

## LIPPEN ON THE HOLY SPIRIT

The stories I tell here have already been shared as particular items at particular times. But they belong to one journey. Here I thread them into one necklace, each one in order of time. I do so because I have thought: *Should I be given the chance before I die to leave one word of advice, what would it be?* Without hesitation I knew. It would be ‘Lippen on the Holy Spirit: lean on, trust in, keep turning to, develop a living relationship with the Holy Spirit’.

Faced with contemporary decisions and choices, some say, ‘I must ask myself what Jesus Christ would have done in this situation.’ For one thing, they don’t seem to realise what a huge task they set themselves. They would need to divest these situations of contemporary factors, re-clothe them in a Palestinian first-century context and follow through with what would be prescribed as Christ-like in the present day – in my judgement an impossible task.

For another, Christ Jesus has different advice: ‘When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own authority, but will speak only what he hears and he will make known to you what is to come. He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and make it known to you. All that the Father has is mine – and that is why I said: “He will take what is mine and make it known to you”.’ (John 16.13–15).

‘Lippen on the Holy Spirit’ is the advice of Jesus Christ Himself; for when we are faced with decisions and choices in our own time, and seek to deal with these according his mind, the Spirit will make his mind known.

How this works out is clearly illustrated in Acts 13 and 16.

At the start of Chapter 13 we are given a picture of prophets and teachers in Antioch who strenuously seek the will of the Spirit in prayer and fasting. The Holy Spirit responds with ‘Set Barnabas and Paul apart for me, to do the work to which I have called them.’ The work is not specified. They will find, as they take the road, what is required of them at each stage.

Features of a journey are revealed in Acts 16. Paul and his companions are prevented from delivering the message of the Church Council to inhabitants of Asia (at that time a province not a continent). What stops them? The Holy Spirit! They go on and attempt to enter Bythnia, but the way is barred again by the Holy Spirit. Paul, an evangelist to his fingertips, is denied opportunity to preach to

people who did not even know the name of Jesus – by the Holy Spirit! They either skirt or go straight through Mysia, and come to Troas. There a Macedonian appears in a night vision, appealing to them to ‘cross over to Macedonia and help us’. Then they ‘set about getting a passage to Macedonia, convinced that God has called us to take the good news there’.

Paul and his companions were able to begin the mission to Europe only because they disciplined themselves to be attentive to the Holy Spirit both when they were told ‘Speak up’ and ‘Shut up’. (O, that some contemporary evangelists heard the second command as well as the first! The gift they might give at times would be to step aside and to sit at the feet of ordinary people and learn what the Spirit is saying to the churches.)

The journey which I undertook in 1980 was to Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Panama and Venezuela, visiting basic Christian communities and carrying news of the work of the Spirit manifest in their development in different parts of the world which I had visited.

To understand what follows, it is necessary to appreciate that my and Margaret’s marriage was like a coin with its two sides. On the one hand, we were given to one another to delight in one another. We had a special gift for that. We were utterly charmed, all our days, to share life. On the other hand, we were given this togetherness to fulfil Kingdom assignments. What these would be we could not anticipate. We had simply to be alert to read the signs given on the way.

Margaret was especially good at reading these signs and jaloosing what should come next. Whatever I had to do on my own (e.g. for the World Council of Churches) would get her blessing. Except in this instance! She almost dug in her heels and tried to dissuade me from this journey. The problem was that, at that time, Guatemala and El Salvador were killing fields and she knew that I would be not with protected tourists but with those counted eliminable. First she tried the line that there was enough information about these two countries available in print and I could miss them out without loss. My reply was simply that, as she knew, reports of others were not good enough – I needed to find what I needed to find. She left it a few days. Then she said that not only reports but people were coming from these two countries – I could seek them out and get direct information of the kind I wanted. I replied that, as she knew, I needed to see people and sniff out the reality of situations in their natural context, not away from it. She gave up. I went with her reluctant blessing after all.

Was it that my conviction overcame her hesitations? That was not our way. We were together-people. I believe she came to see that she was looking on our marriage as if it had only one side, the delight in one another. She was scared for my well-being, even for my life. I believe she worked things out so that she came to the point where perfect love casts out fear. She consented to what she came to see as a Kingdom assignment, part of the package which was our marriage.

The visit to Mexico was straightforward. Bishop Méndez Arceo had developed his diocese on a basis of space given for small communities to flourish. I was able to get updated about their recent history and share with them insights from the life of communities in other parts of the world.

Four hours before my flight to Guatemala my Mexican host, Dr Gaxiola Gaxiola, got a phone call. It was to say that all my contacts in Guatemala and El Salvador had been killed, or had fled the country or gone underground – there would be no one to meet me to provide links with the small communities. Dr Gaxiola suggested I had better give up on the trip and fly back to Britain. But that would have meant that an interested party would not have been consulted – the Holy Spirit. I asked leave to go away by myself for 10-15 minutes to think things through. All I did was open myself to the Spirit.

In my experience the guidance the Spirit gives is not resoundingly clear. It may edge slightly to one way rather than another way and you simply have to make a judgement and plunge. You know, in any case, that if you have chosen rightly, your initiative will be gathered into a large divine initiative, and if wrongly, that it will be covered by an entirely sufficient forgiveness. I came back to my host and said I was going to continue with the journey.

What are you to do if you land in a strange country and all your contacts (except one priest, who I knew would not be at the airport) are eliminated? If I remember rightly, the person who was originally to meet me was called Sister Angela. I approached some of those who were meeting new arrivals and asked if they had seen Sister Angela. Some did not know her, others had not seen her recently. I knew this would be so. The whole idea was to make some sort of human contact in the hope that something might come of it.

Two nuns who I approached were expecting two other nuns, who disembarked behind me. When these arrived, they all moved off in a great flurry of greetings and welcoming conversation. The word came to me ‘Stand around and look forlorn’. In fact these exact words came to me. I remember the word ‘forlorn’ in

particular. How on earth could such an irrelevant thought come from the action of the Holy Spirit? All I knew was that strange pointers like this had, in the past, proved to have substance in them which I could not see at first. At the entrance to the airport I stood around looking forlorn.

At that time the entry to parking areas and the exit from the airport were close to one another. After some time the car with the four nuns appeared, ready for departure. The driver saw forlorn me, changed direction, swung alongside and asked if Sister Angela had not turned up. When I said she had not, the nun said that there was still a spare seat in the car. They would want to help – but could only do so if the place I wanted to reach was in the direction they had to take. I mentioned Iglesia la Merced. ‘No problem. That’s on our way. Hop in!’

If I had taken a taxi into the centre of the city, I would have been met by a closed and darkened church and would have been quite lost. As it was, the nuns knew the church house, which was in a warren of side streets. They took me there. A priest was putting away his car. He said that if I had arrived five minutes earlier, he would not have been there. If I had arrived five minutes later, no one would have answered the door. Too often a gun had been poked through a space in the metal grill and the person who answered had been shot at. The priest was the one person whose name I still had, not only in Guatemala City but in the whole country. I was provided with a base from which to operate.

On arrival in El Salvador, I adopted a different tactic. I made for Bishop Romero’s headquarters and asked around, seeking some sort of lead. I got none. I went out the front door. To the left of it was an open space about the size of a school playground. Two men were walking diagonally across it, talking. I took the chance to bring them into conversation and found that one of them was Romero’s liaison link with basic Christian communities! Once again I had purchase on a situation which seemed to yield none. His companion was in charge of the Roman Catholic radio station which bravely provided knowledge of what was really happening in the country. Though it was towards shutdown time in the evening he invited me to look around before the station closed – I could leave my rucksack in one of the rooms. So we wandered across a few hundred yards and I was shown around. At shutdown I wandered back – to find that the room in which I had left my rucksack was locked for the night and no one who was still there knew how to gain entrance.

I found that this was because of a device that had been adopted. The military, hostile to Romero and all that he stood for, were liable to raid the church headquarters without notice, looking for ‘subversive material’. Evidently they were not

allowed to make forced entry to particular rooms. So each room had a locking up arrangement which was not shared – so that others could genuinely tell the military that they did not know how to gain access. My rucksack was out of reach.

As the headquarters closed down, I realised I had two options. One was to sleep rough, in the open air. I was accustomed to rough sleeping. That was not the problem. The problem was death squads, wandering about at night, indiscriminately killing, leaving corpses to be picked up in the morning. The alternative was to try to get a bed in a modest residence. But I had no baggage, no airline tickets, no passport or other identification, no money – the police would be called, and Salvadorean jails were not known for their gentleness and comfort.

At that point I put my hand in my pocket – and found that Romero's basic Christian communities linkman, who lived outside the city, had given me his card, which I had pocketed without thinking. I also found some Salvadorean coins. For the life of me I cannot say how they got there – I had not bought anything which would have produced change. They were exactly the amount needed for a phone call. (George MacLeod would have said: 'If you think that is a coincidence, I wish you a very dull life!') I made contact and was told that, not far from where I was, I could find a house which a family had abandoned because of pressure from an anti-Romero military neighbour. There was still a caretaker there – he would provide a bed for the night. The next morning no one was earlier than me at the church headquarters, anxious to retrieve the signs of legitimacy and identity which the rucksack held!

In Nicaragua, I stayed first of all with Xavier Gorostiaga, the economic supremo of the new Nicaragua – produced by a brilliant people's revolution (eventually undermined and befouled by Reagan's illegal Contras and all manner of interference and dirty tricks by the USA). I had found Xavier in Ruskin College. (Developments in Nicaragua meant that he had a year to spare after Ruskin. I got him to come to Selly Oak Colleges as Third World lecturer, or something like that. We had flexibility in Selly Oak and could make appointments according to need as long as resources could be found.)

After some days in the Jesuit Centre which Xavier had as his base, I moved to Ciudad Sandino, a barrio which had four Jesuit priests at its heart, with whom I teamed up for some more days, experiencing the outburst of gratitude and hope which marked the first anniversary of the success of the revolution. From the barrio, members of basic Christian communities had gone out to join the guerrillas when they came down from the hills to capture Managua, in one instance with

sticks and stones assaulting the armoured cars (48 if I remember rightly) supplied by Britain to the dictator Somoza. There could not have been, at any other point of history, such a commitment of Christian believers in a revolutionary struggle.

I then moved on to Panama. I understand how difficult it might be for some readers to credit the story which follows. All I can do is supply a record.

Sometimes I had minimal information for getting in touch with small Christian communities. They did not advertise themselves. They might be beavering away, living the faith imaginatively under the noses of the official church without that church realising that they existed.

When I had to journey (as Abraham and Paul did) on a basis 'go and I'll show you on the road what to do', I had a prayer which went something like this: *'Look, God, I may have misread signs – or maybe you want me out of the road to act through other people. If this journey appears to me to be fruitless, fair enough – you know the total scene. But if you want it to bear fruit, please put the people I need to work with in touch with me.'*

In the case of Panama, I flew in with nothing to go on except the name of the person who linked the basic Christian communities. I had no address. I might easily have spent the three days I had allowed for the visit searching without being able to find him.

This is what happened: When I was flying to Panama he was driving on some assignment well away from the airport. He experienced a very strong sensation that he was required to turn back on his tracks. He realised that such an irrational feeling must not be given weight and tried to drive on. The pressure to turn round became so strong that he yielded. He drove up to the airport just as I was coming out. We did not know one another but recognised one another at once. I found I had arrived at a rare time when the Panamanian communities had three days of interchange – not meeting in a block but visiting one another in a process of mutual learning and mutual sustaining.

Thereafter I moved on to Venezuela, to a Pentecostal centre in Barquisimeto which I used for a base and for occasional consultations. On one occasion, my awareness that something new was stirring (though words such as basic Christian communities or basic ecclesial communities were still not current) led me to set up a five-day gathering of those involved, from Puerto Rico right round to Venezuela. The provision at the centre was absolutely basic – had we met in a

hotel, participants would have been tongue-tied with culture shock. In the Pentecostal centre they met at a level which did not disturb or confuse them.

While I was at Barquisimeto, I heard of shanty towns growing up around Caracas, as poor people in the countryside moved into the city to try to make a living. The concern of the Participation in Change programme, co-ordinated for the World Council of Churches, remained with me with its focus on how the poor were coping with change. So I got my ticket altered to spend a day or two in Caracas on the way back. But, try as I would, I could get no means of contact with people in Caracas, to give me entry to the shanty towns.

On the way to the plane to Caracas I took God to task, 'Look Lord, a covenant is two-sided. You have your bit to do as well as I have. So please get off your butt and do something – unless a fruitless journey is what you actually want.'

The pilot was a show-off. Never in my life have I been in a plane which took off at such a steep angle. When he straightened it out, a lass came forward from further down the plane with my plastic file in her hand. With the angle taken by the plane on take-off, it had slipped through the back of the seat beside me, and slid down to land at her feet. I thanked her. Then she said, 'I wanted an excuse to see you in any case: I think you work for the World Council of Churches in Switzerland.' I wondered furiously what committee or commission we might have worked on together. It was not that. 'It's just that, some time ago, I went on the tour of the World Council headquarters and I think I saw you there. When you came on board I recognised you. The landing of your file at my feet gave me an excuse to come and talk.'

So she sat beside me and we chatted. *Did she stay in Switzerland and have business in Caracas?* No, Caracas was her home city. She had been on a course in Switzerland which was not obtainable outside Europe, and now she was on her way back. *What type of course was it?* It was designed to equip her better for some work in the social services, her job in Caracas. *What kind of organisation did she work for? Religious, medical, political?* She was on the social services staff of Caracas City Council. *Was there any line of work for which she had particular responsibility?* Her main job was to be a liaison between the Council and the slum-dwellers in the hills around the city.

There is a mystery in all this. Did I prove to be inadequate martyr material? I was not killed even once, by death squads or by other means. I was not even jailed. I came within a whisker of that in the Philippines. The dictator Marcos had gone to

spend time with his pal Ronald Reagan. Specially close watch was kept on exits for the dissemination of undesirable information! I had volunteered to carry records of assassinations, tortures, etc to London to post to different justice and peace committees in different parts of the world. They were almost found on me. That would have been rough.

Margaret never complained that I returned safely from each visit! Sure, the Holy Spirit was guide, comforter and friend. But that does not guarantee survival in this life. I shared Margaret's relief.