

"Who goeth in the way that Christ had trod," wrote Amy Carmichael, "is much more like to meet Him than he that travelleth byeways" (*Amy Carmichael of Dohnavur*, by Frank Houghton. London: S.P.C.K., 1954, p. 342; published in U.S.A by Christian Literature Crusade, Fort Washington, Pennsylvania, 19034.)

Frank Houghton's biography of Amy Carmichael is a classic of Christian devotional literature, even as it is an invaluable text on pastoral care. The writings of Amy Carmichael herself, rather than theoretical dissertations, are delightful expositions on prayer, Christian community, evangelism, social action, and spirituality, born out of labor to others and service to Christ. While her style of writing and grammar are somewhat Victorian, old-fashioned, her words and her wisdom are timeless and worth reading and rereading.

Amy Carmichael (1875-1951) spent the major portion of her life in South India caring for orphans, the poor, and the outcast. Packed with excerpts from the writings of Carmichael, Houghton's book is not just about Amy Carmichael but is a thoughtfully edited compilation of her major works. The following are a few excerpts from Houghton's biography of Amy Carmichael.

In the streets of Belfast, Amy Carmichael began her career for the kingdom of God. She writes of it in her book *Gold Cord*:

"It was a dull Sunday morning in a street in Belfast. My brothers and sisters and I were returning with our mother from church when we met a poor pathetic old woman who was carrying a heavy bundle. We had never seen such a thing in Presbyterian Belfast on Sunday, and, moved by sudden pity, my brothers and I turned with her, relieved her of the bundle, took her by her arms as though they had been handles, and helped her along. This meant facing all the respectable people who were, like ourselves, on their way home. It was a horrid moment. We were only two boys and a girl, and not at all exalted Christians. We hated doing it. Crimson all over (at least we felt crimson, soul and body of us) we plodded on, a wet wind blowing us about, and blowing, too, the rags of that poor old woman, till she seemed like a bundle of feathers and we unhappily mixed up with them. But just as we passed a fountain, recently built near the curbstone, this mighty phrase was suddenly flashed as it were through the grey drizzle: — 'Gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, stubble—every man's work shall be made manifest; for the day shall declare it, because it shall be declared by fire; and the fire shall try every man's work of what sort it is. If any man's work abide'—*If any man's work abide*—I turned to see the voice that spoke with me. The fountain, the muddy street, the people with their politely surprised faces, all this I saw, but saw nothing else. The blinding flash had come and gone; the ordinary was all about us. We went on. I said nothing to anyone, but I knew that something had happened that had changed life's values. Nothing could ever matter again but the things that were eternal." [Houghton, pp. 19-20]

From Belfast to her life-long ministry at Dohnavur, India (where she became known as *Amma*), Amy Carmichael kept her vision of service for the kingdom of God ever clear before her. Writes Houghton,

"To pour out love all the time, to catch the directing word of the Lord, however softly spoken"—this is what she desired to do, and all her [Dohnavur] Family would say in chorus, "This is exactly what she did." See her, for instance, in 1923..., going to Sermadevi railway station to meet Irene Streeter, Home Secretary for Dohnavur and Amma's great friend. But sitting on the platform between two policemen was a poor woman, in the extremity of wretchedness. And immediately Irene Streeter is forgotten, and Amma is sitting holding the woman's hands in hers, hearing her story of *himsa* [Sanskrit for anything unjust done in the name of justice, particularly pain or torture inflicted to extort a confession] and of the month's imprisonment which lay ahead of her, because she had once given food to Jambulingam [a fugitive in South India]. Not until her sobs had ceased, and Amma had seen her into the train, promising to take messages to her family, was it possible to welcome the long-expected guest and explain why she had taken no notice of her arrival. Her loving compassion not only comforted the woman but drew her to the Saviour, Whom [this woman] has been serving joyfully ever since. [p. 281-82]

Amy's life was a life filled with Christ in the everyday: from the "Warfare of the Service, wherein Amma learned to know Christ *in the power of His resurrection*" to "The Keeping of the Charge, wherein Amma learned to know Christ...*in the fellowship of His sufferings*" (pp. 112 + 285), from her many years of active service and ministry to the Dohnavur Fellowship in South India to her years of disability and illness,

she lived Christ. As she often put it, "the Cross is the attraction!" (p. 218). She continually sought to pattern her life after her Lord:

To take a specific instance. Since the Lord Himself was Leader of the work, [at Dohnavur] they must take orders from Him, and how were they to learn His wishes except by prayer? Amma felt that, if they were to ask expecting to receive, they must be prepared to wait and not to be hasty in forming their petitions until they were assured that they were asking according to the will of God. Their attitude was to be, "Speak, Lord, for Thy servant heareth," rather than, "Hear, Lord, for Thy servant speaketh." To be filled with the knowledge of His will was the prerequisite to asking according to His will. Sometimes the knowledge was not given, and then the only possible petition was, "Thy will be done, whatever that will may be." But often "we are meant to know our Lord's wishes," in order that we may "lay our prayer alongside."

Now, since this method of prayer, and this assurance that we may expect the Spirit to teach us what to pray for, had become as it were axiomatic in Dohnavur, we can imagine the encouragement that came to Amma many years later when she read in a book that was ever afterwards very precious to her the word that God gave five hundred years ago to Lady Julian of Norwich [*Revelations of Divine Love*]: "I [Christ] am the Ground of thy beseeching: first it is My will that thou have it; and after, I make thee to will it; and after, I make thee to beseech it and thou beseechest it. How should it then be that thou shouldst not have thy beseeching?" [p. 144]

Concerning the Dohnavur Fellowship and orphanage itself, Houghton records the words of one observer:

"I am greatly struck by the simple childlike faith of some of these dear convert girls in God's will and way being Love.... An atmosphere of love and obedience pervades the compound, and in this large family of over thirty, varying in ages from thirty-four years to a babe of nine months, I have not seen an angry look, or heard an impatient word. A set of more loving, unselfish women and girls and children could not easily be found. The secret, I think, is that *everything* great and small of all kinds is done for God, and to please *Him*, and in the consciousness that Jesus is present, and He may come today to take them to Himself." [p. 138]

And in a later place Houghton adds:

But disservice is done to Dohnavur by those who speak or write of it as a Garden of Eden without the serpent, or a heaven from which all strife and malice and envy are excluded. Visitors to Dohnavur are charmed by the spontaneity of the children's happiness and if they could spend months in the compound, rather than days or hours, the first impressions would be confirmed. Only they would discover that this love, this harmony, is constantly under attack, that there is not a moment when the adversary is not seeking to undermine it. It is God Who makes men to be of one mind in a house, and they would cease to be of one mind if the members of His household ceased to be in touch with Him.... Perhaps it was inevitable that many who were attracted to Dohnavur by reading Amma's books should think of it as a place where the ideal had been attained, and overlook the frequently repeated warnings not to fall into this error. "Not as though I had already attained" was her eager disclaimer, and "I follow after" her equally eager resolve. The prayer, "Make us what we seem to be," was often on her lips. [p. 257]

Amy Carmichael's life was a testimony both to the Christian's responsibility and desire to love God and neighbor, and to God's empowering grace and faithfulness. "Right to the end of Amma's journey there was One Who gave her 'songs in the night'" (p. 179). Houghton's biography, *Amy Carmichael of Dohnavur*, is not only a book of Amma's life, but very much a book of Amma's songs.

A friend, writing of Bishop Westcott, says this beautiful thing about him: "In the presence of the unseen he met all life, and you could not surprise him out of it. In this atmosphere he worked and breathed. Not only God Himself, but the cloud of witnesses, the communion of the unseen body of Christ, were more real to him than the things seen."

And the same friend tells a story of how the Bishop's chaplain, finding him struggling late and minutely one night over the draft of a service for a humble country church, reminded him that the congregation would not be critical. "They are accustomed to anything," he said. With a gentle, surprised smile, such as Elisha's might have been in Dothan, the Bishop looked up from his desk and said, "You forget: *who* are 'the congregation'? *We* are only an infinitesimal part of it." [Amy Carmichael, *Gold Cord*. London, 1952, pp. 76-7, footnote.]