



Can any good dragon
join in?

'Is this a private fight or can anyone join in?'

Anthony Barker, medical missionary extraordinary, practised for 30 years at the Charles Johnson Memorial Hospital in Nqutu in Natal. When mission hospitals were taken over by the government 10 years ago he moved to England, where he practised as a consultant in a London teaching hospital before retirement. Dr Barker spent the last six months helping to establish the Alexandra Clinic in Johannesburg.

In his 1986 graduation address to graduates in the law and medical faculties of the University of Cape Town, he spoke of the need in us for revision, and the excitement of facing new realities despite the present uncertainties. The following extract is from the closing section of his address.

FOR those who feel they can in honour stay, our history is filled with examples men and women whose message we hear very clearly now. These are they who, from their response to our original question, 'What do I do now?', bid us take heart again, even at this late hour when the children are already dying ...

What would happen if they — if you failed to carry on with the fight? Happily, mankind is a dragon-fighting species. All of us like to say with the Irishman who saw a good scrap developing in the pub, 'Is this a private fight, or can anyone join in?'

In this time, when the dragons are out in all their vanity and power, there is plenty of opportunity for us all to join in. We are well-equipped professionally to do so. We are sufficiently informed (in spite of the national lullaby daily played over our radio network); we are ready and willing to join in the struggle. But I think that there is one thing that we might yet need to nerve our arm and to steel our resolution. It is a measure of hopefulness. Hope is a virtue somewhat in eclipse just now, if only because we haven't thought very much about it, but I sense it was a fundamental hope in them that kept these doughty fighters I have mentioned, in the field. And which, moreover, enabled them so often to overcome.

Perhaps you think I'm lapsing into mere romance? That I am whistling extra loudly in the swirling darkness of this time? I am not. I learn this need for hope, not from the polite people of our

protected society, but from Alexandra and Zululand, and the impoverished and disadvantaged. Hear it in contemporary political satire, in freedom songs, in churches throughout the land. Recognise it in hospital wards, and in law courts when charges are dropped, one by one. See it in the ebullience of those who have come out of detention and earned their spurs in prison.

If these men and women, who have suffered so much more than we have, embody this splendid and cheerful virtue, who are we to grouch around without it?

We agonise, all of us, over the truly awful things that are going on in our South Africa. Sometimes we seem almost beaten to the ground. And yet, where more than here are there so many attainable goals, so many things to do for the amelioration of our wretched condition? We really can make a difference if we go on and on and on, like the Black Sash. Slowly we undermine the silliness of official orthodoxy. Who now preaches that apartheid which once was thought to be a direct export from the Kingdom of Heaven?

So let us show due courage: re-arm ourselves hopefully. With steady nerve and irrepressible hope, we know what to do now. We may even echo King Harry's words before Agincourt: 'Now God be praised who has matched us to this hour!' □