

STORIES THAT TELL: Of Divine and Human Communion

Study 3

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MUTUAL INDWELLING

As a biblical Trinitarian theologian, and preacher of the cross of Christ, Geoffrey Bingham has written his short stories as a joyful participant within the creation, knowing both suffering, and resurrection hope in Jesus Christ. He has greatly helped many people to understand what it is to be truly human. In particular Geoffrey's insights into what makes a human creature to be great and glorious—created in the image and likeness of God—and at the same time tiresome and tragic—as sin twists a person's true character—have brought understanding, shock, comfort and relief, to many people. His theological writings include discussion of the interpersonal relationships between the three persons of the Trinity, and the incorporation of humanity into that rich love communion of *mutual indwelling*. He commented upon Jesus prayer, for those who would believe through the word, that they may also experience this I-Thou relationship that he knew with the Father, through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit:

‘...that they may all be one even as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that thou hast sent me.’
(John 17:20)

This quote from *Ah, Strong, Strong Love* is well illustrated by so many stories:

‘...the possibilities of such mutual indwelling are splendid in the human race...Human mutual indwelling ought to follow from human relationships with God, since such human relationships are via God—their source’.¹

A common theme in this small selection of short stories that follow—from *The Return of the Lorikeets*², it is the revelation of the *spiritual* dynamics of human communion, which are essential to the growth and development of human character. The person who is forgiven their blind, wrong-headedness, can find true fellowship, or communion with God, and others, once again. The four stories are:

- **The Way of the Monad**
- **The Secret, Secret Agent**
- **The Day Mr. Gruntle Became God**
- **The Legend of Lemery's Sword**

¹ G. C. Bingham, *Ah Strong, Strong Love!* NCPI, Blackwood, 1993, p. 90

² G. C. Bingham, *The Return of the Lorikeets*, Troubadour Press Inc., Blackwood, 1995

THE WAY OF THE MONAD

The difficulties experienced by some people in communicating with others, often have their roots, in extremely painful human circumstances. To be healed in one's spirit, or at one's inner core, is an amazing work of redemption, made possible only through the deep Sovereign action of the Holy Spirit. God chose many of us, to bring love and understanding into sad, often fragile, sensitive and defensive lives. When deep human communion breaks forth, it is a joyous redemptive miracle from God. To the gist of it:

To look at Tom Strainey was to see a man whose beard had frosted with age and whose person was frozen from emotional coldness. Short in stature, he was physically strong, his shoulders thick, his chest barrelled and his arms well muscled. His eyes stared stonily at you from above the beard. His thatch of grey hair was like an unruly halo, but you wouldn't have thought of him as an angel. His eyes would have been piercing if their gaze had not been foreshortened. His stare somehow stopped short of reaching you, as though he refused to see you, to contact you with his gaze. He gave the impression of being embedded into himself, yet never looking into a person, and certainly not betraying himself to that other. It was a strange feeling, meeting Strainey yet not meeting him. I suppose you could have called him a 'non-contact person'.³

I first met Thomas Mayhew Strainey when his daughter Verna invited me to link up with him. She was a social scientist and had worked it out that her dad had a problem—a social one of course. She had told me he was a monad, but how much he was that I had not dreamed. I well knew the term 'monad'. The dictionary says bluntly, 'A single unit or entity', and that was how he saw himself, and kept himself to himself. For one who has dealt with humans and their relationships over a long period of time he was an enigma, even if you could give him a name, 'Monad'. I certainly agreed with her in my mind as we met in his living room. His wife looked tired and a trifle fearful, probably because Strainey's non-meeting of people worried her. She liked meeting people, although he never encouraged her in making friends or having social intercourse. I imagined Verna shrugged off his steady refusal to relate to other persons.

The story goes on to tell how the visitor—Dennis Marney—(the "I" who recounts the story to us), was able to meet Tom Strainey on his own turf, and how he was able to talk about his own background in milking cows, and in the Army during WW2, and his understanding of farming methods, and soil and budgies and so on. Trust and friendship grew. A couple of family funerals took place. The farm was sold. Trust and friendship continued to grow. Talks took place, and a few visits too. Tom also caught up with some old army mates. And an amazing change took place. Tom had held deep pain inside himself, from long ago, since he had lost and buried a mate in the war. The story continues as Tom recounts how his life took a turn from bad to good:

'It is a strange story', he said, 'and I'm not sure I can tell it well enough for you to understand, Dennis.

'Sure enough it was meeting my old Army cobbles—Brett and Robbie—which seemed to change my thinking. I had stored things up over the years but they hadn't. As you know they are two outgoing people.'

I was thinking, *Monads never look out. They never regard others with interest.*

³ G. C. Bingham, 'The Way of the Monad' in *The Return of the Lorikeets*, p. 111

They live on their own, inwardly. Monads are self-centred. They have love, but it is turned in on themselves.

'The two of them were in Tobruk, just the same as I was. I guess I was as outgoing as them, there. Tobruk wasn't all that bad.'

Brett and Robbie were outgoing. So was Tom. Quite remarkable.

'It was in New Guinea where it happened. The other mate we had was Harry Richmond. A better bloke you would never meet. Harry was my closest mate, being a dairy farmer and all that. Of course there was more to it even than that. Mateship is something you can never describe, but you would know.'

Tom went on. However the heart of the problem, and its remedy became clear when the issues of guilt and death came to the fore. The new, trusted friend now said:

'You became a monad, Tom', I said. 'You froze into yourself. A psychologist would say you took the guilt of Harry's death into yourself, and you froze. You didn't dare let yourself feel anything. Memory was always going to be a painful thing to you.'

He nodded. 'Brett and Robbie brought it right out the other night. They were not troubled. They thought it was a grand affair, that it was something honourable to remember Harry and the way he died. I had always thought it dishonourable, but of course I knew it wasn't. I know now that I was angry. Harry of all people mustn't die. Harry was my close mate, closer even than Robbie and Brett.'

I had always thought it dishonourable, but of course I knew it wasn't.

I was thinking that long ago Tom should have sought out his old mates and shared his frozen mind with them, and of course his frozen heart, but I knew monads are made in a moment but remain that way for life. Monads number millions in the human race. No-one can change them. Monads hate emotions, despise relationships, fear love, shun intimacy. Tom's change was a miracle. Yet it was not only Brett and Robbie who had effected the miracle. All their lives Rhonda, Stella and Verna had worked away at it, chipping, chipping.

Then, the closing of the story is very helpful for all of us to read again:

I was setting out the vacuum flasks, and their tops as cups. Tom was rubbing his hands and still shivering. We drank the hot fluid gratefully, and then Tom stood up, raising his hands above his head. There was light in his eyes. I recognised that he must have been handsome in his youth. I mourned a little for the three women he had known: they would have been ecstatic over this new Tom.

'Has Verna seen you since the change?' I asked. He nodded. 'She is like another woman, just as I am like another man. I'm not afraid of affection or emotion any more.'

I thought about my own profession and how often we mistake the things of the mind for the things of the spirit. Spirit is deeper than psyche, no matter what its connection with it may be. Nothing of my psychology could have released this man from a mourning unto death.⁴

'Let's drink to the death of a monad and the resurrection of a new human person.' I

⁴ G. C. Bingham, 'The Way of the Monad' in *The Return of the Lorikeets*, p. 130

knew he understood this, but because a faint shadow of puzzlement remained in his eyes, I thought I would quote John Donne to him, and I did; not only for Tom and his women, but also for me and, for that matter, for the whole of us-the human race.

**No man is an *Island*, entire of itself.
Any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in *Mankind*;
And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; It tolls for thee.**

THE SECRET, SECRET AGENT

This is a good yarn, a funny story. It is set on a plane. One fidgeting, self-focussed, curious man, sits down, alongside a very composed, intelligent man who decided to disguise himself under the guise of being a secret agent, rather than what he actually was – a theologian, teacher and pastor!⁵ He had found that his normal supply of information had often proven to be a real conversation stopper. To say he was a secret agent, he felt to be in fact true. He was, then, an agent of the Living Ruler of the nations—Christ. That was the great mystery of all that he loved to convey. So, ...

“He resolved to keep contact with other humans by refusing to disclose his profession.”⁶

THE DAY MR. GRUNTLE BECAME GOD

As the ageing Mr. Gruntle sets about putting everything right in his neighbourhood, we find ourselves confronted by our own attitudes, actions and operations.

Genesis 3:1 Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, “Did God say, ‘You shall not eat from any tree in the garden?’” 2 The woman said to the serpent, “We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; 3 but God said, ‘You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die.’” 4 But the serpent said to the woman, “You will not die; 5 for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be *like* God, knowing good and evil.”

THE LEGEND OF LEMERY'S SWORD

The story illustrates an oft-neglected, but very important aspect of human life, for a person living by faith, and participating purposefully in the plan and action of God. The relationship between the Living Word of God, and the way in which a person shares in that ministry is profound, and can easily be interrupted.

We find the essence of this story taught in Scripture in Ephesians 6:17, where Paul speaks of “the sword of the Spirit”. John, the Divine, refers to “the sword” in Revelation 1:16, 2:12, 2:16, 19:15. Jesus also spoke of it in Matthew 10:34.

“The sword was the word he uttered, and that word did not originate from him but from that Other.”⁷

⁵ Dr. John W. Kleinig, Lutheran Theological College, Adelaide, SA

⁶ G. C. Bingham, ‘The Secret, Secret Agent’ in *The Return of the Lorikeets*, p. 132

⁷ Bingham, ‘The Legend of Lemery’s Sword’, in *The Return of the Lorikeets*, p. 173