Alan Paton
(1903–1988)

Alan Stewart Paton was educated at the University of Natal (South Africa) and was national president of the South African Liberal Party until it was declared illegal in 1968. In that same year Paton, a white Anglican clergyman who had been an outspoken opponent of apartheid, wrote Instrument of Thy Peace, a book of twenty-one short meditations based on the familiar prayer attributed to St. Francis of Assisi. This prayer, the spirituality of Francis, and biblical reflection had been deeply formative to Paton.

Alan Paton is even better known for his novel Cry, the Beloved Country, also a protest against the unjust social structures of apartheid. Its central figure is a black clergyman, the Reverend Stephen Kumalo, who sets off from his impoverished homeland at Ndotsheni, Natal, for Johannesburg in search of his sister Gertrude and his son Absalom. There he learns that Gertrude has adopted a life of prostitution and his son has murdered the son of a white farmer, James Jarvis. Despite Kumalo’s efforts, his son is condemned to die. Kumalo returns home with Gertrude’s son and Absalom’s pregnant wife. The novel ends with a reconciliation between Kumalo and Jarvis, in which Jarvis resolves to rise above his son’s death by helping poor blacks. Published in 1948, the novel continues to be widely read; it is a moving plea for racial understanding.

In the following brief selection, we see Paton writing out of his own struggle for acceptance of God’s will. Notice in the following selection that his debt is not only to Francis of Assisi but also to such people as Dag Hammarskjöld (secretary-general of the United Nations at the time) and Sir Alexander Paterson, men who came out of a European and English context with a strong moral conviction. Yet Paton is not working with messages of violent resistance; instead, he is speaking in a language of forgiveness and love.

Instrument of Thy Peace

God’s Instrument

Lord, make me an instrument of Thy peace. Prayer of St. Francis

We pray for many things, for loved ones, for one sick, for one dying, for health, for much-needed money, for success in examinations, for our country, for the peace of the world. We pray for forgiveness of sins, for conquest of one particular sin that defeats us, for help in some situation that frightens or threatens us. We pray especially hard—most of us—when our own safety or security is threatened.

I myself have done this, but now I wish to place on record that I am in unrepayable debt to Francis of Assisi, for when I pray his prayer, or even remember it, my melancholy is dispelled, my self-pity comes to an end, my faith is restored, because of this majestic conception of what the work of a disciple should be.

So majestic is this conception that one dare no longer be sorry for oneself. This world ceases to be one’s enemy and becomes the place where one lives and works and serves. Life is no longer nasty, mean, brutish, and short, but becomes the time that one needs to make it less nasty and mean, not only for others, but indeed also for oneself.

We are brought back instantaneously to the reality of our faith, that we are not passive recipients but active instruments. The right relationship between man and God is instantly restored.

Francis of Assisi no doubt often prayed for something for himself, or for the order he had founded, or for the chapel and huts at Porziuncula. But in his prayer he asks nothing for himself, or perhaps he asks everything, and that is that his whole life, all his gifts, his physical strength, shall be an instrument in God’s hand.

And I say to myself, this is the only way in which a Christian can encounter hatred, injury, despair, and sadness, and that is by throwing off his helplessness and allowing himself to be made the bearer of love, the pardoner, the bringer of hope, the comforter of those that grieve. And I believe that if you allow yourself to be so made, you will be so.

I think as I write this of a man who is leaving prison to return to the world. During these years he has paid more attention to religion than ever before in his life. As he leaves, the prison chaplain assures him that the past is done, the past is forgiven. But when he returns to the world, he finds that the world has not forgiven, that it has not forgiven his past. So hope changes to despair, faith to doubt. It seems that God has not forgiven him after all.
And the Lord said unto him, Who hath made man's mouth? or who maketh the dumb, or deaf, or the seeing, or the blind? have not I, the Lord? Now therefore go, and I will be with thy mouth, and teach thee, what thou shalt say. (Exod. 3:4, kJV)

No Christian should ever think or say that he is not fit to be God's instrument, for that in fact it means to be a Christian. We may be humble about many things, but we may never decline to be used. John the Baptist told the people by the river Jordan, "I baptize you with water, for repentance, but the one who comes after me is mightier than I, and I am not fit to take off his shoes." Then Jesus himself came to be baptized by him, and John tried to dissuade him, saying to him, "Do you come to me? I need rather to be baptized by you." Jesus replied, "Let it be so for the present; we do well to conform in this way with all that God requires." So John baptized him whose shoes he was not fit to take off.

The gospel is full of reassurances to us, some of them startling. You are salt to the world! You are light to all the world! Even the hairs of your head have all been counted! These words were exciting to those who heard them. Things might be dark but they were to be the light of the world. They were given a new sense of their value as persons. Especially was this true of women. One can hardly describe the joy of the first disciples, who were given by Jesus such a sense of their significance in the world. This same sense of significance has been given again and again to other people by disciples of Jesus. Of these none was greater than Francis of Assisi. He might well have prayed:

To those who have lost their way, let me restore it to them.
To those who are aimless, let me bring purpose.
To those who do not know who they are, let me teach them that they are the children of God and can be used as His instruments in the never-ending work of healing and redemption.

And Moses said unto God, Who am I that I should go unto Pharaoh, and that I should bring forth the children of Israel out of Egypt?

And the Lord said unto Moses, Certainly I will be with thee; and this shall be a token unto thee, that I have sent thee: When thou hast brought forth the people out of Egypt, ye shall serve God upon this mountain.

And Moses said unto the Lord, O my Lord, I am not eloquent, neither heretofore, nor since thou hast spoken unto thy servant: but I am slow of speech, and of a slow tongue.
world comes after thee, and everybody desires to see thee, and to hear thee, and to obey thee? Thou art not a man either comely of person, or of noble birth, or of great knowledge; whence then comes it that all the world runs after thee?"

Hearing this, St. Francis, filled with joy in his spirit, raised his face towards heaven, and remained for a great while with his mind lifted up to God; then returning to himself, he knelt down, and gave praise and thanks to God; and then, with great fervour of spirit, turning to Brother Maseo, he said, "Wouldst know why after me? Wouldst know why after me? Why all the world runs after me? This comes to me, because the eyes of the Most High God, which behold in all places both the evil and the good, even those most holy eyes have not seen amongst sinners one more vile, nor more insufficient, nor a greater sinner than I, and therefore to do that wonderful work which He intends to do, He hath not found on earth a viler creature than I; and for this cause He elected me to confound the nobility, and the grandeur, and the strength, and beauty, and wisdom of the world, that all men may know that all virtue and all goodness are of Him, and not of the creature, and that none should glory in his presence; but that he who glories should glory in the Lord, to whom is all honour and glory in eternity!"

Then Brother Maseo, at this humble and fervent reply, feared within himself, and knew certainly that St. Francis was grounded in humility.

The Little Flowers of St. Francis of Assisi

Lord, make me willing to be used by Thee. May my knowledge of my unworthiness never make me resist being used by Thee. May the need of others always be remembered by me, so that I may ever be willing to be used by Thee.

And open my eyes and my heart that I may this coming day be able to do some work of peace for Thee.

BIBLE SELECTION

Matthew 5:13–16

"You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot.

"You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on a lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven."

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

The following can be used for discussion within a small group, or used for journal reflections by individuals:

1. How can I put the sayings "salt of the earth" and "light of the world" in concrete terms? Are there individuals or movements that readily come to mind?
2. "Submission" and "active social protest" seem to be opposed to each other. Are there ways they can fit together?

SUGGESTED EXERCISES

The following exercises can be done by individuals, shared between spiritual friends, or used in the context of a small group. Choose one or more of the following:

1. Have the group take a look at the ministry of Jesus in terms of three different dimensions: activism, submission, and forgiveness. Identify moments in Jesus' ministry when he seems to exemplify one or another of these three modes of God-centered living.
2. Identify ministries and movements personally known to you in which racial injustice or social injustice of another kind is being actively resisted. Have you ever felt called to join such a movement? If you have not done so, do you think you might do so in the future?

REFLECTIONS

The dominant image in this selection by Paton is of us as "instruments" for God's use. Of course Paton, and St. Francis before him, are merely following the lead of the Apostle Paul who gave this image classic expression. The relevant passage is Romans 6:13: "No longer present your members to sin as instruments of wickedness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and present your members to God as instruments of righteousness." The "members". Paul is referring to here is simply our bodies; our hands, our feet, our eyes, our tongue. These literal, physical parts of our person are to be submitted to God as instruments for his use, much like the surgical tools are submitted to the surgeon for his good purposes.
To be an instrument of righteousness is challenging indeed. And such a challenge is made all the more pointed as Paton faced the horrors of South Africa's apartheid. Such a context gives added power and poignancy to his call for us to be "the bearer of love, the pardoner, the bringer of hope, the comforter of those that grieve.... It is here that a great duty falls upon us all, to be the bearers of God's forgiveness, to be the instrument of his love, to be active in compassion." Challenging words indeed spoken as they were in the midst of apartheid's cruelty.

Isn't it interesting that St. Francis was such a formative figure for Paton? Somehow this simple monk of Assisi has been able to reach across continents and centuries and touch all who have ears to hear and eyes to see. This is especially true in situations of unbearable evil as Paton himself faced. We could all hope to have such an impact for good, even if our circle of influence is exceedingly small.

RICHARD J. FOSTER

GOING DEEPER


ALAN PATON, *Cry, the Beloved Country* (New York: Scribner, 1950). This novel has gone through many editions, and even though apartheid no longer prevails in South Africa, it remains a moving plea for racial understanding.