

# "God's Grace on Fools, God's Pity on God"

by Doris Jean Dyke

Mother, sister, neighbour, friend, writer, courageous worker for peace, and justice and the continuation of life on earth, Margaret Laurence was *one* person, one wonderful person and a teller of stories that reached out and touched us with healing grace. She wrote about places and people we've known, and places and people we've been. She wrote about God's world, about a personal God—"Sir or Madam" she used to say—and she wrote about the movement out of the wilderness of isolation and homelessness into human community, love and reconciliation with other people and with nature. She has said that her background and heritage are strongly Christian, although she reserved "the right to interpret things in my own way."

Her response to the sculpture "Crucified Woman" by Almuth Lutkenhaus showed both her willingness and her ability to engage in theological interpretation. Margaret Laurence found the sculpture awesome and inspiring — a profound statement of faith and affirmation. She believed that the sculptor, in showing Woman in the form of the Cross, was portraying woman's pain throughout history — as well as deep feeling for the anguish and also the strength of women. Laurence had already mused on the possibility of a female Christ. *The Christmas Birthday Story* tells us that Mary and Joseph didn't mind at all whether their baby "turned out to be a boy or girl. Either would be fine with them."

God's identification with the human condition, becoming "flesh," the Bible says, is dealt with humorously, as Stacey MacAindra in *The Fire-Dwellers* carries on a running conversation with God. She's never totally convinced that God is

there, nonetheless gives God some advice on how to come into the world: "So next time you send somebody down here get it born as a her with seven young or a him with a large family and a rotten boss, eh?"

Another interpretation of Christ is offered in "The Merchant of Heaven." Margaret Laurence reminded me to re-read this story when controversy was raging over the Lutkenhaus sculpture. In the story the African artist Danso astonished the missionary Brother Lemon by painting an African Christ: "Danso had shown Him with a group of beggars, sore-fouled, their mouths twisted in perpetual leers of pain." Danso described missionary activity: "It must be quite a procedure — to tear the soul out of a living body, and throw the inconvenient flesh away like a fruit rind."

Theologians have indeed written about the flesh as if it were "inconvenient." But the Incarnation is about God becoming flesh, a human body, and the resurrection of the body is central to Christian belief. Many Christians wonder what that could possibly mean. Some say that it has to do not with the individual body, but with the "whole body," everyone, that no one is saved until all are saved. 'Universal salvation' is the term theologians use. Margaret Laurence ends the "Merchant of Heaven" with the narrator looking "at those damaged creatures clustering so despairingly hopeful around the Son of Man, and it seems to me that Brother Lemon, after all, is one of them."

One of the tasks of theology is to make decisions about what can be kept from the way our forbears expressed their faith, and what must change in order that the faith is ours rather than theirs. Every generation must do this in order to be

faithful. It's with discernment and wisdom that Margaret Laurence has examined the faith by which Manawaka lives, by which Africa lives, by which we live. "The MacLeods always tell the truth," says Vanessa's grandmother. At the end of her ninety years, Hagar Shipley [*The Stone Angel*] tries to recall something truly free that she's done and can think of only two acts. One was a joke and the other was a lie — "... yet not a lie, for it was spoken at least and at last with what may perhaps be a kind of love." Hagar, namesake of the fertile Egyptian slave whose very being taunted the barren Israelite Sarah, but still Hagar was unloved, used and abandoned by both Abraham and Sarah. Always a slave, never free (*Genesis 16 and 21*). Hagar Shipley lives on the edges of society, always longing for freedom and love.

God's grace on fools is what happens in the hospital room when the humiliated and stubborn and dying Hagar is being visited by a frightened young minister. The visit doesn't go too well until Hagar asks him to sing — and he does — although he's embarrassed. He sings so well that she says "He should sing always, and never speak."

*All people that on earth do dwell,  
Sing to the Lord with joyful voice.  
Him serve with mirth, His praise  
forthtell;*

*Come ye before Him and rejoice.*  
Suddenly Hagar knows what she has always known: "I must always, always, have wanted that — simply to rejoice." Rejoicing is what the minister's been talking about? We'd never have known that either, he was so awkward, up-tight, phoney. But there it is, old as the Psalmist. Rejoice.

Later, when Hagar is talking to her grandson, she thinks: "What does he know of me? Not a blessed thing. I'm choked with it now, the incommunicable years... I want to tell him. This is what I think. *Someone really ought to know these things.*" Communication and understanding between generations is the theme of *The Olden Times Coat*: "It was as hard for Sal to think of herself being old like Gran as it was to think of Gran having once been ten years old." Every generation must do its own interpretation.

Birth and death dance together throughout the lives of Laurence's women. On the train, leaving her barren marriage, Morag [*The Diviners*] remembers that crocuses used to grow out of snow: "You'd find them in the pastures, the black-pitted dying snow still there, and the crocuses already growing." But for Vanessa MacLeod, the shadow of death darkens the birth of her baby brother. In the face of this, her grandmother neither "flinched nor trembled." Grandmother MacLeod's staccato creed is that God loves Order and whatever happens is God's will (implying that if Vanessa's mother dies, that too will be God's will). Such doctrine does not comfort. Comfort is found in Aunt Edna's arms — Aunt Edna, who says she's scared too.

Later Vanessa sees, hears, smells, touches God's world: wheat turned yellow but stunted because there had been no rain; the ladybug who doesn't know she has wings. She thinks of the earlier dead baby, the sister who might have been her, and of the new baby brother, born alive after all. She felt that "whatever God might love in this world, it was certainly not order." God shows up in mercy, grace, suffering, pity, joy, jokes, truth, fear, strangeness and disarray.

Social snobbery — along with religious exclusivity, racism and patriarchal authoritarianism — prevent human beings from becoming friends. Morag loves Jesus because "He is friendly and not stuck-up... Jesus had a rough time. But when alive, He was okay to everybody, even sinners and hardup people and like that." But Morag hates God: "God is the one who decides which people have got to die, and when." Nothing intense or upsetting, however, goes on in church. The congregation has good taste. A stained glass window shows "a pretty and cleancut Jesus expiring gently and with absolutely no inconvenience, no gore, no pain... holding his arms languidly up to something which might in other circumstances have been a cross." Rachel Cameron wonders what her mother believes: "...I

suppose she takes it for granted that she believes. Yet if the Reverend MacElfrish should suddenly lose his mind and speak of God with anguish or joy, or out of some need should pray with fierce humility as though God had to be there, Mother would be shocked to the core. Luckily, it will never happen."

But there's another preacher in Manawaka, a clowny preacher who yells "By their garbage shall ye know them." Christie's name tells us who he is and Morag knows what he does: he collects the town garbage and takes it to the Nuisance Grounds. Why? "Because all that awful old stuff and rotten stuff is a nuisance and nice people don't want to have anything to do with it?" Margaret Laurence called him Christie; the one that takes all the muck of the world. Jesus is called Christ; the one that takes away the sin of the world. Nice folks didn't like Christie. Jesus said that he must suffer many things and be rejected. "Some of them," said Christie, "Because I take off the muck for them, they think I'm muck. Well, I am muck, but so are they. Not a father's son, not a man born of woman who is not muck in some part of him immortal soul, girl. That's what they don't know, the poor sods. When I carry away their refuse, I'm carrying off part of them, do you see?"

When Christie is dying he can no longer speak: "...what must that be like? Christie, who told tales, who divined with the garbage, who ranted in his sorrow like the skirling of the pipes in a pibroch." But Morag and Christie laugh together — "Their protection, hers and Christie's, as it always has been." And Morag is able to find the words she needs to tell him "...you've been my father to me." His words, slurred and whispered, "Well — I'm blessed," Christie Logan says. He might have said "Well — I'm damned," but he said "I'm blessed." Morag gets a piper for his burial.

Christian theology sometimes talks of loving God and loving the neighbour, as if this had to do with individuals only, rather than also having to do with the structures of society that are unjust, that are unloving to the neighbour. Hagar saw the inside and the outside in the look on her father's face, "... as though destruction were a two-edged sword, striking inward and outward simultaneously." Structures of power and domination, structures of fear that create loneliness, distrust, anger, cruelty, war are within individuals and in society, in families, clans, tribes, ancestors, neighbours, between colonizers and Native people.

"Pride was my wilderness and the demon that led me there was fear," says Hagar. *Fear*, the demon that is the opposite of *shalom*, peace, that flows like a river (*Isaiah* 66:12); justice like the sound of a mighty river, righteousness like an ever flowing stream (*Amos* 5:24); "Everything will live where the river flows" (*Ezekial* 47:91). The Diviners, those who find the underground river "real wet water," always know that divining is a gift — sheer grace. "It's not something that everybody can do," says the diviner, "but the thing I don't usually let on about is that quite a few people can learn to do it. You don't have to have the mark of God between your eyebrows."

Seeing the gift, the grace in ordinary events, was the gift that Margaret Laurence gave us — the ordinary grace-filled events of the Incarnation, a gift given from God, "not because deserved, just because given. The birth of every wanted and loved child in this world is the same, a gift. The birth of every child should be this way. We're still frighteningly far from that...". Nothing sentimental in the way it came to the child Margaret in "Upon a Midnight Clear": "It was easy then to believe in the Word made manifest. Not so easy now. And yet I can't forget, ever, that the child, who was myself then, experienced awe and recognized it."

The child Morag talks to God when she's told that her parents have "passed on": "Telling Him it was all His fault and this is why she is so mad at Him. Because He is no good, is why." Stacey MacAindra also talks to God and that's how we know her. She sees God as judge, and as hope. Early in the novel God is asking her what she's done with her life:

*Well, let's see, Sir, I think I loved my kids. And He'll say, Are you certain about that? And I'll say, God, I'm not certain about anything anymore. So He'll say, To hell with you, then. We're all positive thinkers up here. Then again, maybe He wouldn't. Maybe He'd say, Don't worry Stacey. I'm not all that certain, either. Sometimes I wonder if I even exist. And I'd say, I know what you mean, Lord. I have the same trouble with myself.*

Stacey can be seen as a Christ figure; she knows that the world may end in flames set off by bombs; she carries on her hands the burns that life has given her — but always she cares for others. The novel ends with hope. The two-year old Jen who didn't speak at all begins with a sentence, a caring sentence, "Hi, Mum. Want tea?" In bed, Stacey and Mac talk to each other.

"She moves towards him and he holds her. Then they make love after all, but gently, as though consoling one another for everything that neither of them can help nor alter.... Temporarily, they are more or less okay." That's good news, not easy optimism.

Fire-dwellers we all are and Margaret Laurence turned more and more of her time towards working for peace and nu-

clear disarmament. She saw the temptation to close our hearts and minds to the terror of the world we live in: "Although I would take issue with the early Church Fathers on many things," she said, "I would agree that despair is rightly placed as one of the deadly sins."

*The death of the individual is the end which we will all one day meet, but in the knowledge that our children and*

*their children will live, that someone's children will go on...The individual is the leaf on the tree. The leaves fall but the tree endures...Now the tree itself is threatened. Our aim must be no less than human and caring justice, and peace... for all people that on earth do dwell.*

## AL PURDY

### For Margaret

We argued about things  
whether one should seek experience  
or just let it happen to you  
(me the former and she the latter)  
and the merits of St. Paul  
as against his attitude to women  
(she admired him despite chauvinism)  
But what pitifully few things  
we remember about another person:  
me sitting at her typewriter  
at Elm Cottage in England  
and translating her short story  
"A Bird in the House" into a radio play  
directly from the book manuscript  
in just two or three days  
(produced by J. Frank Willis  
on C.B.C. his last production)  
and being so proud of my expertise  
Then going away to hunt books  
while my wife recuperated  
from an operation  
Returning to find the play finished  
Margaret had taken about three hours  
to turn my rough draft  
into a playable acting version  
fingers like fireflies on the typewriter

and grinning at me delightedly  
while my "expertise" went down the  
drain  
And the huge cans of English ale she  
bought  
Jocelyn called "Al-size-ale"  
and the people coming over one night  
to sing the songs in "The Diviners"  
(for which I gave faint praise)  
And the books she admired  
Joyce Cary's "The Horse's Mouth"  
Alec Guinness as Gullej Jimson a  
valkyrie  
riding the Thames on a garbage barge  
— how Graham Greene knew so much  
that she both loved and cussed him  
for anticipating her before she got there  
and marked up my copy of his essays  
These are the lost minutiae  
of a person's life  
things real enough to be trivial  
and trivial enough to have some  
permanence  
because they recur and recur — with  
small  
differences of course — in all our lives

and the poignance finally strikes home  
that poignance is ordinary  
Anyway how strange to be writing  
about her  
as if she were not here  
but somewhere else on earth  
— or not on earth  
given her religious convictions  
Just in case it does happen  
I'd like to be there when she meets St.  
Paul  
and watch his expression change  
from smugness to slight apprehension  
While she considers him as a minor  
character  
in a future celestial non-fiction novel  
And this silly irrelevance of mine  
is a refusal to think of her dead  
(only parenthetically DEAD)  
remembering how alive  
she lit up the rooms she occupied  
like flowers do sometimes and the sun  
always  
in a way visible only to friends  
and she had nothing else

### Lawrence to Laurence

On my workroom wall a letter from  
D.H.L.  
that reads  
"Dear M,  
I send you  
by this post, registered M.S.  
an article I did on the Indians  
and the Bursum Bill" etc.  
I think he used a steel nib pen  
and dipped it in ink when dry  
and you can see where the nib  
ran short and faded the words  
in his letter like "and the" above  
Reading DHL's handwriting hypnotizes

me as Mabel Sterne and Walter  
Lippman  
and Scofield Thayer flit past and are  
dead  
and the New York World of the letter  
died long ago of malnutrition  
I read the letter and my hand  
reaches for ghost ink that isn't  
there just the way he did  
and stop to think about this poem  
I'm writing (how trivial): and from  
the other side of the letter  
I can see its continuation there  
visible thru the Taos N.M. notepaper:

"from the other side" I say  
And this is what obsession does  
you read meanings into nothingness  
or perhaps into very little  
And remember a remark by Margaret  
Laurence  
"I expect to grow old raising  
cats and roses —" (but she didn't)  
What all this means is a patented  
method of jumping from Lawrence  
to Laurence and I mourn both  
from steel nib pen & ink to cats & roses  
Goodbye —