Women of Spirit: Dorothy Day

When Pope Francis addressed Congress in Washington last year, one of the four great Americans he mentioned was not destined to cheer the more swivel-eyed of the conservatives present. It was a name less well-known than the other three (who included Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King), but it was enough to give the vapours afterwards to such soft-hearted media as Breitbart and the Daily Mail. Who was this person? Dorothy Day.

If ever there was a woman of spirit in twentieth-century America, it was Dorothy Day. She died in 1980, having achieved something like ‘national treasure’ status by dint of her relentlessly consistent message and her great age. But this was the woman who had a divorce, an abortion and an illegitimate child in her past; and who, after her conversion to Catholicism, spent decades advocating ways of looking after the poorest in America which sounded not just socialist but anarchist. She was a pacifist. She was vocal in the civil rights movement. She spent more than a few periods in jail because of her participation in protests and demonstrations. She was utterly fearless and apparently tireless. And she is now on the first stage towards sainthood, and thus called – as the Pope called her in Congress – ‘Servant of God’. Mind you, she was prone to say to admirers who got a bit carried away, “Don’t call me a saint. I don’t want to be dismissed that easily.”

Her real contribution to American life began in New York in 1933, in the slough of the Great Depression, when she founded the Catholic Worker movement, and its newspaper, also called the Catholic Worker. She edited that until her death 47 years later. It is still published today.

Her belief was that we must devote ourselves to the poor; that to do so we must embrace poverty voluntarily ourselves; and that the way forward for society was to be fundamentally communitarian – that the long loneliness we face as fallen, individualised human beings can only be healed in community living. ‘The Long Loneliness’ is the title of her autobiography, written in 1952, where you can read both of her extraordinary life and of her equally extraordinary ideas.

Why devote ourselves to the poor? First, simply because of the horror of their lives. In ‘The Long Loneliness’ she writes:
Above all the smell from the tenements, coming up from basements and areaways, from dank halls, horrified me. It is a smell like no other in the world and one can never become accustomed to it. I have lived with these smells now for many years, but they will always and ever affront me. I shall never cease to be indignant over the conditions which give rise to them. There is a smell in the walls of such tenements, a damp ooze coming from them in the halls. One’s very clothes smell of it. It is not the smell of life, but the smell of the grave.

If you think this is confined to history, think again. I have seen this level of squalor in my previous parishes in London. It is quite scandalous in a country as wealthy as ours; and, from the Christian point of view, it is a blasphemy.

Dorothy Day also had a fundamental theological imperative for this devotion to the poor, which derived from the scriptures. She spoke endlessly about the Matthew gospel we heard, and especially its piercing last line: just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.

She would also use that verse from the Letter of James: if a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill’, and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? Armed with that verse she issued many a challenge.

For Dorothy Day, though, even more than those two passages, the text which lay right at the heart of her life and work and convictions was the Sermon on the Mount: that revolutionary sequence which begins with the Beatitudes and continues with a cascade of up-endings of traditional Jewish teaching. If someone wants your coat, give them your cloak too. Dorothy Day believed that literally, and did it frequently. In such radical fashion she made the move from why we care for the poor to why we should live like them:

The mystery of the poor is this: that they are Jesus, and what you do for them you do for Him. It is the only way we have of knowing and believing in our love. The mystery of poverty is that by sharing in it, making ourselves poor in giving to others, we increase our knowledge of and belief in love.

The Catholic Worker, April 1964
We meet Jesus in the poor. When a woman, racked with hunger and desperate for her next fix, manages to catch your eye, Jesus is looking at you too, through her eyes, and saying, ‘what are you going to do for me?’

Dorothy Day’s belief that we should voluntarily embrace poverty ourselves is obviously one of the harder of her teachings. But she gathered like-minded people around her, and in houses and co-operative farms across the States, where this is exactly what happened. It was idealistic but not without shrewdness. She did not advocate the abolition of private property, for example, since ownership was not inherently evil, and people with something have something to give to others. Still, she looked at those with much through, shall we imagine, narrowed eyes:

\[ \text{The first public act of our Lord, (she writes) … was the overthrowing of the money-changers’ tables in the temple. The miracle at Cana, when Christ… turned water into wine, has been written of as the first public act of our Lord. It was the first miracle... but it was not the social act of overturning the tables … a divine courage on the part of this obscure Jew, going into the temple and with bold scorn for all the riches of this world, scattering the coins and the traffickers in gold.’} \]

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Along with this radical commitment to living intentionally poorly went her commitment to life lived in community, variously understood. She often called herself a ‘communitarian’. Again she writes:

\[ \text{Community – that was the social answer to the long loneliness. That was one of the attractions of religious life and why couldn’t lay people share in it? Not just the basic community of the family, but also the community of families, with a combination of private and communal property.} \]

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Such was her belief in this community ideal that she thought care for the poor should be a matter for the community itself, people looking after each other. She argued against state support repeatedly. This of course jars strikingly with the standard left-of-centre approach taken in the west in the last half-century. But she passionately believed in keeping such activity local. She also believed in the value of work, that work gave a person dignity. The loss of dignity, even the loss of hope, were what pushed people beyond poverty (what you might call almost manageable poor-ness) into destitution. Other things were the work of government, for her: improving the conditions and rights of workers, for example, and not making wars.
For us this aspect of Dorothy Day’s thinking risks sounding like David Cameron’s infamous ‘Big Society’ idea: the idea that government can’t and shouldn’t do everything when it comes to social welfare. The problem was – and remains – that this really seemed to be saying that government should do less and less, to save money. And that’s before people and newspapers of that ilk start making their disgusting distinction between the ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’ poor.

Well I’ve seen the results of the cuts to social welfare budgets, and it is distressing. At the same time though – and this is where we have to listen carefully to Dorothy Day – I’ve also seen what amazing work is being done by on-the-ground community organising. Citizens UK is an excellent example of this, the people who gave us the Living Wage campaign. Local gatherings, including churches, can achieve great things for their community when they work in such a focussed way. The real challenge, one we might hear Dorothy Day making, is this: how can communities – individuals and families - become more thoroughly, well, loving? - not just ‘organised’, but habitually, even naturally, marked by conscious acts of loving care?

Dorothy Day knew. The last paragraph of ‘The Long Loneliness captures her ultimate conviction beautifully:

‘The final word is love… [although] our very faith in love has been tried through fire. We cannot love God unless we love each other, and to love we must know each other. We know Him in the breaking of bread, and we know each other in the breaking of bread, and we are not alone any more. Heaven is a banquet and life is a banquet, too, even with a crust, where there is companionship. We have all known the long loneliness and we have learned that the only solution is love and that love comes with community. It all happened while we sat there talking, and it is still going on.’

Andrew Hammond