seemed to be the place at which Christian influence stopped, beyond which was a desolate, inhumane region, where, in the words of Levi in the opening pages of his account, 'Christ never came': 'Christ never came this far, nor did time, nor the individual soul, nor hope, nor the relation of cause to effect, nor reason nor history' (p. 2).

Because of their acute sense of abandonment, the people of the region were permanently plunged in a deep resignation to the inevitability of neglect and the futility of hoping for better. This was the region to which political prisoners, opponents of the regime, were sent, where the road ended, with limits set to their freedom of movement, where they had to register every day with the authorities. Levi, however, manages to make the very best of these limitations and is soon absorbed into the meagre life of the village of Gagliano, able to use his neglected medical skills to cure the sick, whereas the two local doctors had been incompetent and unsuccessful.

Levi not only makes the best of his situation, he develops a great love for the people and describes their way of life in considerable detail, only occasionally making gentle critical comments on those he meets who are insincere or manipulative. His descriptions speak for themselves as he dwells lovingly and good-humouredly on the idiosyncrasies of the local people. However, at certain times, he describes the aura of pessimism and resignation that pervades the life of the villagers around him, and his bitterness on their behalf emerges from his account. The peasants all sympathise with the fact that as a political prisoner he must have enemies in Rome, just as they have. There is a spirit of

brotherliness, 'this passive brotherliness … as suffering together, this fatalistic, age-old patience'. It is 'a bond made by nature rather than by religion' (p. 3). While there are churches, priests, religious processions and ceremonies in the locality,

> there is no room for religion, because to them everything participates in divinity, everything is actually, not merely symbolically, divine: Christ and the goat, the heavens above and the beasts of the field below … Even the ceremonies of the church become pagan rites, celebrating the existence of inanimate things, which the peasants endow with a soul. (p. 116)

In September, during the feast of the Virgin Mary, the papier-mâché Madonna, a replica of the famous Madonna of Viggiano, is 'no sorrowful Mother of God, but rather a subterranean deity, black with the shadows of the bowels of the earth, a peasant Persephone or lower-world goddess of the harvest' (p. 118). The peasants pray to her for rain for their parched land, but the rain does not come: 'The black-faced Madonna remained impassive, pitiless and deaf to all appeals, like indifferent Nature' (p. 120). When Levi visits his patients and sees their bedrooms, he sees two pictures, the Madonna of Viggiano and President Roosevelt, the Madonna with her 'black, scowling face, with its large inhuman eyes' and the 'hearty grin of President Roosevelt' (p. 121). The two pictures seem to represent

> the two faces of the power that has divided the universe between them … The Madonna appears to be a fierce, pitiless, mysterious ancient earth goddess … The President a sort of all-powerful Zeus, the benevolent and smiling master of a higher sphere. (pp. 121–122)

For the peasants, America is the substitute for Rome, America the land of promise and hope, to which many young men travel in search of prosperity, whereas Rome has failed them and offers no hope or future. The pitiless Madonna is the face of grim rejection, of impassive neglect, just the excuse for the occasional boisterous celebration of the force of nature and earthly powers.

Only very rarely does Levi, despite the frustrations of his confined situation, feel this same resignation that the Madonna inspires. At the start of the New Year of 1936, when winter has set in and there is an eclipse of the sun, he sees the eclipse as a portent in the heavens: 'A plague-ridden sun looked through

half-closed eyes at a world that had entered upon a war of dissolution.' And he makes one of his references in this account to the evils of the wider world that gradually preoccupy him more and more and shape his life increasingly:

> A sin lay beneath it all, and not merely the sin, committed in these early days, of massacre by poison gas … No, the sin was of the kind that all pay for alike, the innocent along with the guilty. The face of the sun was darkened in warning: 'The future holds only sorrow', the peasant said. (p. 205)

The gloom of the eclipse and of the winter in this region infects him with the same pervasive pessimism and resignation that all are doomed to endure the same fate.

The depressed mood of the people is perhaps best expressed in the story of the peasant of Gagliano who dreams of a treasure buried in a forest nearby. Frightened by the dark, ghostly night, he tells another man his dream and together they search for the treasure, which they find to be gold. But when one of the men climbs down into the hole to extract it, the gold turns into coal (pp. 145–146). This same sense of disappointment and betrayal is found towards the end of Georg Büchner's 1837 play *Woyzeck* in which a grandmother tells some children the story of a poor orphan child who, because there is no more hope on earth, strives to get to heaven, which smiles in such a friendly way, but turns out to be just a piece of 'rotten wood'. When the child then looks for the sun, it is just 'a faded sunflower'. Eventually, after more futile searching, when the child returns to earth, the world is now 'an overturned harbour'.[2] The meaninglessness of such a betrayal of hopes recalls Levi's comment when he is asked why he has come to Gagliano and he realises that he is the victim of fate. 'Such things as reason or cause and effect, do not exist; there is only an adverse fate, a will for evil' (p. 77).

However, through his service as a doctor who, though unable to achieve the impossible, is able to effect basic cures that the two incompetent local doctors are unable to effect, and through his ability to communicate with every kind of person, Levi is eventually described as 'a Christian, a real human being' (p. 264), one who has shown humanity and care, different from the authorities, the 'fellows in Rome', as the peasants frequently describe them contemptuously. In the eyes of the peasants, a Christian does not need to be a religious person, simply a human being who cares and gives love.

It seems that this is the only means at his disposal of alleviating the sufferings of these people and of bringing some love and purpose into the world. Levi does not mention his personal beliefs. We learn very late in the book that there is a Protestant Bible on his bedside table (p. 260), a fact noticed by the priest who replaces the drunken priest who has been relegated to ministering in an even remoter village in the valley. Levi is a painter, he can play the organ for the new priest, but he does not help out for more than one Mass. Whatever his personal beliefs, he mainly channels them into his service as a doctor, which he only undertakes reluctantly in the first instance, as he has not practised medicine for a long time. He demonstrates love and service through actions rather than words. He is clearly an activist, a fact that has incurred the wrath of the authorities and caused him to be sent into exile in Lucania, but in this place he has to conform to the restrictions imposed on him by the mayor, who nonetheless is pleased to have such a cultured person in their midst as a prisoner. Despite his activities as a dissident, he seems to have found a niche in Gagliano where he can use his skills in a different way to alleviate the sufferings of others while making the best of his confinement.

Despite the title of his book, after the remarkable opening chapter Christ is very rarely mentioned in the account. Christ has indeed stopped elsewhere, and has seemingly been replaced by an analysis of the life of these people, tinged with their resignation but enhanced by Levi's deeds of practical service. But does the book hold out any more hope than Levi's good deeds?

In one of the most moving passages in one of his books of meditations, Eddie Askew rewrites part of the parable of the good Samaritan. After the Levite passed by on the other side, he writes: 'Then for a long time no-one came. The sun beat down by day, the night was very cold, and the man died.' He adds: 'I call it the Absent Samaritan. Because for many people help never comes.'[3] My recent reading and frequent rereading of Levi's book has drawn my attention again and again to the plight of those regions of the world, such as the devastated parts of the Middle East, where Christ must seem to be a very distant person indeed, to remote, arid parts of Africa where help seems to be merely scraping the surface of the problems that exist, lack of clean water, medicines and helpers, corruption, violence, tribal hatreds, where, as one journalist writes, 'every minute of every day a woman somewhere dies in childbirth or pregnancy',[4] where children starve or, if they survive, have very short life expectancy, where the politicians, the equivalent of the 'fellows in Rome', seem to be slow to help and where we ordinary citizens sacrifice so relatively little from our abundance to alleviate suffering. While much has been

done and the problems are being increasingly brought to our attention, I scratch my head in bewilderment that God seems to have created us human beings in his image, who so manifestly fail to reflect that image, and that he does not seem to have created us with wills that are stronger to reach out to those who stare into our television cameras out of their resigned despair as if judging us for our neglect. Has Christ perhaps stopped short of us and given up on our failure to act much more than we have done? We see this currently especially in the attitude of governments and peoples towards the plight of refugees and migrants whose situation we consider shortly.

Towards the end of his first chapter, Levi gives a pre-echo of my thoughts, as he compares the situation of the rest of humanity with that of the abandoned peasants of Lucania:

> The seasons pass today over the toil of the peasants, just as they did three thousand years before Christ; no message, human or divine, has reached this stubborn poverty. We speak a different language, and here our tongue is incomprehensible. The greatest travelers … have trodden the paths of their own souls, of good and evil, of morality and redemption.

And he goes on to say how Christian morality has bypassed the life of the people of Lucania: 'Christ descended into the underground hell of Hebrew moral principle in order to break down its doors in time and to seal them up for eternity' (p. 2). His use of the philosophical term 'moral principle' seems to isolate the doctrine from the realities of the daily existence over centuries of the peasants who remain untouched by such concepts.

The view that such moral concepts are sealed off from the real life of the people is highlighted by the fact that once Levi has stated that 'Christ did not come. Christ stopped at Eboli', he virtually ignores the name of Christ and concentrates exclusively on the concerns of the people among whom he finds himself (p. 2). Yet while omitting mention of Christ as a person in whom he can believe, Levi, in his love and devotion to the people, becomes for them a new, modest, unaccustomed, unexpected Christ figure. He does not perform miracles in raising sick people from the dead, and he is unable to heal the first person brought to him on his arrival, yet through his concern and his skill he is able to bring healing to almost all his patients and show loving concern for them. There is no bodily resurrection, such as occurred with the raising of our Lord and the raising of Lazarus, and such as is depicted in a famous twentieth-century film

where a Christ figure returns to raise a girl to new life who had been dead for a few days.[5] The atmosphere in the community of Gagliano does not resemble the atmosphere of Palestine in the time of Christ, where supernatural events and miracles merged with the normal natural events of daily life. It seems that supernatural miracle has fled the scene to be replaced by the limited skills of well-intentioned and well-trained human beings seeking to serve humanity. But is it possible that Levi, without explicitly stating his own faith and without a conscious effort to propagate the Christian gospel, is living out, in practical ways within the limitations of his humanity, the injunction of Christ to minister and to serve; 'I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me' (Matthew 25:40). If he had failed to do his best to treat his patients and to serve the community, he would have incurred the negative condemnation: 'Just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me' (Matthew 25:45). Such familiar recorded words of Christ confront us starkly with our failure to serve our fellow human beings and convict us of one of the most obvious failures in the life of pious Christians whose piety does not reach out beyond themselves. As Graham Greene wrote through the thoughts of his priest in *The Power and the Glory*: 'God might forgive cowardice and passion, but was it possible to forgive the habit of piety?'[6] Certainly, nobody would criticise Levi for piety. He remains uncommitted to the life of the local church and sceptical of the immorality of the first priest and of the smooth urbanity of his replacement.

But has he achieved any good in the long run? After all, when an amnesty is granted to political prisoners following the end of the war with Abyssinia, he is released and allowed to return to his native Turin after only 18 months of exile. In answer to the pleas of the peasants, he promises to return, but up to the time of writing his account, eight years later, he has not done so. At one point he mentions that he rarely returns to places he has once visited (p. 158). With the amnesty, he now has the chance to resume his previous way of life, though surely his dissident activities have been curtailed. He is simply disinclined to linger longer in Lucania, despite his love for the people. So has his lack of commitment to a prolonged ministry negated what he has achieved in winning the confidence of the people and in serving them?

It seems clear that, while the obstacles to the spread of goodness seem insuperable, the loaf can be leavened by the service of one man or woman in a limited sphere. Levi has brought hope and love, the people now know that they are not forgotten. Can one claim that the act of Oskar Schindler, related in Thomas Keneally's novel *Schindler's Ark* and in Steven Spielberg's film, in

rescuing a limited though substantial number of Jews from the gas chambers, has ultimately changed the world? When his colleague Stern reminds him of the Talmudic verse that says that 'he who saves the life of one man saves the entire world' we are surely reminded of the series of Jesus' parables in Luke 15 which stress the vital importance of searching for just *one* lost person.[7] The smallest good act of grace and mercy glorifies God and enhances his kingdom. And the final words of Ben Okri's novel *Starbook* tell how, amid the fluctuations of centuries of civilisation, fragments of love and beauty can shine and light up our mortal world.

> All stories lead to infinity. There is no end to them, as there was no beginning. Just an epic sensed in the unheard laughter of things. Just fragments seen in the murky mirror of mortality, when bright beings shine momentarily in the brief dream of living.[8]

When a light has shone, the darkness has been illuminated, an impression made for good and the world is never the same again.

While one would not wish to denigrate the power of apocalyptic events and doubt the power of God to work through great, earth-shaking movements, earthquakes and fire, it seems that in our fallible and imperfect world, where evil seems so rampant and the gold of so many seems destined to turn into coal, that God more often than not chooses to demonstrate his glory and power through small acts, gentle interventions, as John O'Donohue says, through 'the shy graciousness of divine tenderness',[9] even through a 'gentle whisper' , or as we know it more familiarly 'a still small voice' (1 Kings 19:12), expressing himself through the sanctified acts and service of the trophy of his creation, humankind. So perhaps, while it seems that 'Christ stopped at Eboli', he is continuing to reveal himself through the presence and love of the man who went to Lucania as a reluctant political exile and unknown to himself succeeds in glorifying God when, in his view, the worldly authorities, the 'fellows in Rome', had abandoned the people. Perhaps Christ has come to Gagliano and created a new sense of self-worth after all.

Reading Levi's post-war reflections today, it is impossible not to sense many echoes with the present refugee crisis in Europe. Perhaps Levi's memorable title suggests a contemporary reappropriation: Christ stopped at the Calais Jungle, or Christ stopped at the Greek–Macedonian border, or even, Christ stopped in the Mediterranean. What would the refugees make of our efforts, our compassion, our prayers and our cries for justice and humanity? Would

they echo the sentiment of the people of Eboli, that 'Christ never came'? Are they living through their own modern-day parable of the Absent Samaritan? Or will our service, however imperfect, like Levi's, introduce Christ's presence into where it was thought he was not?

Notes

1. Carlo Levi, *Christ Stopped at Eboli*, trans. Frances Frenaye, London: Cassell, 1948. Henceforth all references to the book will be given in brackets in the text.
2. My translation. The scene is not numbered and is called 'A street'.
3. Eddie Askew, *Disguises of Love*, London: Leprosy Mission International, 1983, p. 78, and Luke 10:25–36.
4. Article in *The Observer*, 28 September 2008, p. 42, confirmed by an article in *Time* magazine, 29 September 2008, pp. 40ff.
5. *Ordet* ('The Word'), directed by Carl Theodor Dreyer, 1955.
6. Graham Greene, *The Power and the Glory* (first published in 1940), London: Heinemann & Bodley Head, 1971, p. 202.
7. Thomas Keneally, *Schindler's Ark*, London: Sceptre, 1986, p. 52.
8. Ben Okri, *Starbook*, London: Rider, 2007, p. 422.
9. John O'Donohue, *Eternal Echoes*, London: Bantam Books, 1998, p. 110.