

THE ORPHANAGE AND THE LAKE

Some years ago a student friend of mine surprised me one day with a story he had written. Over the previous months we had spoken a few times about faith. Andrew was going through a fair bit of questioning about religion and about his attitude to church in particular. Looking back now, perhaps much of our talking stayed groping in a world of ideas, whereas what Andrew needed was the freedom of images. Happily he hit upon this level of communication and came up with a parable of his own. I hope that he will publish it in full one day but meanwhile I offer a summary of what I remember of it.

It concerned a little boy - of about ten - growing up in an orphanage. One night in the large dormitory he wakes up in the dark but knows that the dawn can't be far away. It is summer time and there is a lake in the grounds of the orphanage. He feels a great urge to see the dawn at the lakeside but the rules are rigid: on no account should any child get up before the bell and it is strictly forbidden to leave the dormitory until the proper time. But he decides to risk it. He dresses quickly and creeps out, holding his shoes in his hand so as not to wake the others. Then there is a long corridor and - a nice touch - all along this corridor are the pictures of the past presidents of the institution along one side and of saints on the other side. So the boy puts his head down and runs through the long corridor: he does not want his eyes to be caught by the disapproving glances of the figures on the walls. He comes to the lake and waits in darkness for the dawn; sure enough, the drama of day begins, and the colours change from orange to red to bright sun. He watches all this reflected in the water of the lake, absorbed by the sheer beauty of it. Then suddenly he remembers the time. They will be up by now. He will be missed. He will be in trouble. So he gets up to return and speaks his last words to the lake: 'I'll go back now. Thank you. I don't care if I'm punished. Because I know something now - I know that the God of the lake is greater than the God of the orphanage.'

Over the years I have come back to that story as a simple but powerful evocation of where many people are as regards religion. Alas, they may have encountered only the orphanage with its rules and codes and organization. The God of the orphanage is worshipped in a religion of ritual. But the God of the lake is encountered in a way that goes beyond that into something of wonder and awe and freedom. More and more I am convinced that this is the most neglected door into faith today.

Michael Paul Gallagher SJ Where is your God? - Pages 17-18.

