

Amy Carmichael, Woman of Spirit

Isaiah 54.1-14

Luke 13.31-end

Our reading from Isaiah is surprisingly apposite this morning, considering the lectionary does not know that I'm going to be talking about a woman who never had any biological children, but who certainly enlarged the place of her tent and stretched forth the curtains of her habitation to make room for all those who came to think of her as mother.

Amy Carmichael was born in Northern Ireland in 1867, to a staunchly Presbyterian family, imbibing with her mother's milk the evangelical missionary ethic and the language of the King James Version of the Bible.

I can't claim that Amy's influence came into my life at quite such a young age, but I have known about Amy since I was 5, and read her words, on and off, for half a century. Like Amy, my parents were missionaries in South India, and when I went to boarding school up in the healthy climate of the Nilgiri Hills – snooty Ooty it was called – I found myself in Carmichael House. Our boarding houses were named after inspirational women, in the faint hope that by some process of osmosis their spirit might enter into our homesick and snivelling little hearts and enable us to be less of a complete nuisance to the tough missionary women who had to try to teach and comfort us.

One of the earliest stories I remember hearing about Amy was how, when she was a child, she prayed to have blue eyes instead of brown. She'd been brought up with a belief in the absolute power of prayer, so was dismayed when her eyes remained resolutely dark. Her mother explained that God always answers prayers, but that 'no' is an answer just as much as 'yes' is. In later years, Amy had reason to be grateful for her dark eyes, as she was often able to pass unremarked in India, and to go into places that an obvious westerner would have been barred from. As a theology of prayer for five year old girls at boarding school, it was not very encouraging, but it did make us like Amy Carmichael, as a fellow sufferer in a disappointing world.

But as I came to read more of Amy's writings, the note of self-pity was strikingly lacking. Under very trying circumstances indeed, Amy remained resolutely positive, always able to spin gold out of any straw.

Amy went to India at the age of 27 and never came back to Britain again, not even on holiday. She didn't believe you could take a holiday from what God asked you to do. She died there in 1951, aged 83, mourned by a very large family who called her 'Amma', 'mother', and by a readership from all over the world. Initially, Amy went to be an itinerant evangelist, travelling with others from village to village, to offer the gospel of Jesus Christ. The work was hard and the successes were few, while the misery and poverty that Amy saw and wrote about rather shocked the comfortable people back in Britain, who supported this mission work, but really wanted to hear uplifting stories of joyful conversion, rather than painful stories of failure and distressing privation.

In 1901, Amy's life took a new direction, which was to be her path from then on. A 7 year old girl, Preena, turned up very early one morning, begging for sanctuary at the place where Amy was staying. Preena, like many other small children at that time, boys as well as girls, had been sold to a

temple, to be 'married to a god'. It is likely that it was overwhelming poverty that led her parents to sell Preena, rather than depravity or religious devotion. At least the bride of a god ate. It took Amy quite a long time to work out that being married to a god was really little more than prostitution, but when she did, it became her over-riding ambition to rescue children from this life of abuse, and to offer them a safe and loving environment in which to grow up in self-respect, dignity and the Christian faith.

This was the start of Dohnavur, a fellowship which still continues to this day. Although temple prostitution is now illegal in India, there are still children who suffer the effects of poverty and family hardship, and fall through the nets of other provision, for all kinds of reasons. In Amy's day, Dohnavur grew fast, first of all caring only for girls, but later adding provision for boys, too. Children were housed in family-sized cottages, each with its own 'parent', and were given an education, very much along practical and Christian lines, learning, among other things, to sew, grow and cook food, and sing hymns and read the Bible. To begin with, Amy's oversight of Dohnavur was shared with a missionary couple, the Walkers, but Mrs Walker's health deteriorated and she had to return to England, and then Robert Walker died at the young age of 54, leaving Amy very much in sole charge of the work.

Amy wrote regularly, partly to help educate the people at home in Britain, but also to raise much-needed funds for Dohnavur's ever-increasing family of children and adults. More houses were needed, more teachers and parents for the children, a hospital was built, somehow, when something was needed, God provided the means, and Amy's books were no small part of that provision. Many of her books are still in print, and her little daily reflections on Bible passages I still find helpful. They are not at all scholarly and are unashamedly personal – even sentimental – but there is no doubting the advice – it comes from lived experience. She writes, for example, 'I have noticed that the first thing attacked is peace...When peace is shattered, vital prayer ceases...In disturbed times we can learn that circumstances have no power whatever over peace.' Amy wrote that not out of optimism but out of hardship, endured and overcome, in peace. And that means that there is at least the trace of a path that we might follow – that's one of the gifts that people of spirit leave behind – the knowledge that there is a pathway in the most barren of landscapes.

In 1931, in her early 60s, Amy had a bad fall from which she never recovered fully, and which eventually confined her almost entirely to her bed. For a woman who had been remarkable for her speed of movement and her energy, this enforced inactivity, combined with constant pain and sleepless nights, could have led to a complete character change. But Amy demonstrated that circumstances don't need to have power over peace. Reflecting on pain, the lessons of the little girl whose unchanged brown eyes turned out to be part of her treasury, typically began to write, so that her reach from her sofa was extended rather than diminished. The little, simple, realistic musings on pain, not glorifying it, not sentimentalising over it, but seeing it as something that could be endured with God's help, had a far wider readership than her more conventional Bible reflections. One of her books is called 'Rose from Briar', and it has proved enduringly helpful for people who feel made useless, laid aside, as Amy called it, by pain. God does not put people away in a cupboard if they are not fit and active. Amy lived another 20 years after her accident, and continued to be indomitable.

She was not perfect, but then she never expected us to think she was. We might question her unwavering evangelistic fervour, and lack of interest in the integrity of other faiths, her biblical

fundamentalism, her certainty that God spoke to her very directly, which sometimes allowed her to appear autocratic. But if we are only willing to learn from people we agree with about everything, then we setting out a meagre diet for ourselves.

I think it is her commitment that I find most challenging to my own woolly and well-meaning but not very effortful attempts to live a Christian life. Amy did the thing in front of her that needed doing, and she did it whole-heartedly, not just with determination but with real love; whether it was rescuing children from prostitution, writing out of pain, praying daily, come rain or drought, rose or brier, or giving up any chance of home and family of her own, to become 'Amma' to thousands. I earnestly hope God will never ask me to do such things, but I also hope that I haven't already missed invitations because I am not really listening. I so sympathise with the well-meaning person in our reading from Luke, who tried to persuade Jesus to hide and stay safe. Jesus is annoying open and resolute in simply carrying on regardless, and many found Amy, his faithful disciple, equally annoying, because she forces us to see that more might be possible.

Amy quotes Augustine, 'To God, who is everywhere, we come not by travelling but by loving.' Not any easier in Cambridge than in India, but no less important.