# WALK HUMBLY with your GOD

A COLLECTION
OF MEDITATIONS

by
William Janzen

# WALK HUMBLY WITH YOUR GOD

A Collection of Meditations

by

William Janzen

CMBC Publications
600 Shaftesbury Blvd.
Winnipeg, Manitoba
R3P 0M4

Design by Gerald Loewen

CMBC Publications
600 Shaftesbury Blvd.
Winnipeg, Manitoba
R3P 0M4

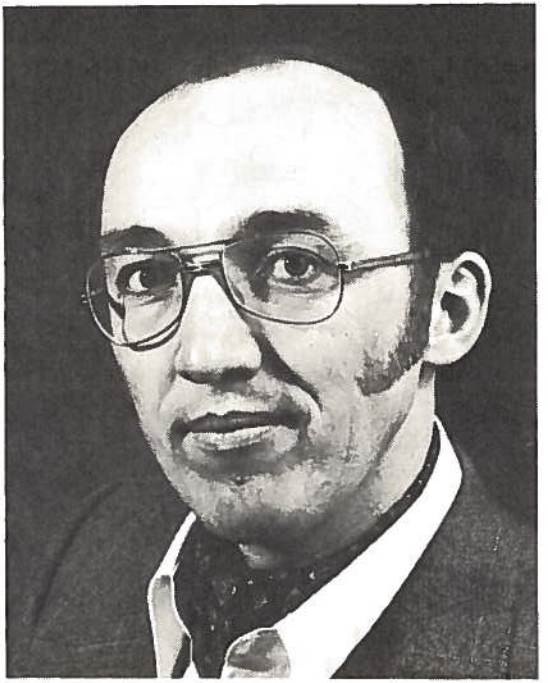


First edition April 1979


Printed in Canada
ISBN 0-920718-30-2

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

William Janzen has served as director of the Ottawa Office of Mennonite Central Committee (Canada) since 1975. Prior to that he served the Ottawa Mennonite Church as one of its ministers. The meditations included in this book were first preached in that congregational setting.



Janzen was born in 1943 and grew up in the Mennonite village of Blumenheim in Saskatchewan. He has served a term with MCC-PAX in the Congo (now Zaire) in Africa. His studies have been in the areas of religion (Canadian Mennonite Bible College and the University of Ottawa) and political science (Carlton University). His concern for the church, indicated in this collection of meditations, also pervades his academic and vocational pursuits.

## FOREWARD

"Give Preaching a Second Chance!" This was the general title of a series of four talks given by a radio preacher in the early 1960's. I remembered that experience when these 14 sermons by William Janzen first came to my attention.

He has given preaching a second chance, a fresh and weightier meaning not only with his listeners in the Ottawa Mennonite Church, but also with the wider reading audience of this book.

Good preaching has at least two qualities about it. It reflects a deep understanding of the Word, meaning God's message for humanity. It is also characterized by a working knowledge of words, meaning the language that becomes the vehicle for the Word.

Contrary to a popular assumption, spoken and written words have not lost their power. Indeed, one can observe in our time a new craving for the really good lecture, for the thoroughly-prepared sermon, and for the well-written book or article.

Where words are carefully chosen to bring the Word to the human experience they are as potent as they once were when Jesus spoke his Sermon on the Mount and when Lincoln gave his Gettysburg address.

I am confident not only that the publication of these sermons will enrich the lives of those other preachers to approach the ministry of the Word with greater enthusiasm.

The world cannot live by bread alone. Its multitudinous people are getting hungrier than ever for the really good Word coming to them in a language which they can understand.

Frank H. Epp
Conrad Grebel College
Waterloo, Ontario

To my parents

Abram and Gertrude Janzen

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

## *LEARNING TO WAIT*

*. . . he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion. . . (Philippians 1:6).*

One of the most common things of life is the need to wait. We are asked to wait every day for a variety of things. But we do not wait easily. We tend to be impatient and to become frustrated when we have to wait. I believe, however, that life itself is calling us to wait and that the way we wait is a reflection of the way we respond to life 's Author.

At one level, our frustrations with waiting are understandable. It is not pleasant to wait for the delivery man to bring our order, for the garage mechanic to complete the repair job and for the government official to find the right document. We do well to organize our schedules and to plan ahead so that these waiting periods will not be too long.

But there is another level, a level of deeper and more valuable things, where the need to wait has to be accepted. We can make plans and set schedules for things like fixing cars and building houses. But love has to be waited for; only to a small extent can it be planned. Understanding between people has to be waited for; often it takes much time. Healing of both the body and the mind has to be waited for; we can provide the proper treatment, but we cannot force it. The birth of human life has to be waited for. Even with all of today's knowledge, it cannot be made to happen.

There is much waiting in family life. Wives and husbands often wait months and years for a certain understanding from each other. Parents spend much time waiting for their children. On

occasion children also wait for their parents. In the story that Jesus told about the prodigal son, the father waited with a heavy heart for the return of the son. It was very difficult for him. But imagine what would have happened if, instead of waiting, he had sent his servants to forcibly bring the son home. That beautiful picture of reconciliation, which has inspired so many, would probably not have taken place.

Waiting is often painful. Frequently it is done alone. It is a humbling thing to do. It is a way of acknowledging that things are not yet complete and that it is not really within one's power to make them complete. It means trusting that somehow they will yet become complete and whole and that, for the time being, one is accepting the incompleteness. And so, in waiting for light, one does the waiting in darkness; in waiting for healing, one does the waiting in suffering; and in waiting for friendship, one does the waiting alone.

Although waiting is often painful, it is important that we learn to wait. Those who refuse to wait miss out on very much. One perceptive writer, Father Anthony Padovano, says,

> *Those who are unable to wait miss those who wish to give themselves to us but who cannot give themselves all at once. Those who hurry life refuse others the time they need to become themselves....to believe one can have it all, so to speak, in a hurry, is to confine the mystery of life and the grace of God to a moment or a year or a decade. When men cease waiting, their hopes die, their dreams are dispelled, and their life is over.1*

Since waiting is so important, it is not surprising that the Bible provides us with some beautiful pictures about it. Early in the history of the Israelites, there was Jacob the great patriarch. He was an old man when a severe famine came to his land. He had raised a big family. His boys had given him more than a fair share of trouble. Indeed they had sold his second youngest son to a passing Egyptian caravan. When the famine came and the search for food became desperate, Jacob sent his sons to Egypt to buy food since he had heard that it was available there. But the man in charge of the Egyptian grain exchange seemed intent on giving them a hard time. To meet his demands old Jacob had to send even his youngest son. This was not easy for Jacob. It was very difficult. Listen to the words: "If harm should befall him on this journey that you are to make, you would bring down my gray hairs with sorrow to Sheol" (Genesis 42:38).

Moses, that great leader, spent some forty years in the desert with the Israelite people. He waited for them to get ready to enter the land that had been promised. So much social and spiritual preparation was necessary. And the people seemed so slow to follow. They grumbled endlessly. They had their own ideas. And those who were to assist Moses were not always dependable either. But he stayed with them. Though discouraged, he did not despair. He waited for them. And while he waited he worked. Eventually the new land was reached.

But their troubles did not end with the possession of the land. Even the great temple, royal palace and centralized government could not settle all the problems. At one point they were defeated by the great Babylon and many of their people were taken into captivity. They

felt the tragedy of this deeply. They waited and waited for a return to Jerusalem. They cried out, "How shall we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land? If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither, let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth if I do not remember you, if I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy" (Psalms 137:4-6). Though difficult, they kept on singing the Lord's song. And by the grace of God, His song is still being heard.

One could talk of the whole history of Israel as it is recorded in the Old Testament, as a period of waiting: waiting for the fulfillment of the promise that had been made to their forefathers; waiting for Him who would show them the way to a Kingdom of truth and righteousness. Their commitment to such a Kingdom was not always clear. Their motivation was far from pure. But they waited. At least some of them did. Their waiting was a unique mixture of confidence and sorrow. And their writings, as in Isaiah and Jeremiah, have brought comfort and strength to many.

Jesus too waited. He waited for his way to become clear, and hoped, even at the end, that it could be different. He waited for his disciples to understand. But often they did not understand. Sometimes they seemed arrogant in their ignorance. At other times they asked sincerely, "Are you he who is to come, or shall we look for another? "(Matthew 11:3). Many people would have been outraged at such a question. They would have said, "How dare you doubt me? " Jesus was not outraged. It is a mark of his ability to wait, that he allowed others to come to him, at their own pace.

In our fast-moving twentieth century, the virtue of waiting is almost lost. In addition to instant tea and instant coffee we seem to expect

instant friendship, instant love, instant healing, instant wisdom, instant understanding, instant solutions to whatever the problems may be. We have great difficulty in believing that some things are not within our control; and that some things cannot be molded and shaped according to our will. Because of our refusal to accept that waiting is sometimes necessary, we miss out on some very enriching dimensions of living.

Some time ago we, as a church, were faced with a problem on which we did not see clearly. A young man from a Latin American country had fled to Canada because he was charged with killing a police officer in a riot. He was a strongly committed revolutionary and wanted to go to Cuba. When he came to us, we gave him food and one of our families gave him shelter. But then the Royal Canadian Mounted Police arrested him for being in Canada illegally and proposed to deport him. This left us wondering whether we should give further assistance and help him to appeal the deportation order. The situation in his country, as he described it, was bad. It had to be changed and regrettably, he said, some violence would be necessary. We, as a church, wanted to support efforts for greater justice in the world, but we could not support violence. We were prepared to ask that he be given whatever rights he might have under Canadian law, but he was asking for more and we did not see clearly what we should do.

About that time, David Schroeder, from our Canadian Mennonite Bible College in Winnipeg, came to speak to us. In the discussion after the service we raised our problem with him. We asked, "Is it right for us to support this man in his efforts to change the situation in his country? Is there justification for his efforts which include violence? " Schroeder replied by talking about making representations to the gover-

nors and calling their attention to their unjust policies. "And what would he do if nothing changed? " we asked. If I recall his reply correctly, he said, "I would make sure that I had made the peaceful representations as clearly and as strongly as possible, but I do not insist that all problems have to be solved today, or even in my lifetime. I can wait. I have faith." There is a lot to ponder in that reply.

Waiting is difficult. It is a humbling and often a lonely thing to do. It has the appearance of a "do-nothing" approach. Moreover, there is no certainty that the things for which we wait will take place, and even if they do, they may take place in a different way than we had hoped. Yet we find in the pages of the Bible as well as in the pages of our own experience, that there is a redemption which has to be waited for and which, in another sense, is already ours while we wait for it.

The Old Testament Israelites carried a sense of hopeful waiting. They were helped in this by their memories. They remembered experiences where redemption had been a reality. When problems arose, we hear them calling on God as the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, who saved them from the famine, who rescued them from slavery, who led them through the Red Sea and so on. These experiences of the past strengthened their faith that He would also lead them through the problems at hand.

For the Israelites, their memory was a source of strength. We too should learn to remember. We should reflect on our lives as a whole, as well as on the moments of particular grace. We should look at people we know, at the church and at the redemption portrayed in the Bible. We should build on these things. If we do, I believe we will develop the confi-

dence of St. Paul, "that He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion" (Philippians 1:6), and the faith of Israel that, "they who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint" (Isaiah 40:31).

## *EACH PERSON IS SPECIAL*

*What is man that thou art mindful of him, . . ? Yet thou hast made him little less than God, and dost crown him with glory and honor. (Psalms 8:4,5).*

The desire to be known as special, is held by almost every person. It is a gentle longing in almost every human heart. We want to be loved in a special way; we want to be known for certain special abilities; we strive for things that will give us a special character. This longing to be known as special is not our only reason for doing things, but it is there. And people vary widely in the way they deal with it.

This desire to be known as special is not only natural and widespread. It also points to a truth, deep and precious, namely, that each person is indeed special. Many things in life would deny this. Ordinary logic would say, if each person is special then no one is special. But there is a deeper logic in life. And the Christian Gospel gives it words. It says that each person is special.

Let us consider some of the well-known stories of the New Testament from this perspective. Take the one about the prodigal son. Most of us have probably felt some sympathy for that older brother. He did the work. He kept the place going. Indeed without him, there might not have been a home for that loose-living younger brother to come back to. Yet there was no rejoicing for him. There was no celebration in his honor. All that went to that undisciplined fellow who came back, cap in hand, after squandering his thousands. Was it right that the happy celebrations should center on the prodigal brother and that the stable, hardworking one should go unnoticed? Was

it just? Was it equal treatment? It certainly does not appear that way.

But maybe there is a different way of explaining this story. Maybe the doctrines of justice and equality, though very important in the social and political relations of mankind, are not the most perfect expressions of the way God deals with people. From Him, each one receives special treatment. And the older brother. like the younger one, like everyone of us, has his own pilgrimage to make, his own mountains to cross, and his own fertile valleys in which to find nourishment.

Consider also the story that Jesus told about the one lost sheep from the fold of ninety-nine. Somehow, the one that is lost became very special. Somehow, the powers of love became drawn towards that one. If we were doing a simple cost-benefit analysis we might say, "Let's not go to the trouble of finding it. It's risky. We might just get ourselves into more trouble. Let's build on what we have left. Ninety-nine out of a hundred is not a bad average, statistically speaking." But the deeper reality of life makes each one indispensible. No person, however great or good, can replace another. In the heart of God, each one has a special place.

Perhaps the idea that each person is special seems somewhat removed from our lives.
Certainly, it is difficult to see how in social and political life each person can be regarded as special.. Our laws tend not to treat people as special. It is not in their nature. Indeed, one of the ideals of our legal system is that people are equal before the law and there no one is special. How then do we say that each person is special?

Let us look at it from a different perspective. Consider children. It seems to me that a child somehow knows that is is special. Perhaps this knowledge comes from the attention that children get in the context of family life. Perhaps it comes from the way they gradually discover themselves–that their fingers can bend, that their legs can stand, and that they can ride bicycles. Perhaps it comes from the way they freely dream about the great things they may some day become. Whatever its source, a child seems to know that he is special.

When we get older we tend to lose this awareness of being special. Maybe it has to be so. Obviously, in the specialness that a child feels, there are some selfish and indulgent aspects which do not belong in maturity. But sometimes adulthood takes away completely the sense of being special. The tendency is to fill our roles, to do our duties, to keep our commitments and to carry out our responsibilities. The feeling is one of being ordinary, not special. In fact, there are times when we think that if only we were ordinary then at least we would be okay. But the Author of Life invites us to something more. He calls us to discover ourselves, and others, as special.

Some poetic writers have portrayed, with beautiful words, how they came upon this discovery. The English poet, Francis Thompson, writing early in this century, described how he discovered that God was especially interested in him. In his poem, "The Hound of Heaven," he said,

**"I fled Him, down the nights and down the days**
**I fled Him down the arches of the years;**
**I fled Him, down the labyrinthine ways**
**Of my mind; and in the mist of tears**
**I hid from Him, and under running laughter**
**Up vistaed hopes I sped;**
**And shot, precipitated**

**Adown Titantic glooms of chasmed fears**
**From those strong Feet that followed, followed after**
**But with unhurrying chase**
**And unperturbed pace**
**Deliberate speed, majestic instancy**
**They beat – and a Voice beat**
**More instant than the Feet**
**'All things betray thee, who betrayest Me**
**. . . I am He whom thou seekest!**
**Thou dravest love from Thee, who dravest Me'."1**

A more recent writer, also from England, is Malcolm Muggeridge. In his book, *Jesus Rediscovered*, he has a chapter on the old question "Is there a God? " In it he explains how he was led to answer that question. He says,

> "I myself should be very happy to answer with an emphatic negative. Temperamentally, it would suit me well enough to settle for what the world offers, . . . the earth's sounds and smells and colours are very sweet; human love brings golden hours; the mind at work earns dēlight. I have never wanted a God, or feared a God, or felt under any necessity to invent one. Unfortunately, I am driven to the conclusion that God wants me. He comes padding after me like a Hound of Heaven and His shadow falls over all my little picnics. . . In the innermost recesses of vanity one is discovered, as in the last sanctuaries of appetite; on the highest hill of complacency, as in the lowest burrow of despair. . . "2

There are numerous passages in the Bible that

describe a similar awareness. But the words of Psalm 139 surely stand among the most significant. There the writer says, in part,

> O Lord, thou hast searched me and known me!
> Thou knowest when I sit down and when I rise up;
> thou discernest my thoughts from afar.
> Thou searchest out my path and my lying down,
> and art acquainted with all my ways.
> Even before a word is on my tongue,
> lo, O Lord, thou knowest it altogether.
> Thou doest beset be behind
> Thou doest beset me behind and before,
> and layest thy hand upon me.
> Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;
> it is high, I cannot attain it.
> Whither shall I go from thy Spirit
> Or whither shall I flee from thy presence
> If I ascend to heaven, thou art there!
> If I make my bed in Sheol, thou art there!
> If I take the wings of the morning
> and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea,
> even there thy hand shall lead me,
> and thy right hand shall hold me.
> If I say, "Let only darkness cover me,
> and the light about me be night,"
> even the darkness is not dark to thee,
> the night is bright as the day;
> for darkness is as light with thee.
> For thou didst form my inward parts,
> thou didst knit me together in my mother's womb.
> I praise thee, for thou art fearful and wonderful.
> Wonderful are thy works!
> Thou knowest me right well;
> my frame was not hidden from thee,
> when I was being made in secret,
> intricately wrought in the depths of the earth.
> Thy eyes beheld my unformed substance;
> in thy book were written, every one of them,
> the days that were formed for me,
> when as yet there was none of them.
> How precious to me are thy thoughts, O God!
> How vast is the sum of them! (Psalms 139:1-17)

These three poems speak very personally. They are not so much dogmatic pronouncements as personal testimonies. The writers seem to say, "this is the way I have discovered things to be". They suggest to us that it is not in laws or decrees

or logical arguments that we discover our own specialness or that of anyone else. They invite us to listen more closely, to God, to ourselves, and to the stories of people's lives.

Often it is in life stories that the specialness of persons is found. The Bible contains many life stories. One could look at almost any of the persons there - - Abraham, Moses, David, Ruth, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Job, etc. Their lives were not easy. They worked hard and for most of them there were periods of great suffering. But the stories about them reveal that each one had a sense of being special to God and of a particular task which they were called to do.

Perhaps we do not write out the stories of our lives. But we do have stories. Each life is a story. Each person--learned or unlearned, young or old, male or female, and regardless of background--has a life story. When we reflect on our story, the way things have happened, the things we have learned, the people whom we have met, the difficulties and the joys that have been ours, the situations in which we have done well and those where we have not done so well, and what these things mean to us, then we discover, I believe, that our personal lives are stories, that each one is unique and that each one is led in a special way by the Author of Life, who created us in His image, who has a particular task for us and who longs for us to know Him.

May our worship here be a reminder for us that we are special, both in the way we are loved, and in the tasks before us. May we approach others, both in the church and in the larger world, with the knowledge that they too are special, even though they may not know it, even though they tell their stories in broken pieces. May our lives in all their dimensions be to the glory of Him for whom each one is special.

Footnotes:

1. Francis Thompson, "The Hound of Heaven," in *The Complete Poems of Francis Thompson*, New York, Random House, edited by B. A. Cerf, D. S. Klopfer and R. K. Haas, 1913, p. 88.

2. Malcolm Muggeridge, *Jesus Rediscovered*, London, Fontana Books, 1969, p. 41.

## *ACCEPTING OUR POVERTY*

*Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the Kingdom of heaven. (Matthew 5:3).*

The season of Lent is a time for reflection, for self-examination and for repentance. It is the time when we remember the suffering which Jesus accepted for us: the way He came to believe that he had to go to Jerusalem even though others warned him of what might happen; the way he celebrated the passover with his disciples; the way he prayed in Gethsemane hoping so much that there would be another way; the way even his closest followers failed to understand; and so on.

For centuries, Christian people have tried to use this time of year to reflect more deeply on themselves. In many church traditions there is an emphasis on fasting, abstaining from certain normal things of life and attending special church services. Our own tradition is quite flexible, but in my opinion it is important that we do take this time to become somewhat more quiet, somewhat more reflective, and somewhat more penitent.

One way of doing this is to look at what we have done and what we have left undone and try with all the strength available to us, to make the changes that should be made. This can be valuable. It can help to redirect our actions. But there is another way. It calls us to look not only at our activities but at our being, and to recognize the poverty of our being.

Perhaps this sounds unusual, but I believe there is a sense in which we are poor: poor in our ability to love, poor in our ability to pursue the true purposes of life, and poor in our abil-

ity to forgive. We say we forgive but then discover later, sometimes to our surprise, that in our hearts much fear and resentment remains. We can hardly live without friends and yet we are poor in our ability to maintain and nurture friendships. When Jesus began the Sermon on the Mount with the Beatitude, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven" (Matthew 5:3), he was, I believe, calling on us to recognize our poverty.

The Catholic priest, Daniel Berrigan, once wrote,

> ...all men, in their deepest existence, are poor men. Only Christ could 'become poor'; it remains for mankind to explore and accept a poverty that, from the point of view of God and the neighbour, is simply a datum, a fact - the appalling truth of our state. Men are poor in grace, poor in submission before life, poor in the capacity for love.1

It is difficult to think of ourselves as poor. We are not inclined that way. We work enormously hard to acquire strength, if not physically then intellectually, socially or economically. Our strength gives us a place in the world. It is not necessarily wrong to develop strengths. Indeed, if done in certain ways it is right to do so. But when our pursuit of strength in one area or another becomes a refusal to recognize our basic weakness and poverty, then we are in trouble.

Since it is unusual to think of ourselves as poor, it may be appropriate to use a series of pictures to communicate its meaning. One picture comes from a Mennonite Central Committee voluntary service worker. It portrays how a young married couple gradually came

to see their poverty and how their recognition of it became the beginning of a deep inner healing. The story comes from Mrs. Elizabeth Sherk. She writes that when they left for the MCC assignment in Nigeria, they felt proud and self-satisfied. In her words,

> The last time we spoke to our home congregation,...is still fresh in my memory—the audacity, the pride, the false humility of it all. With a smirk, relishing my tone of haughty defiance I announced, 'The reason we are going to Nigeria is to enjoy ourselves! We don't want anyone to set us up on a pedestal. No one is to expect us to be faultless representatives of Jesus Christ over there.2

During the course of their work in Nigeria, things changed. They found that they were not really enjoying themselves. They found themselves becoming very cynical about the Africans. They became very lonely. They were amazed at their own bitterness. In reflecting on this, they came to see themselves as impoverished people, said Mrs. Sherk. The self-satisfaction was gone. But as they came to recognize this, they also learned of the healing power of the Word of the Lord. They learned to listen more deeply to the Bible, to people and to songs. They discovered the truth in the words of the song made popular by the Medical Mission Sisters, "When your Word, O God is spoken, we shall be healed, we shall be healed".

Perhaps we are not on our way to Africa, but maybe our approach to life is similar to the way the Sherks approached their MCC assignment. Maybe we are encountering similar difficulties. Maybe we can learn something from their experience.

Another picture comes from mentally and emotionally retarded people. It is told by Jean Vanier, the son of Canada's former Governor General, who lives and works with such people. He admits that in the light of reason and responsibility they are failures. He accepts the words of one psychiatrist that "the mentally retarded individual is suggestible, naive, and easily influenced. His 'self' lacks strength and form. He is weak."3 Vanier does not argue with this. But then he goes on to talk about some who have become beautiful, who have accepted their poverty and who are no longer frightened by it. These, he says,

> ...do not have a consciousness of power. Because of this perhaps their capacity for love is more immediate, lively and developed than that of other men. They cannot be men of ambition and action in society and so develop a capacity for friendship rather than for efficiency. They are indeed weak and easily influenced, because they confidently give themselves to others; they are simple certainly, but often with a very attractive simplicity. Their first reaction is often one of welcome and not of rejection or criticism.4

The Vanier story reminded me of the kind of thing that many MCC workers talk about. These workers, placed in many different situations of need, serve without salary. Consequently they live a very simple lifestyle and many of them have come to believe that this simplicity opens doors to the hearts of people. Though the work is often difficult, their simplicity tends to put them more on one level. It tends to break down the wall between those who serve and those who are served. Many workers talk of the deep friendship and spiritual communion that it has encour-

aged.

Perhaps, if we would recognize our own poverty better, we would also learn to see through the artificial barriers that enclose our lives, and partake more deeply of such communion with God and with other people.

This kind of simplicity and poverty seems to strike a deep chord of truth in the human heart. I am amazed, for example, with the inspiration that comes from a person like Mother Teresa of Calcutta. She works among the poor and the dying. She does it in a very simple way – without a large bureaucracy, without elaborate facilities, without many experts and without the pretence that all the problems can be solved. But somehow she so inspires people that she now has followers in many parts of the world. A Prime Minister of India has written, "To meet her is to feel utterly humble, to sense the power of tenderness, the strength of love."5

The last and probably the most powerful picture comes from the temptations of Jesus. Jesus was tempted in different ways to do things that ordinary man cannot do. He was tempted to become a superman. He was tempted to turn the stones into bread, to take over the Kingdoms of the World and to jump down from the pinnacle of the temple and have angels save him in some spectacular way. He did not give in, but if he had then he would no longer have incarnated God in truly human form. He accepted the limitations of ordinary man.

Similarly, in the Garden of Gethsemane, near the end of his life, when soldiers came to arrest him, some of his closest followers made efforts to defend him with the sword. But he told them to put it aside. He said, "Do you not think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve

legions of angels?" (Matthew 26:53). He could have. But he did not. In many ways he lived life within the limits of ordinary man.

It is noteworthy to compare the temptations of Jesus with those in the Garden of Eden. In both cases there were promises of greatness. Jesus was promised great powers. Adam and Eve were told that they would become wise, knowing good and evil, like God. Our first parents did not resist the temptation. Like we, they sought to escape from their poverty. But the New Testament calls us to accept it. In Philippians we read,

> Have this mind among yourselves, which you have in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. (Philippians 2:5-8).

What is the message of these pictures? It appears that for Christ to be our Saviour, he had to become poor; that for Elizabeth Sherk to be healed she had to recognize her poverty; that some mentally weak people who were able to accept their poverty, became special instruments of God's grace for others; that simplicity strikes a deep chord within the human heart and allows for a deeper level of communion. I think we could say that if we recognize our poverty then we would see ourselves as sons and daughters of God and sisters and brothers with all the people of the world

May we be given the grace, at this time of year, to recognize that we are poor in spirit and

thus become open to the Kingdom which God wants to give to us.

Footnotes:

1. Daniel Berrigan, *They Call us Dead Men: Reflections on Life and Conscience*, New York, The Macmillan Company, 1968, p. 11.

2. Mrs. Elizabeth Sherk, in notes used for reporting to the annual meeting of Mennonite Central Committee (Ontario), November 1976.

3. As found in Jean Vanier, *Eruption to Hope*, Toronto, Griffin House, 1971, p. 41.

4. Jean Vanier, *Eruption to Hope*, Toronto, Griffin House, 1971, p. 42.

5. As found in Desmond Dogg, *Mother Teresa: Her People and Her Work*, London, Collins, 1976, p. 11.

## *BELIEVING IN PEOPLE*

*Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me;. . . (Mark 9:37).*

*. . . as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me. (Matthew 25:40).*

In the setting of a child dedication ceremony, it is natural to believe in people.1 These young children look so healthy, so wholesome and so good. They are so full of promise and potential. They suggest so many things that are pure, true, noble and excellent. They seem to say that nothing is impossible. It is not surprising that in one of the efforts of our Lord to describe what it means to live in the Kingdom of Heaven, He pointed to little children. Because of this atmosphere, it may be an appropriate time to explore the theme, believing in people.

There are several important aspects of this theme. There is first the very personal matter of recognizing how useful it is to be believed in. We would find life very difficult if no one believed in us. The confidence that others have in us helps us to do some of the important things of life. We learn to make friends because other people help us to believe that we are capable of friendship and that friendship is valuable. And we choose careers and take jobs because some person, perhaps a teacher, a parent or a minister helps us to believe that we are capable of making something worthwhile out of them.

The strength with which some people believe in others was illustrated for me recently when I was sitting at a banquet table beside a married woman. Her husband was busy with other things so we got into conversation. She began to

talk about her husband's recent job change. She was very grateful for the new job. The old one had become almost unbearable. "They were pushing him around as if he was nothing," she said. "And that really upset me because I know how good he really is and what he can do if he is given a chance." She said it with the kind of sincerity and conviction that leaves no room for doubt. I thought to myself, what a tremendous thing for one human being to so believe in another.

No doubt you know other stories of the way the faith of one person in another has opened doors and moved mountains. But the truth of the need to be believed in can be seen also from the way doors are sometimes closed when this belief in another person is not there. In the little Saskatchewan community where I grew up, there was a boy who was mentally and emotionally weak. He was about my age. The problem was not too serious. We played together; he could talk; and he started school. But the school environment had a negative effect. He was picked on, made fun of and belittled. He was often made the scapegoat. Not surprisingly, he too became more difficult. After about four years, he was taken out of school and sent to an institution set up to deal with such "problems". I visited him there years later and though he appeared much calmer, his abilities seemed to have declined even further. His ability to talk was almost gone. I rarely think of him now, but sometimes I wonder what kind of a person he would be today if there would have been people, strong people, who would have really believed in him.

If these stories illustrate one dimension of our theme, namely that it is important for our personal lives to be believed in, they also suggest as a second point, that believing in people is part of our mission. Often we say, that our mission is to love, to love as God loves. But the word

love, has come to be used in so many different ways that its meaning is often unclear. I think the term, "believing in people," can help us to stand one dimension of it. In a Christmas sermon some years ago, our brother Tony Enns suggested that Christmas is really a great sign of God's belief in man and of His faith that human life can be redeemed.

Jesus believed in people. It seems that He believed in many in whom nobody else believed. He believed in Zacchaeus, whom others regarded as a hopelessly selfish and corrupt tax collector. He believed in the sick who often followed Him. He believed in children even when his disciples thought they were a nuisance. He believed even in his disciples. He believed in them enough to use them as leaders in the building of his church, even though they had been amazingly slow to learn what He was all about.

The view of our mission as believing in people helped me some time ago to respond constructively to another person in a pastoral situation. The relationship had developed over several years. But there were problems with which I seemed unable to help him. Often I asked myself, What does it mean to love this person? At one point, it struck me that it might be better to try simply to believe in him. That led me to think concretely about his strengths and his potential and to help him to fulfill them. And in this situation it seems to have helped.

The experience taught me more clearly than I had understood it before that our love is often quite shallow. Sometimes we are more concerned about ourselves presenting a loving image than about the other person. At other times we are just being nice in a superficial way. People need not so much our sympathy, our pity, and our compassion, as our faith in them. Believing in them can give a sense of direction to our rela-

tionships.

Another illustration of our mission as believing in people comes from Menno Simons. His words, spoken four hundred and fifty years ago, were printed on the back side of our bulletin last Sunday. He says our mission is,

> To take up the two-edged, powerful, sharp sword of the Spirit. . . the Word of God. . . to destroy the kingdom of Satan . . . pierce all hard and obdurate hearts. . . to prune all flesh, whether high or low, rich or poor, learned or unlearned, of all pride, vain show, pomp, avarice, usury, of cheating, lies, deceit, robbery, sheding of innocent blood, of hatred, envy, adultery, fornication, unchastity, unnatural desires, gluttony, wine-bibbing, perversions, of fearful cursing and swearing, unspirituality, vanity, and of the fearful unbecoming idolatry. And we do all this in order that all men. . . may by the fear of God, . . . become. . . inwardly humble before Him. . . and rediscover all divine wisdom, truth, love, earnestness, and sobriety; the true sacraments and true service of God

Can we describe that as loving people? It stretches the current meaning of love almost too far. But we could describe it as believing in people; believing that people have the potential for righteous living; believing that there are divine truths; believing that people can discover these and follow them.

Menno Simons' description of the Christian mission suggests a third, and for us today, the final dimension of our theme. It is that believing in other people can be a direct response

to God. People are created in the image of an eternal God. To believe this brings a deep value to human life both individually and collectively. It means that life is not a game.

This is not easily believed in our day. There is so much cynicism about life. In part this comes from our general social uncertainties. Political leaders seem to come and go. World problems are described as crises one day and forgotten the next. If we are not careful we can become so shaken that we are concerned about nothing except our own security and private well-being as if nothing else mattered or was worth believing in. Yet there is an eternal order for all human life. And each human life carries within it the possibility of responding in some way to Him who is both Creator and Redeemer.

Our personhood is rooted in God and his love for us. Ultimately our personhood does not depend on our many activities; we cannot earn it completely, simply by doing many things and being successful at work, nor lose it completely, merely by being unsuccessful; it does not finally depend on how we relate to the current way of social life, whether we understand it, are well adjusted to it or whether we are separatists; it is not determined by whether our minds are brilliant or not, or whether our emotional make-up is well balanced or not. To believe in people is really to believe in Him in whose image each person is created.

The many things of this transitory life are not unimportant. Indeed, the habits we are able to form, the skills we are able to learn, the abilities we are able to develop, and the things we are able to do are important. They are important precisely because they can be used to give expression to the divine reality within us. But somehow these things are secondary. Somehow, I believe, that even though my childhood playmate is in a mental institution, even though he

has lost his ability to talk, even though he is virtually forgotten, somehow his life is valuable and significant, no less than that of the highly cultured artist or the political leader of worldly acclaim.

To believe this we may need to separate ourselves a little bit from the way this world ascribes value and importance and learn something that people like Mother Teresa and Jean Vanier seem to have learned. When I read about their work with people who are emotionally wounded or physically dying, I am impressed again and again by the fact that they do not do their work out of a sense of pity or out of a sense of duty. They really believe in these people. They see great value in them. They seem to accept in a literal way, the well known New Testament passage that when we do some things for the least of people, we are doing them unto Christ.

To believe in the children that have been dedicated here today is not hard. We feel close to them. We want to believe in them now and always, even on those days when it will not be so easy. But we should also learn to believe in those in whom it is more difficult to believe; those who may be less "normal", those to whom we feel less close, those who may seem to us to be mere units in the nameless masses of the world. They too need our faith in them. It is our mission; it is our response to the God who is creator and redeemer for all of us. It is in Him that our personhood is rooted and from Him that our spiritual well-being flows forth.

Footnotes:

1. The occasion for this sermon, on May 30, 1976, was the dedication of Christine and Robert, children of Robert and Eleanor Dyck; Jeffrey Allan, son of John and Ruth Dyck; Donald Victor, son of Victor and Erna Wiebe; and Elvera

Genevieve, daughter of Jim and Sandra Chism.

2. Menno Simons, as found in "Faith and Life Bulletin 6764," Scottdale, Pennsylvania, Mennonite Publishing House, 1976.

## *CHRISTMAS: THE JOYOUS INTERRUPTION*

*Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people, . . . (Luke 1:68).*

There is a certain atmosphere that appears in the advent season, which sets it apart from the rest of the year. There are Christmas carols on the radio and decorations in stores, streets and homes. People seem to be a little more friendly; a little more willing to share. Letters are written and greetings are sent. There is special singing in churches and children everywhere are excited. These things altogether bring out an atmosphere that sets the advent season apart.

Of even greater importance than the social atmosphere of this season is the particular dimension of the Christian Gospel that this season brings to us. To understand this let us consider in contrast, the emphasis of Lent and Good Friday. That is the time when we think of suffering, of endurance, of the burden of carrying a cross, of duty, of obedience, of faithfulness and steadfastness in one's commitment to a righteous cause and so on. Those themes represent not only the period of Lent and Good Friday, they are so common that they virtually dominate Christian thinking.

But can we think of Christmas from that perspective? Can we think of Christ becoming human out of a sense of duty to Almighty God? Can we picture Joseph as a man of great self-discipline, evident in the way he stayed with Mary when he discovered the disturbing fact of her pregnancy? Should we be inspired by his courage in the face of slanderous rumors and suspicions, and by his "grin and bear it"' attitude? Should we read these things into the Christmas story? Are these the things

that we should learn from it?

Surely, that would be a distortion of the meaning of Christmas. The Christmas season does not speak primarily of duties and commitments and carrying crosses. It speaks of joy, of a joyous interruption in the regular course of life. It has been said that our hearts will be truly Christian when we find ourselves rejoicing over the happiness of others. That, I think, is the lesson of Christmas. It is about happiness. It is about receiving joy.

Receiving joy sounds kind of simple. In a sense it is simple. Some of us have built up our lives in such a complicated way that we feel uneasy when joy comes to us. We tend to feel that it is somehow unreal and artificial; that it is somehow beneath the important and serious things of life. Somehow we do not trust it; we tend to push it away; we do not know how to receive it and to allow it to work its way into our lives. We need to hear the Christmas message.

Let me recount two stories about joy breaking into the lives of people. One comes from a busy mother who writes,

> Children have a unique way of helping us in our search for happy experiences. In our complex adult world we have forgotten what it means to stand and stare, to feel and listen, to soak up the beauty of each moment. We have routines, deadlines, obligations. And in our rush to keep them we run right past what could be the most meaningful times in the day. Let us heed the excited call of the children, "Mom, Dad, come see what I found." One such call came to me late one afternoon

while peeling potatoes, hair in curlers, deep in thought over a little talk I would give to a ladies' group that evening. On his way home from school David had seen something in the park that he wanted to share with me. But what a time to do it. Chafing inwardly at the interrupted routine but feeling that I owed it to him to go, I succumbed. At an old hollow tree we stopped and David pointed up. "Look inside, Mom. Aren't they cute? " There in a neat little nest were three scrawny, featherless birds. Their bulging eyes and bits of blue eggshell spoke of a recent miracle of birth. Everything else that I saw or did that day I have forgotten but the memory of the unplanned and unhurried trip to the park with David remains. I wonder if the reason our days are often so uneventful is that we don't allow ourselves to be interrupted by the children.1

The other illustration comes from a personal friend who is a dairy farmer in Saskatchewan. He started the farm a few years ago, and to buy the land, build the barn, and set up the equipment, he had to make an enormously large loan. Keeping up with the payments was not easy, but he had calculated carefully. If no major problem developed then he would be able to manage and, eventually, come out on top. But then one autumn day, when his family was burning leaves, a huge hay stack caught fire. It went up in smoke. That was serious. As he had figured things, he could keep the whole system going smoothly, if he did not get sick, if the price of milk held up, if the cows remained healthy, if the crops were reasonably good, and if no big setbacks came along. Losing a large hay stack was "cutting it very close."

Fortunately, there were very good neighbours. They pitched in and came, one after another, each with a load of hay until he had enough to carry through. But what is even more striking than the way his needs were met, is the way he felt about it. He said, "When the neighbours started coming, one by one, with those loads of hay, it hit me even more strongly than when the stack went up in smoke. I did not know what to do with myself. I did not know how to receive it." He was a strong man. He could work hard, not only on the farm but also on the Committees and Boards in the community. He did his duty and kept his commitments. But receiving help from his neighbours was another matter. He could hardly accept it.

Our situations are probably different in many ways. Certainly our financial debts are not as big as those of our farmer friend. But I think that we often find ourselves in a similar predicament. We too are tied down with duties and commitments. We too work hard to fulfill the expectations that others have of us. And sometimes the burden of it all becomes very heavy. At work the projects always seem bigger and demanding of more time than our schedules allow for. At home, children expect parents to be everything from theologians to astronomers. At school teachers require project after project and assignment after assignment. At church the budget is still not met and then the Council goes ahead with additional Christmas commitments. Where do they expect it to come from?

Sometimes our world begins to feel like a system with inputs and outputs, like a machine that runs smoothly only if each role is carefully filled. And so, as "responsible" people we try to fill our roles. We make up our minds that we will do our duties and keep our commitments. It all becomes a burdensome law.

Whether we go on because of fear or because of pride, it becomes harder and harder. And sometimes all that we hear from the Christian pulpit is, "Do your duty, keep your commitments, carry your cross, do not give up, look to God for strength and keep going."

I do not want to make light of this, or tell you to disregard your responsibilities. But the Bible brings in another dimension. It tells us, I believe, that the law of our lives, whether we call it the Mosaic Law or whether it is of our own making, must not become like a closed system. The Bible talks not only of keeping laws but also of the fruits of the Spirit. These, it describes as "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control" (Galatians 5:22). The Bible does not tell us to disregard laws but it puts these fruits of the Spirit on a higher plane. It tells us, what the experience of life also tells us, that the laws by which we live often tend to become closed systems in which the beauty of life can hardly flourish. They need to be interrupted; they need to be broken into; we need to be called out to a reality of life that is deeper and higher and which can set us free.

The society into which Jesus came was something like a closed system. Many people felt oppressed. Politically they were under the rule of a heathen power. The economic laws made credit tight and interest rates high. The religious laws were such that many despaired of ever keeping them, and those who thought they were keeping them seemed arrogant and self-righteous.

Jesus came into this setting and it soon became clear that he was somehow separate. He seemed to stand in freedom while others lived in chains. He was able to draw on deeper spiritual resources and instead of seeing God only as a judge whose wrath was to be feared, he knew Him also as a loving Father. He never told

the people to discard the laws, but he said there is more to life than just carrying crosses and just doing one's duty. He told them of a power that makes a mustard seed to grow, of the water that quenches even the deepest thirst, and of a love that is eternal and unconditional.

In our time there are many people who have, as the saying goes, "dropped out". They have done so in different ways, and the reason for some will not be the reason for others. But an explanation that I heard in a political discussion some years ago made a lot of sense to me. The speaker pointed out that in the political discourse of the last several generations, the key words have been "rights" and "duties". Political relationships have been interpreted on the one hand as rights to land, rights to certain levels of pay, rights to the human body, and on the other hand as duties to support the political system, governmental programs, and so on. Rarely do we hear words like kindness and gentleness in political discussions, the speaker said. Looking at it from that perspective, it is no surprise that the human spirit does not feel completely at home in such an atmosphere. It is no wonder that many sensitive and good people "drop out".

There is a book in the church library called *Enough Room for Joy*. It is the story about the work of Jean Vanier, who set up a home for mentally and emotionally weak people. It is not a hospital. He calls it an Ark, after the idea of Noah's Ark. The "normal people" live and work together with the "wounded", as he calls them. In the last few years, many similar Arks have been set up in North America and Europe. And the writer talks about these groups as being "called out". He says,

> While technological society with its values of competition and success

> is bordering on despair, communi - ies like the l'Arche are beginning to blossom forth. These communities, with their 'peculiar people' ... are telling us that there still is in this world enough room for joy and they point the way to finding it.... On the one hand there is a movement towards inferiority, towards deepening the wellsprings of peace within oneself in order to be more of a source of peace for others. On the other hand there is an outward movement towards the world steeped in violence and so much in need of men and communities of peace, ...the greatest hope is, perhaps, not in a transformation structured from without by political and economic measures or authoritative pronouncements but from within, by people who have experienced or at least sensed that there is an alternative to the path along which mankind is presently rushing...2

This themes comes up repeatedly in the New Testament. In writing to the Galatians, St. Paul says, "You were called to freedom, brethren" (Galatians 5:13). In writing to the Corinthians he says, "Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom" (II Corinthians 3:17). To us, this may sound unrealistic. After all, in the real world responsibilities are important and commitments cannot be discarded. But if we read the New Testament carefully, we do not find advice against fulfilling responsibilities and keeping commitments. We hear Jesus saying that there is more to life than the fulfilling of these things; and that if we are concerned about nothing more then our spirits will wither and die.

We may understand this call better with our hearts than with our heads. It is a call often found in poems. Father Anthony Padovano says:

> There is a time for joy because there is poetry in the heart of man and grace and freedom and love, realities no one understands but everyone feels. There is a time for joy because we can have hope even when there are no reasons for it; we can choose life when all circumstances counsel the opposite; we can feel joy in our bones even though we think it is foolish. There is a time for joy because we are always free men; because God who made us for freedom is at the heart of our heart.3

This grace, freedom, love, peace, joy and hope are things that seem to come from outside of us. We cannot develop them or acquire them simply by trying to keep laws and commitments. They come when our lives are interrupted by the Spirit of God. That is the message of Christmas. Human life is interrupted by joy. Let us receive it; let us accept it; let us allow it to work its way into all areas of our lives.

Footnotes:

1. Author unknown. The story was found on an untitled and undated piece of manuscript.

2. Bill Clarke, S. J., *Enough Room for Joy: Jean Vanier's L'Arche: A Message for Our Time*, Toronto, McClelland and Stewart, 1974, pp. 21 and 19.

3. This is a paraphrase, not an exact quotation from Anthony Padovano, *Belief in Human Life*, Paramus, New Jersey, Paulist Press, p. 42.

## *UNDERSTANDING OUR DAILY WORK*

*. . . such persons we command and exhort. . . to do their work in quietness and to earn their living. (II Thessalonians 3:12).*

It is often said that we live in confusing times. We are unsure about so many areas of life. We have difficulty understanding even such common things as the meaning of family life, the basis of social relations or the place of daily work. Some would say that we no longer know who we are as persons.

The confusion about daily work was suggested to me recently by an event related to the coming of the Vientamese refugees to our city. A number of groups were involved in efforts to help them resettle. And at one meeting a lady whom I had not seen before gave a very impressive report. She had done so much work. Her telephone had been ringing all day long for weeks. Her car had been full of clothing and furniture, collected from all parts of the city. She had been driving here and there. Her husband had felt neglected and her children forsaken. It was an exciting report. It went on and on and on. But gradually I began to listen more to the way she gave her report than to what she actually said. She seemed so much more excited about her doing-of-many-things than about the people whom she was to serve. I wondered how it all came together in her heart.

In reflecting on the way this woman gave her report, I began to wonder whether perhaps she was a mirror of our own confusion about work. And in thinking over the various ways in which we approach our work it seemed that perhaps people could be divided into two groups on the matter of work: those who are overemployed

and those who are underemployed; those who work far too hard and those who for one reason or another, do not work hard enough; those who find so much value in their work that they virtually worship it, and those who find no value in it at all; those who make too much of their work and those who make too little of it.

In looking for the proper place of work in our lives, we should look at some passages in the Bible even though we will not be able to do a theological analysis of them. The first one comes from Genesis. There work is described as a burden, as the result of "the fall". In the Garden of Eden, the food had been ready to eat. Now it would be necessary to work for it. The passage says,

> Because you...have eaten of the tree of which I commanded you, 'You shall not eat of it,' cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth to you;... In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread (Genesis 3: 17-19).

This passage emphasizes the necessity of work. It describes work in a burdensome way. This does not fit well with the modern leisure-oriented society where work, like everything else is to be a pleasure. But it is nevertheless true. There are exceptions but generally work is a necessity which cannot be avoided.

The second Biblical passage comes from the writings of St. Paul. In his second letter to the Thessalonians he stresses the importance of work. He writes,

> For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us; we were not

> idle when we were with you, we did not eat any one's bread without paying, but with toil and labour we worked night and day... If any one will not work, let him not eat. For we hear that some of you are living in idleness, mere busybodies, not doing any work. Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work in quietness and to earn their own living (II Thessalonians 3:7-12).

This condemnation of idleness may seem unusually strong. But according to some interpretations the Thessalonian Christians were awaiting the return of Christ with such eagerness that they neglected the responsibilities of earthly life.

The last Biblical passage comes from the Gospels. Here Jesus says that we should not be carried away with our concern about work. He says,

> Do not be anxious about your life, ...is not life more than food, and body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? ... And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin; yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O men of little faith? (Matthew 6: 25-30).

It seems clear from this passage that Jesus was speaking to people whose problem was different from that of the Thessalonians. Instead of talking about accepting responsibilities, he says people should trust more in God's care.

These three passages approach work from vastly different angles. The passage from Genesis brings out the basic necessity of work. The passage from the Gospels says that people should not make too much of their work. And the one from Thessalonians warns against making too little of it. What do we make of these differences? In my opinion, the differences in the passages are well suited to the different ways in which we can go wrong in our approach to work. Like the groups of people to whom these passages were originally addressed, so we are torn between making too much of our work on the one hand and making too litle of it on the other hand.

There are a number of ways in which we tend to make too much of our work. Our tendency follows closely the pattern of the woman working with the refugees. We too work hard; we too do many things and we too enjoy the peculiar pleasure that comes from letting others know how very hard and difficult our work is. We delight in having other people depend on us, not only those in our city but throughout our country. We tend to become the measure of our self-respect, so that success at work leads to pride and failure at work leads to despair. This holds not only for our view of ourselves, but also for our approach to others. Our understanding of personhood is "wrapped up" in work. When this happens then our work, no matter how important it may seem, is not in its rightful place.

We also make too much of work when we think it is all that we are called to do in life. Recently, while attending a meeting out of town I shared a room with a middle-aged professional

clergyman. He told a story of how early in his ministry he had tried to do everything. If there was a need somewhere then he had felt that it was his duty to minister to it. His schedule had soon become very full and his family had begun to feel the burden. When his wife had asked whether things could not be changed, he had replied to her in all seriousness, "Now surely, you don't want to stand in the way of the Lord's work, the work to which God has called me, do you?" It had taken him some years to understand that even though his work was important, it was not the only thing that he was called to do with his life. Perhaps ministers are more prone to this weakness than others, but I do not think so. Turning away from opportunities to do things, whether they be in business, government or pastoral work, is not easy. But there are times when that is the right thing to do.

We also make too much of our work when we allow it to take over our whole working week. This has long been a problem for me. Each year I make up my mind that I will keep the fifth of the ten great commandments, namely that regarding the Sabbath. But somehow my resolutions go the way of most New Year's Resolutions. Always there is some work that could be done, some preparations, some reading and so on. And somehow I have difficulty resisting it. Still, I believe that in the long run, people would be better off if they kept the Sabbath. This would mean that there would be a regular break in our routine; it would give one an opportunity to reflect on one's life and work. There is no doubt in my mind that this commandment is there for our well-being and starting next Sunday, I intend to keep it.

But there is another side to this story of working. If we have a weakness for making too much of our work, we also have problems with making too little of it. In our time there seems to be a

widespread pessimism about the potential of human life. The world is so big. Events come and go as if moved by forces over which people have no control. We can despair. But we should guard against it. We need to recognize that we are not called to save the whole world; we are called only to do our part, to be faithful to God only in that which is before us.

One of the things about the sixteenth century Anabaptists that has often impressed me is that they did not feel responsible for maintaining the whole world. People probably came to them and said, "But you should have your infant children baptized and you should swear oaths of allegiance and you should fight in the armies, because if people stop doing these things then society will fall apart." And they probably replied, "Keeping society together is important but it is not our highest calling. We do not believe that society will fall apart just because we are not going along with certain things. But in any case, our first task is to be faithful to God according to the teachings of the Bible, and keeping the world together is finally up to God." That was their theology. There is a lot that we can learn from this approach. We are called to obedience only in what lies before us. We are not responsible for the whole world.

We also make too little of our work when we belittle our talents. Each person has been given some talents. They are not of the same kind nor in the same amount. But it is part of Christian teaching that we use what we have. Let us not pretend that we do not have any talents. There will always be those who have more talents than we do, who are able to use them better and who are able to do more. Let us not be discouraged. What they do is up to them. Let us use our talents. Let us use them without apology. Let us use them in God's redemptive work in the world. There are many many areas of work in

which we can be instruments of God's grace.

We also make too little of our work when we think that it will always be easy. It is tempting to believe that life is basically easy and that if we find it to be difficult then something is fundamentally wrong. We can support this view with certain social philosophies but it is not a true view of life. Not only does it go against the observation of the Genesis passage but we find little support for it among the great men of the Bible and history. Isaiah and Jeremia were hardworking people. The strength and beauty of their writings does not come from loose and purposeless living. And Jesus, though he called on others to consider the lilies, can hardly be seen as an idle person without self-discipline. He knew his calling and he gave himself to it.

Unfortunately, this does not yet bring us a completely clear understanding about the place of daily work in our lives. But it does tell us that we should resist the temptations of making too little of our work on the one hand, and making too much of it, on the other hand. It gives our work a dignity, but it is a limited dignity; it says that our work can be a channel of the grace of God, but that it should not by itself be god for us; it says that work is an important part of life. but it is not the true Centre of Life. According to some philosophies, man is a worker and the work he does determines everything else about his life. Christian teaching does not discard our work. It holds work in high respect. But it says that we are more than workers; that we are persons; that our personhood cannot be completely earned by working, nor lost simply by failure at work; it says that our personhood comes from Him in whose image we are created, who is revealed to us in Jesus and who loves us as persons. That remains the centre of the Christian gospel. It can also become the Centre

of our lives.

## *ADJUSTING TO SOCIETY*

*Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewal of your mind,. . . (Romans 12:2).*

There is a peculiar tension between the need to adjust to society and the need to be separate from it. Contact with society can benefit our minds, our spirits and even our economic well-being in the sense that we owe our jobs to the larger society. But there is also a sense in which we need to withdraw and to be separate. Is it possible to balance these two things?

The tendency to adjust to society can be seen in our personal lives. Most of us, at least in the years when we grew into adulthood, went through stages when we were very concerned about being well-adjusted. One of the most common hopes of parents is that their children will be well-adjusted. Schools try, among other things, to ensure that their graduates will be well-adjusted. Thousands are spent on getting psychologists and social workers to help people become well-adjusted. The idea guides not only people's behaviour, but also their attitudes: their attitudes toward possessions, their choice of things to strive for, their relationship to others, the kind of people they admire as well as those whom they despise or regard as enemies. Sometimes it seems that the longing to be well-adjusted is so deep and widespread that it amounts to a belief that salvation lies in being well-adjusted.

But the other side of the question is strong too. In the history of the Christian church there have always been those who have seen non-conformity, as the right social character of the Christian church. To St. Augustine, that great and influential fourth century teacher, the ideas of

"a City of God" and "a City of Man", were basic. The city of God consisted of those who were truly Christian. Among them the will of God would be lived out. They would embody all that was good and virtuous. And they would be completely separate from the city of man where lust and selfishness and power would prevail.

In the centuries that followed, this view of two separate spheres was gradually put aside. The institutional church came to control more and more areas and eventually all of life was seen as one sacred and integrated body. But in the religious Reformation of the sixteenth century the separatist view came to the fore again. The earliest Confession of Faith to which we as Mennonites trace our distinctive outlook carries it strongly. The Schleitheim Confession of 1527, known at that time as "A Brotherly Understanding of Some Children of God about Seven Articles" says,

> A separation shall be made from the evil and from the wickedness which the devil planted in the world; ...we shall not have fellowship with them ...and not run with them in the multitude of their abominations...all creatures are in but two classes, good and bad, believing and unbelieving, darkness and light, the world and those who (have come) out of the world, God's temple and idols, Christ and Belial; and none can have part with the other. To us the command of the Lord is clear when He calls upon us to be separate from the evil and thus He will be our God and we shall be His sons and daughters.1

This view has remained important to Mennonite theology ever since. John Howard Yoder who is sometimes regarded as the foremost Mennonite

nonite theologian of our time, seems to accept it. He argues that if the Christian Church of our time is to follow the New Testament, then it will be a new social reality, distinct from the larger world. People who know Jesus Christ as Lord, he says, will take on an outlook and develop a way of life that will be different from that of those who do not know Him in that way. He goes on to say that the important test of whether the church is really the church is in the way it relates to the world.2 Our own theology, which we as a congregation worked through not long ago for our Statement of Guiding Principles also holds to a certain separation. There we say "that we will strive to live in holiness, that is to be set apart for serving God. . . "3

In addition to this theology we have a long history of separate living. Most of our four hundred and fifty years have seen us living by ourselves. This was not the choice of our forefathers. It came because they were persecuted and banned in many areas. They were given protection on the condition that they would stay within certain restricted regions. Towns and cities were off-limits, as were most schools and many occupations. Because of these restrictions the church community developed into a society of its own, with separate institutions of welfare, education, finance, etc. They developed a self-sufficiency and survived with relatively little contact with the outside world.

This setting probably led them to a certain interpretation, not only of the Schleitheim Confession, but also of the various "separatist" passages in the New Testament like "Do not be conformed to this world" (Romans 12:2). "Do not love the world or the things in the world" (I John 2:14), "Come out from them and be separate from them" (II Corinthians 6:17), and the words from Jesus' prayer for His followers that "they are not of the world even as I am not of the

world" (John 17:16).

For many of our generation, however, that separate setting is past. It was the pattern for the greater part of Mennonite history, but ours is different. In part the change may have been inevitable, but to an extent it also came out of the deliberate decision of many individuals. People decided to leave. The strong attraction of the economic, educational and social opportunities of the larger society was supported by the feeling that in some aspects the teaching about being separate had been worn out, that it had become legalistic and concerned with little things, and allowed others to become arrogant and self-righteous. Whatever the reasons our life changed, We learned a new language, started farming in a bigger way, went into business, sought university degrees, joined the professions, built "modern" homes and churches, and organized our religious life in a much more elaborate way.

But along with this change in our way of life, came an equally important change of heart. Where once we had felt that to be right with God, we had to be separate, now we developed a strong desire to be well-adjusted and to become recognized by the larger society. We wanted to be measured by its yardstick and to be counted successful. There was a general, if not always a conscious struggle for recognition. Frank Epp, with his broad knowledge of Mennonite history in Canada writes that Mennonites struggled for "social recognition by their fellow Canadians and spiritual recognition by other Christians."[4] And the really significant thing about it is that it seems not to have worked out. The effort and its failure are seen in the way Epp describes certain aspects. He says,

> Just when we had made the adjustment to the city, the city was no

> longer being recognized as the essential locus of the good life...Just when we had completed, more or less, a most difficult language transition from German to English, we were told, on the one hand to adopt French as our second language, and, on the other hand, that multi-lingualism and mutli-culturalism were now the thing in Canada...Just when we had learned to shed some of our peculiar dress and accepted the fashions of the day, like lipstick in the 1950's and miniskirts in the 1960's, they were going out of style and a new generation was calling us back to simplicity, modesty, and integrity of dress...Just when we had learned to draw up constitutions and to do church work through proper bureaucracy and organization, we were confronted by the structures as obstacles and impossible taskmasters...Just when we had finally and fully accepted the salaried ministry of the respectable churches, we found that they were reaching for what we had left behind.5

Where does this leave us? We became restless with the separate life, but it seems that we could not make our peace with conformity either. Is there nothing firm that we can go by? Must the tension go on and on? Can there be no permanent solution?

Let us look more closely at those passages in the Bible which have so often been understood as calling for a separation. The passage from Romans is probably the most common. It says,

> I appeal to you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present

> your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect. (Romans 12:1,2).

The passage from Corinthians says,

> Do not be mismated with unbelievers. For what partnership have righteousness and iniquity? ...For we are the temple of the living God as God said, I will live in them and move among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. Therefore come out from them and be separate from them... (II Corinthians 6:14-17).

The passage in the First Letter of John says,

> Do not love the world or the things in the world. If any one loves the world, love for the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the pride of life, is not of the Father but is of the world. And the world passes away, and the lust of it; but he who does the will of God abides for ever. (I John 2: 15-17).

And the passage from John's Gospel, which is the High Priestly Prayer of our Lord, says,

> I do not pray that thou shouldst take them out of the world, but that thou shouldst keep them from the evil

> one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of of the world. Sanctify them in the truth; thy word is truth. (John 17:15-17).

Each passage states clearly that the followers of Christ are not to be at one with the world. They are to be somehow separate. But it is just as clear that this is only one-half of the call. The other half is to be transformed by the renewal of our minds, to present ourselves to God, to be His temples, to do His will, and to be sanctified by His truth. The call is not simply to the doing of different things. The call is toward a Source and a Destiny of Life that is above both the form of social separation and that of social conformity. We are called toward a standard of truth that transcends the world. We are called to become temples that are eternal, and to know a promise that those who do the will of God will not be overcome by the changes of social forms.

This does not take us out of the struggle. From that there is no escape. But it does bring in another dimension. It shows that what we may have understood as a call to separation is only one part of the call which can lead us to something firm and sure. It tells us that our struggle is for the true Source of Life, namely Jesus Christ.

No doubt, the struggle to know Him and to follow Him in life will be expressed in particular social forms in particular settings. The New Testament teachings about possessions, about how eagerly we pursue them, how dearly we hold them, and how willingly we share them; the teachings about living and serving other people and believing in them; the teachings about the things to strive for in life; these and other things cannot be lived out except in a social form of one kind or another.

But we need to understand that the social

forms, though important, remain secondary to our effort to live by the Way of our Creator, our Redeemer and our Lord. It is in Him that our scattered emotions can finally be brought together. It is through Him that our lives can receive firm direction. It is from Him that the eternal springs of our personhood flow forth.

Footnotes:

1. As found in J. C. Wenger, "Schleitheim Confession of Faith," *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, Vol. 19, No. 4, 1945, p. 15.

2. John Howard Yoder, *The Original Revolution: Essays on Christian Pacifism*, Scottdale, Pennsylvania, Herald Press, 1971, p. 116ff.

3. Ottawa Mennonite Church, Guiding Principles, as adopted at a meeting of the congregation on June 9, 1974.

4. Frank H. Epp, "The Struggle for Recognition," *Call to Faithfulness: Essays in Canadian Mennonite Studies*, edited by H. Poettcker and R. A. Regehr, Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canadian Mennonite Bible College, 1972, p. 169.

5. *Ibid.*,p. 171.

## *GOING TO MEETINGS*

*The apostles and the elders were gathered together. . . there had been much debate, . . . (Acts 15:6).*

Going to meetings has long been a problem for me. I find that at meetings I become impatient with people whom I would otherwise enjoy, critical of ideas that I would otherwise easily tolerate, and annoyed with trivia that I might otherwise find amusing. My impatience, my criticism and my annoyance sometimes come out strongly. And so it is that quite often when I go home from meetings, I have a talk with myself and I resolve that at the next meeting my attitude will be different. But so far few substantial changes have taken place.

My problem was re-emphasized for me recently when I attended a five-day national church conference. My late arrival did not help. But when I got there and began to listen to the things that were being said, they seemed so unimportant that I began to wonder whether the meeting was really necessary. Moreover, the people speaking from the platform did not introduce themselves and I did not know them, nor the committees, boards and councils that they represented. They called each other by their first names as if they were members of a small club. The meeting was supposed to evaluate programs and determine long range policies, but I felt like a spectator at a game.

As I might have known, my irritations developed quickly. But since this meeting was to last for five days, it was also a good time to reflect on the problem. In doing so I began to think that it might be appropriate to share some of these reflections with you because many of you also

go to meetings and complaints about meetings are common, regardless of whether they relate to meetings with fellow workers in places of employment, meetings with fellow students in schools, meetings with groups in communities, or meetings with fellow members of our church.

My thoughts led to three guidelines. The first is, let us be more selective about meetings. Is it necessary to attend so many meetings? Are we going to too many? Going to meetings should not become central in our lives. Indeed they cannot be central if we are to remain healthy. They have to be kept in second place. And to know what is secondary we have to have a sense of what is central. We need to cultivate that which is central. One way in which Jesus did this was by spending time alone. Once He went into the desert for forty days; at other times He left the crowds to be alone; sometimes He actually ran away from them, even from His disciples. He spent much time in private prayer. He knew what was central and what was secondary.

Some poets have likened our lives to the way rivers always flow out from the land masses into the seas; they start from somewhere in the mountains; they grow as they go; somehow they find their way from the land to an ocean. It is never the other way around. Our lives too start from somewhere and flow out into the ocean of people and affairs. And this is as it should be. But we need to have a sense of where we start, of what the Source of Life really is for us; and if the ocean of people and affairs becomes so great that it begins to flood the land and covers even our sense of the Source, then perhaps there is something wrong with our order of things; then maybe we are doing too many things.

It is often said that our society is too individualistic. If this criticism refers to the selfish disregard for the needs and rights of other people

then it is legitimate. But if individualism means getting to know the centre of our lives and drinking personally from the Living Water that Christ offers, then we need more of it. And for that kind of individuality to grow, we may need to guard against too many social activities.

Let us not allow our egos, or even our sense of duty to draw us into so many meetings and committees and organizations that we lose the sense of where the true value of life comes from. Jesus could have received more honour and prestige if He had accepted more social positions. At one point a crowd wanted to make Him King. But He ran away into the desert. He knew that the true Source and Destiny of His life should not be compromised in this way.

This guideline of not going to too many meetings also says something to those who organize meetings. Do not pressure people too much. If people say no, accept it. Try to respect their sense of what is central and what is secondary in their lives. If that means that some committees do not work and some meetings remain unattended, then perhaps that is the way it has to be.

The second guideline that I would like to offer is, let us assess the importance of meetings correctly. After we have looked at the place of meetings in our order of things and perhaps decided to cut out a few of them, there will still be some that have to be attended. Let us not become too cynical about them. Let us recognize and accept their importance.

The Bible, which serves as our guide on so many things, also says quite a lot about the importance of meetings. We may be surprised at this. But we should not be, considering that it is in many ways an account of human life. When Moses led the Israelites through the desert, there were all kinds of meetings: meetings with the

elders of the tribes, meetings with the advisers whom he had appointed, and meetings with the whole multitude of people. They made laws and regulations for their whole way of life. Things did not always go smoothly. The people grumbled a lot. The elders and advisers were not always helpful. Moses too became very frustrated and discouraged at times. But he stayed with it. And those immortal events of leaving a land of captivity and going to "a land of milk and honey" took place. They have inspired millions, and meetings were an essential part of them.

Later when the Israelites were in the new land, the tribal elders had many meetings to deal with their problems. With time the external threats became serious. This led them to ask that a King be appointed over them. A King, they believed, would help them to organize their defences. They went to Samuel, the religious leader, and asked him to appoint a king. But Samuel was not eager to do so. He said that an earthly King was likely to become very oppressive, imposing heavy taxes upon them and taking their young off to fight wars. He argued with the elders at length, but eventually he gave in and appointed King Saul. Today we would call those negotiations a constitutional conference.

Unfortunately the Kings were not able to solve all the problems and the nation was eventually taken into captivity. Years later, when the people began to return, there were meetings about whether to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem and how to go about it. Today we would call them labour meetings. They were long and drawn out. There was much division but one faction finally went ahead and the job got done.

We might also note that during Jesus' ministry He had meetings with His disciples. They seemed slow to understand what He was all about; they were concerned about who would be the greatest

in the Kingdom and who would sit at his right hand in glory. If ever anyone had reason to be impatient at meetings it was Jesus. Sometimes he was impatient. Still, He used those very disciples in the building of His church. We can also read of many other meetings in the New Testament church, and in the later history of the church. There was vigorous debate; differences were often strongly expressed. But they led to some good things.

This is a long history of meetings, 3,000 years long. They were often difficult meetings; meetings where jealousies flared, and pettiness was common. Still they served as vehicles for something good; they became instruments that God used to do His work in the world. There is a little poem, "God has no hands but our hands, no feet but our feet, no voice but our voice...," the point being that we should use them wisely. The same holds for meetings. Maybe we can cut down on the number of meetings that we go to but some meetings will have to be attended and it may be that they will be used by God for His ongoing work in the world.

Thirdly, if meetings are instruments for God's work, then surely we can give ourselves to them more fully and freely. Going to meetings, however ordinary and mundane they may be, can then be an opportunity to serve as an instrument for God's work. Preparing ourselves for them and doing our homework may be an exercise in devotion. Using our imagination to develop the opportunities and to solve the problems will be an expression of our faith. Listening to the ideas of others will come from our recognition that each person is created in the image of God and will have something to contribute to His Kingdom. Accepting criticism will come out of the humility which knows no one has a monopoly on good ideas.

Each particular thing that a person does reflects in some way his or her general attitude to life. That holds alsofor how one appr to life. That holds also for how one approaches meetings. One's impatience with the people at meetings, one's cynicism about the items on the agenda, one's tendency to play games and refuse to "zero-in" on what's important—all these things reflect something more general in our lives. But so too do the imagination that we bring to meetings, the willingness with which we listen to others, and the vigor with which we work at things. These things also reflect something about our commitment to the Author of all life.

Let us be careful not to become involved in too many meetings. Let us be selective about what meetings we go to. Let us not allow our meetings to crowd out our sense of the True Source of Life. But let us also recognize that meetings can be important, that they can be a means for the work of God in the world, even if they are difficult, even if the decisions are not unanimous. Let us give ourselves to them imaginatively with power and in humility.

## *SOME LARGER DIMENSIONS OF REBIRTH*

*. . . unless one is born of water and of the Spirit he cannot enter the Kingdom of God. . . (John 3:5).*

*Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; . . . I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God. (Revelation 21:1,2).*

The word, rebirth, is important in the Christian vocabulary of our time. It comes from the encounter of Nicodemus with Jesus recorded in the Gospel of John (John 3). It has always had a place in our understanding of the Christian gospel. But it has never been used as widely as it is today. Some surveys indicate that perhaps a third of North American people refer to a rebirth experience as the basis for their Christian life. Some talk about it with pride. Books with the "Born Again" title become best sellers. Mass evangelists who call on individuals to be born again are being heard by more and more people.

Many of us probably have mixed feelings about these developments. We are grateful that so many people seem to be open to the Spirit of God. Some of the stories of people whose lives have been transformed are truly inspiring. But sometimes the idea is used in ways that appear narrow and superficial. For this reason, it seems worthwhile to make an attempt to point out some larger dimensions of rebirth.

We can begin by noting its broad biblical base. It goes far beyond the story of Nicodemus. Even the Old Testament has many pictures of rebirth.

The story of Noah is about a rebirth. There is a new beginning. The Genesis account tells us

that after creation mankind had become wicked, corrupt and violent. God wanted to start over.

The calling of Abraham also signifies a new beginning. After the period of Noah, mankind had again become proud and arrogant. This is shown especially in the attempt at Babel to build a tower up to the heavens. God wanted to start over by calling to himself a people to whom he would have a special relationship and through whom He would be able to reveal Himself to the world.

The move to Canaan several centuries later was a new beginning too. During the years of slavery God's covenant with Abraham probably became little more than a faint memory in the minds of the people. But with the promise of land and with leaders like Moses and Joshua, there could be a new beginning.

The unity that David brought, was also like a new start. In the generations since coming to the land, the people had become weak, fragmented and discouraged. David brought a new strength and unity, symbolized in the Temple and the Monarchy, and this was like a new start for the people.

Centuries later, the prophets again brought a new beginning. At least they called for one. They saw that religion had become shallow and superficial, used as a cover-up for much unrighteousness. They wanted the people to become more fully obedient and to turn with their whole lives to the true ways of God.

In a sense the laws of the Jubilee were to ensure new beginnings. They required, among other things, that every seven years debts should be cancelled and every fifty years, land should be returned to its original owners, servants should be freed and people should go back to their families.

The inequalities that had developed were to be erased so that people could start over (Leviticus 25).

Perhaps the most powerful picture of all is the vision of Ezekiel, looking at a valley full of dry bones and feeling called to prophesy to them and seeing them take on flesh and breath and life (Ezekiel 37).

These and the many other stories, Biblical as well as non-Biblical, carry a strong message that life can start over, that there can be new beginnings, that there is always a possibility of redemption, and that there are good reasons for having faith and hope. They make it virtually impossible not to believe in rebirth.

A second dimension of rebirth is that it may take more than an instant of time. It may be slow and gradual. In a way it is a life-time experience. Admittedly, for some it is very sudden. Among those for whom it has been sudden are St. Paul and Martin Luther. But for many others, including people in the Bible, it is not that way.

Some months ago I was led to think about this quite personally. While attending a church committee meeting, certain differences were expressed strongly. One person suggested that perhaps we would rediscover our unity if each one would talk about his conversion experience. The suggestion was not picked up, but over the next few days I wondered to myself what I would have said if the idea had been pursued. I came to the conclusion that perhaps the best response would have been to tell my life story in summary form, stating at the end that my conversion was not yet complete, that much remained to be done, and that hopefully, God would continue to work on me.

This is not to say that one cannot point to

some special times; times when one sensed in fear the righteousness of God; times when certain basic decisions had to be made; time of unusual grace when deep insights were received and curtains lifted. But on the whole, I would identify with the words of Jean Vanier. He writes,

> Being reborn in Jesus is not so rapid for many of us. It is a quiet, gentle growth, like the growth of the child in the womb of his mother and like the gradual growth in knowledge, affection, physical strength and understanding after birth. The healing power of the Spirit is a quiet, gentle power. He makes die in us all the fears, the desire to possess, or to destroy, the hurts and the frustrations, all the power which wants to dominate. There is a growth in the power of listening, the power of compassion, of patience, of learning to wait for the hour of God. 1

I am tempted to carry this idea one step further and to say that not only can rebirth be slow, but that sometimes people are not even aware of it. I have often wondered about Jesus's description of the judgment where some are sent to the eternal fire because they had not given food to the hungry, or drink to the thirsty, or welcomed the stranger, or clothed the naked, or visited those in prison; and where others are invited to inherit the Kingdom because they had been faithful in these areas (Matthew 25).

The really striking thing is that this latter group was so surprised. They did not even know that they had done these things for the Lord. They were not even aware of their own acts. We should not make too much of this because it is important to confess Jesus Christ as Saviour and

Lord. But this story does tell us, I believe, that in true rebirth one is no longer the centre of one's life; one is not so conscious of the things one does; one receives the grace to somehow put one's self aside.

A third dimension of rebirth is that it goes beyond happiness to a deep awareness of others. The search for happiness is strong among North Americans. Some philosophers say that all human beings seek happiness. Perhaps that is so. But our mass media advertising makes it look as if it is our only concern. It is no wonder, then, that preachers sometimes sound like commercial salesmen, and that the gospel, like certain liquors, cosmetics or cars, is guaranteed to bring instant happiness.

In reflecting on this, I am struck by the contrast of the Old Colony Mennonite Church in which I grew up. In the preaching there, people were called on to walk on the straight and narrow way, but it was described as a difficult, almost sorrowful task. It required one's full attention, day in and day out, and even then one was bound to fail repeatedly. One would have to return again and again to the throne of God for grace and forgiveness.

It is so different from the preaching which promises a life-time of perfect happiness for a simple one-time commitment. Most of us probably think that "long-faced Christianity" is a wrong interpretation of the Gospel. But is it any less wrong than the "instant happiness Christianity? " Can we describe Jesus as a happy person? And what about Luther and Menno Simons and Moses and Jeremiah? When we look at these people, we see, not a grinning self-satisfied happiness, but a spirituality that feels the suffering in the world deeply. They felt the wounds. They suffered with others.

Recently, an MCC volunteer who had worked in Bolivia, made some observations that relate to this in a profound way. He told of some high-powered evangelists who had come through the rural village where he had lived. Some of the converts that they had gained, he said, had become so taken up with their own experience that they had become detached from the community. They had become less loving rather than more loving, he said. He called for a new understanding of spirituality, one like that portrayed in the well-known prayer of St. Francis which speaks of becoming an instrument for God, bringing peace, hope and love to others.

A fourth dimension of rebirth is that it goes beyond the personal and includes the social as well. This can be seen clearly in the writings of St. Paul about the law. He saw a tendency among the Christians to become enslaved to laws. These could be either the Mosaic laws with their dietary restrictions and circumcision requirements, or the laws which rise out of human nature, out of one's ego, and which become just as enslaving. Paul wanted the people to understand that the Christian life was more than the fulfilling of laws, that Christ was calling them to a deeper reality, namely that of living in the Spirit and bearing its fruit.

Just as Paul talks about the personal life in the Spirit that goes beyond the law, so he says that in social life Christ has broken down the walls between the Jews and Gentiles. It was a big question in the early church whether the Gentiles, too, could be Christian, and, if so, then on what terms. Jesus and His apostles had been Jewish and in a way Christianity looked like a Jewish movement. But Paul felt especially called to take the message to the Gentiles. He believed that Christ had brought peace between Jews and Gentiles and had created out of them a new people. In his letter to the Ephesians he says, .

> You Gentiles by birth...were foreigners, and did not belong to God's chosen people. You had no part of the covenants, . . . (but) Christ himself has brought us peace, by making the Jews and Gentiles one people. With his own body he broke down the wall that separated them and kept them enemies. . . in order to create out of the two races a single new people in union with himself, . . . It is through Christ that all of us, Jews and Gentiles, are able to come in the one Spirit into the presence of the Father (Ephesians 2:11-18).

Thus Paul combines the personal and the social. He shows that just as Christ brought healing and peace to individual persons, so he also brought healing and peace to the relations between people. Just as Christ breaks down the walls that have grown up within ourselves so that we can see our deeper wholeness, so he also breaks down the walls that have grown up among people so that we can see the deep social unity. The redemption which Christ made possible for individuals is possible in the same way for social relations. And just as we accept divine grace for ourselves as individual persons, so we should also accept the grace that He offers for the relations between people.

A fifth and final dimension of true rebirth really has to do with all of life and with the whole world. We began in the early chapters of Genesis, noting how after creation, mankind had become wicked, corrupt and violent and how the story of Noah was really a new start for all mankind. But things have again become corrupt and broken. We know this in all areas of life. But things will not always be that way. There will yet be a healing of all wounds, a rebirth for all areas of life. It will become the way God origi-

nally meant it to be. In the last chapters of the Bible we read,

> Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; . . . I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God . . . and I heard a great voice from the throne saying, 'Behold the dwelling of God is with men. He will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away!' ...The glory of God is its (the city's) light, ...By its light shall the nations walk; and the Kings of the earth shall bring their glory into it, and its gates shall never be shut by day, —and there shall be no night there; they shall bring into it the glory and honor of the nations. But nothing unclean shall enter it, nor any one who practices abomination or falsehood, ...the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city; also, on either side of the river, the tree of life, yielding its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations (Revelations 21:1-22:4 in parts).

The idea of rebirth grows out of the deepest and broadest truths of life. It is at work in us as individuals, in our social life and in our world. The God who gave us life is drawing us to Himself. The God who created the world will bring it to fulfillment. Let us give ourselves "to him

who by the power at work within us is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think." (Ephesians 3:20).

Footnotes:

1. Jean Vanier, *Be Not Afraid*, Toronto, Griffin House, 1975, p. 38.

## *RESPONDING TO THIRD WORLD NEEDS*

*. . . for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came on to me. (Matthew 25:35,36).*

One of the great concerns of our time is the need to respond to the so-called third world. It is an important concern. We cannot avoid it. And we should not try to avoid it. But it can also be very confusing. Sometimes the problems seem so large that we nearly despair. Sometimes it seems that nothing can be done about them anyway.

Since it is so difficult to understand this issue, it may help us to look at it from the perspective of history and to see this particular period as a stage in the long relationship between the civilization of the west and those of the third world. That relationship has gone through many stages and if we trace them over a five hundred year period, we may see some significant trends.

In the late fifteenth century, the character of western Europe was changing in many ways. Man was becoming more active. New ideas appeared on almost every topic. New institutions of learning developed. New forms of commerce took shape. There was a sense of being in charge of the world. People began to travel to other lands. The elaborate structure of power which had woven politics and religion together in a very close way and which had lasted almost a thousand years was breaking up. And with the Protestant Reformation and the Catholic Counter Reformation, Christianity was being expressed in new ways.

The contact with non-western people was one of the many new developments of this period. Explorers like Christopher Columbus and Vasco de Gamma are examples of Europeans discovering other lands and making contacts with other peoples. In the early contacts there were instances of high mutual respect. For example, when the Portuguese explorers came to Africa's Congo River in 1482, they found a people living in an orderly society, having domestic cattle, sheep and chickens, working with metals and weaving some clothing. From our standpoint it might seem primitive but it was not so different from life in Europe at that time. And in that situation the relationship between Europeans and Africans developed almost like that between equals.

As the story unfolds however, such instances of mutual respect were soon lost in a trend of a different kind. In North America the native inhabitants were pushed back to make room for settlers. They were pushed so far back that eventually they had only reserves left. Some of the consequences of this are only now becoming apparent to us. Large parts of Asia were given to commercial companies, like the British East India Company, who, with charters from the Royal Houses in Europe, were free to do in the territories whatever they wanted to. In Africa, a great intercontinental slave trade set in.

The dimensions of that slave trade stagger the mind and heart even today. Over the course of about 300 years, millions and millions of human beings were taken from Africa to North and South America and sold as labourers in the plantations run by European"Christians". They were captured by the cruelest of methods. Sometimes villages would be set on fire and the people taken as they ran out. At other times, members of one tribe would be enticed with manufactured goods from Europe, to capture people from other tribes

and to sell them as slaves. Not surprisingly, this resulted in wars between the tribes. Those who were sold to the inter-continental traders, were shipped across the Atlantic and thousands lost their lives in this voyage.

Of course, there were people who spoke out against it. Among these we see a Mennonite congregation in Germantown, Pennsylvania whose letter in 1688 stands. according to some writers at least, as the first recorded protest against slavery.1 But there were other groups who also took up the struggle against slavery. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries there were large Christian and humanitarian movements against slavery. One by one the governments of Europe began to pass laws against it. Gradually it was stopped.

The story of that anti-slavery movement is inspiring. But it did not solve all the problems. Indeed it contributed to the next stage of the relationship, namely the colonial one. The great missionary-explorer, David Livingstone, walking through central and southern Africa in the mid-nineteenth century, said that the slave trade, the inter-tribal wars brought about in part by that trade, as well as famine and disease, had so reduced the population that its only hope for survival lay in the protection that European administrations could bring.2 Some African tribal chiefs also called for European administrations because, even though the inter-continental slave trade had stopped, considerable internal slave trading was still going on. European administrations, it was believed, would be able to stop this and develop a trade in legitimate goods in its place. Rulers in Europe soon became interested.

In 1885 representatives of fourteen European governments assembled in Berlin for a big conference. It lasted several weeks and during that time they drew lines across the map of Africa and decided who would take which pieces. The fact

that there already were fairly distinct boundaries between the different tribal groups, apparently did not occur to them. Their objectives, included "freedom of trade for all, suppression of the slave trade, and the civilizing of the natives of Africa..."3

Colonial rule did bring protection from some things. It also facilitated the large Christian missionary movement, which although it carried some negative things with it, also resulted in many possitive things. But colonial rule also gave Europeans new opportunities to exploit the continent commercially. In Algeria for example, the land had in the past provided enough food for home consumption. But with the coming of French export, the amount of nourishing food for the native Algerian actually decreased.4

In other parts the exploitation was more ruthless. There was forced labour on large scales. In describing things in the Congo in the several decades before 1910 when it was the personal property of King Leopold of Belgium, one writer says, "If African servants disobeyed their bosses, or if the workers or tribesmen did not deliver their full quotas of rubber and ivory, they had a hand or foot cut off. Their African gangers, to prove their efficiency in enforcing deliveries, would deliver to their white superiors basketloads of human hands."5 So terrible was the King's rule that some years later, Belgium's official commission for the protection of the natives estimated that the population of the Congo had been halved during the time of the King's rule.6

It would be wrong of course to attribute these things to the whole of the colonial era or to all of the colonial powers. When the Belgium government took the Congo away from the King in 1910, some things changed. New agricultural methods and crops were introduced. Elaborate health care programs were set up. Hitherto

unknown educational opportunities became available to thousands of Africans. The colonial era was not all bad, although the control of things remained firmly in European hands.

But the colonial period, like the preceding ones, eventually ended. It gave way in what is generally known as the independence movement. Writers have speculated about the causes of this movement. Some attribute it to the natural dislike of one racial group to be ruled by another. Some attribute it to the Christian teaching communicated in the thousands of missionary schools that to God every human being is infinitely precious and that none is better than another. One missionary on being expelled from Portuguese Angola illustrated this well when he said that the Portuguese rulers had sensed that the Christian gospel was dynamite when translated in the vernacular of a suppressed, despised and exploited people. Other writers have attributed the independence movement to ideas generated by World War II. There is a story of one British officer explaining to an African why Hitler had to be put down. He said, "It is not good for one tribe to rule another. Each tribe must rule itself. That's only fair. A German must rule Germans, an Italian, Italians and a Frenchman, French people."7 The African drew his own conclusions fairly quickly.

Whatever its causes, the independence movement changed the face of the globe. Instead of a few large empires with imperial offices in the countries of Europe and colonies in all parts of the world, there are now about 150 politically independent countries. But it has not solved all the problems. In fact some of the new governments have become more oppressive and brutal than the colonial ones were.

Whatever their character, it is with these independent countries that the question of foreign

aid, which has been on the public agenda for two decades now, is concerned. With political independence, their needs became more obvious and the efforts to respond have been many. In virtually every western country, there are now dozens, if not hundreds of agencies trying to respond to those needs. Church agencies, secular agencies, governmental departments and international organizations have been set up. They promote education, medical care, road construction, and agricultural development. Thousands of people have gone out to serve, many on a voluntary basis. There has been much enthusiasm. Much good has been done. But gradually some serious criticisms have also been made.

Some of the people who have gone out, most convinced that they could solve the problems, have come back as hardened cynics. Among the criticisms are: that the education work has trained people for life in western countries, and has thus made them less useful in their own setting; that by setting up western style social institutions they will always need outside help to operate them; that when our governments give them money it is most often given on the condition that they use it to buy things in our own countries, thus tying them into our economy with machinery that is often ill-suited to their setting; that western companies buy large pieces of land in third world countries to grow crops for the market in western countries, thus in effect taking land away from small local farmers and channeling food production away from local needs; that the big powers of the world pressure third world governments to line up in the international power struggles, then supply them with weaponry and entice them to fight little wars in order to adjust and maintain the balance between the big powers.

With all these criticisms it is no wonder that we find things confusing. Can the history of the past 500 years help us to understand the present

situation? I believe it can. I believe it shows that somehow western civilization allowed for the growth of an enormous arrogance toward the people of other civilizations. It was a thorough going pride. There was a feeling that westerners had the right to take over. The slave trade and the economic exploitation reflected the belief that people from other civilizations could be used as tools for the benefit of western people. The civilizing mission reflected the belief that the west had the answers to whatever problems they might have. And to a considerable extent the Christian missionary movement was part of this.

It is hard to understand this historic western mentality. Some have described it with the words "God, Gold and Glory," thereby combining the political yearning for the glory of empire, the commercial yearning for economic wealth and the religious movement to spread the western understanding of Christianity. It is a simple phrase with considerable truth. It raises the question, does the modern foreign aid movement rise out of a similar motivation? Is it merely one more effort to mold others into our image instead of helping them to respond to the image of their creator? Are we really trying to listen and to understand?

What is true about the dynamics of our civilization is also true about the individual heart. When something promotes our glory and our economic well-being, then we are soon persuaded that it is also God's will. But fortunately there is more. There is, deep within each person, a longing for that which is just and pure and true. It is to this deeper motivation that we must respond. It will help us to see other people as sisters and brothers. It will help us to see their needs, be they for food, shelter and clothing or right teaching for their minds and true nurture for their spirits.

Let us not despair. Even though some terrible things have taken place, not everything is bad. There is a basis for responding to third world needs. Let us go forth strongly and imaginatively, using whatever agencies or channels may seem appropriate, knowing that some mistakes will be made, but doing the best we can. It is a challenge for our generation. It is an opportunity to fulfill in part the old prayer of St. Francis: Lord, make me an instrument of thy peace; where there is hatred, let me sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; and where there is sadness, joy. O Divine Master, grant that I may seek not so much to be consoled as to console, to be understood as to understand, to be loved as to love; for it is in giving that we receive, it is in pardoning that we are pardoned, it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.

Footnotes:

1. Albert P. Blaustein and Robert L. Zangrando (ed.), *Civil Rights and the American Negro: A Documentary History*, New York, Trident, 1968, p. 10.

2. As found in Sir Alan Burns, *In Defense of Colonies*, London, George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1957, p. 46.

3. Ndataningi Sithole, *African Nationalism*, Cape Town, South Africa, Oxford University Press, 1959, p. 65.

4. Basil Davidson, *Which Way Africa: The Search for a New Society*, London, Penguin African Library, 1964, p. 39.

5. Ritchie Calder, *Agony of the Congo*, London, Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1961, p. 12.

6. Basil Davidson, *op. cit.*, p. 37.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 59.

## *FOR REMEMBRANCE DAY*

*Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned. . . (Isaiah 40:1,2).*

The eleventh day of November is a day for remembering. It has been set aside by law to remember the people who suffered and died in the wars that our nation has been involved in, as well as the purpose for which they gave themselves. To help people remember, there will be ceremonies in schools, military bases, legislative buildings and other public places in the cities, towns and villages of our land. As Mennonites, we will again be asking ourselves, how shall we approach this. For four hundred and fifty years our church has stood resolutely against participation in wars. Where does that leave us with these Remembrance Day ceremonies? Shall we let them pass by without notice? Or are there some things for us to remember?

I believe there are a number of things that we should remember. There is, first, the magnitude of the suffering that has resulted from wars. There have been so many wars. Even if we look only at the well-known wars from our time, we soon have a long list. There are the two world wars, the revolution in Russia, the conflicts in Hungary, Poland and other parts of central Europe. In Africa, there was the Mau Mau uprising in Kenya, the war in the Congo following its independence in 1960, the civil wars in Algeria. Nigeria and the Sudan, the Congo rebellion in 1964, the long anti-colonial wars in Mozambique and Angola and now the fighting in southern Africa. In Asia, there was the Vietnam war involving Cambodia and Laos as well, the civil war in China, the war in

Korea, the several wars between India and Pakistan and the war which separated Bangladesh from Pakistan. Latin America has also had its wars. And in the Middle-East, the wars seem never to stop. Others could be added to this list but surely this is enough for some sober reflection.

The magnitude of the suffering would become even clearer if we counted all the people who have been killed or injured. Undoubtedly the figure would run into millions. And the suffering goes far beyond the people who are hurt physically. Each person comes from a family, a home and a community. When a soldier dies, it is not only a soldier lost to a commander, but often, also a father lost to a child, a husband lost to a wife, a son lost to a parent, and a member lost to a community.

The suffering also extends beyond the time of the fighting. Many wounds are carried for years, even decades, after the guns have become silent. This became clear to me when I worked for two summers on the construction of the South Saskatchewan River Dam. Many of the men who came to work there had fought in World War II. Although almost twenty years had passed, they were still unable to adjust to ordinary vocational, family and community life. It was if their experience in the war had been so intense that their whole identity was wrapped up in it. Their later experiences were as nothing in comparison to those in the war.

These men came to the dam because the work was easily learned and the wages were high. They worked hard during the day and at night they told stories—stories of courage and glory in battle and stories of disappointment and bitterness for receiving too little recognition and gratitude from the society for which they had fought.

They rarely stayed long. After a few weeks, they would move on to something else.

It seemed as if these men could not settle down. The war had shaken them too deeply. Their spirits were wounded. And their fragmented vocations, their forgotten communities and their broken and scattered families told of a war that had not really ended, of wounds that had not healed, and of suffering that went on and on. One began to appreciate anew the words of Isaiah, "Comfort, comfort my people. . . Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended. . ." (Isaiah 40:1,2).

If we pause on this Remembrance Day to reflect on the great suffering that has resulted from the wars of our time, then we will probably be led as a second step to reflect on the things and the attitudes that support war. In this again, the men at the South Saskatchewan River Dam can be instructive. To them war represented bravery, strength, courage, loyalty, heroism, comradeship, self-sacrifice, and many other things that are good. They felt, it seemed, that the war had given them an opportunity to express their best qualities. And they remained so taken up with it, that the simple life of peacetime seemed like a big "come-down". They could not accept it.

We probably think of these men as unusual. But are they? I do not think so. There are a number of aspects of our way of life which suggest that we too believe that war brings out the best and that peaceful living is a big "come-down". Consider the matter of technology. Technological inventions are very important to our lives. We would have great difficulty living without them. But is it not true that some of the greatest strides in technological progress have been made in war time? Is it not true that the automotive and aircraft industries received

their initial push in World War I when governments saw the military potential of these new inventions and made available the large sums of money to develop them? Is it not true that synthetic rubber, which is so common now, was manufactured mainly because of the scarcity of genuine rubber during World War II? Is it not true that ocean-going ships owe many improvements to the inventions of war? Is it not true that even now, one of the most common arguments why Canada should have its own military armaments industry, is the technological sophistication that it brings to other industries?

Consider next the political identity of countries. One of the oft-stated points in our history classes is that Canada gained recognition as an independent country because of her good performance in World War I. Before then, our external affairs were handled by the British government. After that war, this responsibility was transferred to Ottawa. The war had been the way to nationhood for Canada. For our great neighbour to the south the situation is similar. Their national identity is rooted deeply in their war of independence. Similarly, the political identity of the Soviet Union is tied up with the October Revolution of 1917, and that of China in the so-called Long March and People's Revolution of 1949. Some African countries also fought for their independence and even those who did not have wars are nevertheless indebted to World War II for stimulating the idea of political independence. More illustrations could be noted. But this may be enough to show that the proud political identities of many countries are rooted in wars.

We could also consider the areas of medicine, education and general social morality. In medicine, several important vaccines for tropical diseases were first manufactured to meet the needs of war. The development of artificial limbs is similar. In education, a number of leading

North American universities are indebted to defence departments for the bulk of their research programmes. And in social morality, we have a peculiar way of thinking that the virtues of courage, bravery, self-sacrifice and loyalty, as typified in the soldier, are superior to those of "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control", which, in the New Testament are described as fruits of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22).

All these things suggest that we are not so different from the men at the South Saskatchewan River Dam. Their individual identities remain wrapped up in their war experience. Our social and political identities are not much better. Those men felt that the war had brought out the best in them. We too value its products. We look at those men and see brokenness in their family, vocational and community lives. Somehow, we do not see our own brokeness.

If we use this day of remembrance to reflect on the things and the attitudes that support war, if we recognize how very involved we are, then surely, we will be led as a third step to repentance and to a new direction for life. But that is a big task. What does repentance mean for issues so large and complex? Is it possible to cultivate a political identity that is not dependent on war, to stimulate the development of the technology and medicine that we need without building the machinery of war, to nurture a social morality that is truly Christian? I feel incapable of dealing with these big questions at this time. But I would like to share a few brief stories of where people have actually tried to deal with conflicts in a different way.

One story comes from the 1920s. World War I had ended. The treaty required Germany to make large reparation payments to France. The Germans, so involved with rebuilding their coun-

try, fell behind in these payments. The French government became impatient and so it sent some 60,000 troops into Germany's Ruhr Valley to take over the mines and factories. The German people had no guns with which to fight back, but they were determined not to give in and they made a very impressive non-violent resistance. One account says,

> The French were received in silence. . . The offices of the mining syndicates were closed, the great coke and blast furnaces remained idle, the shops of Essen were barred and shuttered and the blinds of every window drawn against the invaders. Railwaymen refused to carry coal from France, policemen refused to. . . salute French officers. . . restaurant proprietors refused to serve French soldiers and the girls refused to speak to them.1

This continued for nearly a year. And it was not without suffering. Leaders were taken to prison, striking workmen were whipped and some 140,000 citizens were evicted from their homes for the crime of refusing to obey the orders of the French military. But there was practically no bloodshed. And their courage, devotion, loyalty, and perseverance gained them most of their objective.

Another story comes from the Norwegian resistance to Nazi occupation in World War II. This was led in part by the church. The Nazis had appointed a new church hierarchy, but the local pastors, with the support of their people, ignored the new hierarchy. The Nazis asked that certain of their doctrines be taught in schools but the teachers refused. The workmen went on strike from time to time and the people as a whole, while "formally correct" in their relations

with the soldiers, let it be known that in their capacity as soldiers they were not welcome. This continued for some three years. After that, some began to cooperate with the occupying forces and others resorted to violent resistance.2 Nevertheless, that this could go on for three years and that there could be such widespread cooperation makes one wonder about all the other things that might also be possible.

A third story comes from a man who was my teacher a few years ago. He had held a senior position with the British government in Africa in the mid 1960s. During the course of his work he had become aware of a deterioration in the relations between the central government of Nigeria and its eastern province, later known as Biafra. It was not really in his area of work, but he decided to look into the situation. He went to visit the respective leaders. They received him, but it took him three visits to each one before enough trust was built up so that plans for a meeting between them could be made. Eventually a meeting took place, and an agreement was worked out that both sides felt they could live with. Unfortunately, because the leader of the central government became seriously ill on his way home from that meeting, his colleagues made the report to the people. But his colleagues had opposed the agreeement so they denounced it publicly. When the leader of the eastern province heard this, he said, "I knew it all the time. The people from the central government cannot be trusted." With that he made a declaration of independence for his province and soon a tragic three-year civil war was underway.3

These stories do not prove that all conflicts can be solved peacefully. But they suggest that probably not all wars have to take place. Let us not accept too quickly the pessimistic view that wars are inevitable and that nothing can be done about them anyway.

If we use stories like these to build a new outlook on life,and if we want to pursue that seriously, then we should also become more understanding of the social, economic, political, and psychological forces that underlie conflict situations. We should make more imaginative efforts to find channels through which these forces can be expressed in peaceful and wholesome ways. We should be more willing to support the efforts of others to find such channels, even when they appear secular and ordinary.

But more than this, we will need to "hunger and thirst for righteousness", as Jesus puts it in the Sermon on the Mount. Without a sense of the righteousness and justice that comes from God, even non-violent methods can become misdirected and selfish, and can lead to unjust results.

With these things in mind, let us join our fellow countrymen in remembering; let us remember those who have suffered and those who continue to suffer from the wounds of war, not only in our country but around the world; let us recognize that we remain dependent on war in many ways; let us seek ways of true and genuine repentance; let us remember that our Lord has called us to be peacemakers and let us carry out this calling intelligently and in faith.

Footnotes:

1. Arthur Bryant, *Unfinished Victory*, London, Macmillan and Co., Ltd., 1940, p. 124, as found in *In Place of War*, prepared by American Friends Service Committee, published in New York by Grossman Publishers in 1967, p. 38.

2. Arthur Bryant, *op.cit.*, p. 125.

3. As recounted by Malcolm MacDonald to a group of students at Carleton University's School

of International Affairs in Ottawa, Canada in the spring of 1970.

## *THE SURPRISE AND JOY OF CHURCH MEMBERSHIP*

*. . . human history requires a people structured as a community to stand for life. . .; Men must be encouraged to believe in life because we are constantly tempted to lose faith in it. . . and keep ourselves insulated from God. Anthony Padovano.*

When people come and inquire about church membership, I find myself somewhat surprised. At the same time, it is a joy to respond to such inquiries. Such inquiries are not uncommon and one responds in various ways. One tries to explore the reasons why the persons are seeking membership, what they expect from the church and what their faith and outlook on life are based on. Then there is also our rule "that systematic instruction in the fundamental principles of the Christian faith is desirable before acceptance into church membership" and in appropriate situations one tries to provide some of that. In some cases the discussions lead to a reconsideration and a withdrawal of the application for membership. But in most cases it goes forward and it is a joy to make the recommendation that the persons be accepted.

Still, the element of surprise remains. I have been with this work for several years, but it has not gone away. Indeed, it seems to be increasing. In part the surprise comes from the fact that people would want to join this particular church. I have not had the opportunity to visit many other churches in this city but I would expect that there are churches where the sermons are better, the liturgy richer, the vision clearer, the choirs bigger and the programs able to respond to the needs of more people. But then, in all modesty, there are probably some attractive things

about our church too: our group is small; we know each other; a variety of persons speak from our pulpit; certain perspectives of our theology are unique. And so, when one considers these things altogether, this part of the surprise tends to go away.

The larger part of the surprise, which does not go away so quickly, relates not to our church in particular, but to any Christian church. How is it that there are still people who want to join a church? Joining a church means joining people and in the work of a church all the frailties of human nature come into play. In spite of continual preaching about repentance, our selfishness and pettiness and arrogance and fearfulness, all come out. And in a church setting they often come out wrapped in a religious halo. Is it not easier and maybe even better to stay by oneself, to worship and meditate in private, to live one's personal life as well as one can and not be bothered with other people?

Many of us probably know persons who have chosen this way. They may come to a church from time to time. They may read the Bible with interest and keep up with theological and religious writing. They probably long for opportunities to share religious and spiritual insights. But they cannot see themselves joining a church. They may respect the church. They may feel inspired by its ancient liturgy, its long tradition, and its profound teaching and may even wish that they could be part of it. But when they come close to the life of a church, they find it so superficial and shallow that they cannot in good conscience join.

Some of these people are worthy of admiration. The best of them feel the deep inner harmony of life and it hurts them when they come close to people who do not feel it. They need to

be alone. They need to spend time in silence. Father Anthony Padovano has written about this need for silence in a very moving way. He says,

> "Silence happens to a person because of what life does to him. There are times when words destroy the interior harmony of a person. The rhythm of human development sometimes needs silence rather than speech. The wonder of life makes us silent. . . There is a mystery to ourselves, a mystery which eludes all our talking to one another, a mystery which envelopes us at moments and makes us pause in surprise and contemplation. To talk at such moments is to lose something of ourselves. . . God is dead for men who do not know how to be silent and who therefore, fail to appreciat the wonder-filled experience of being alive."1

The church should nourish this awareness of life's harmony. It should be a place for it to grow. But often the words spoken in a church and the atmosphere of its gatherings serve to undermine and destroy it instead. There must be many people who, precisely for this reason, stay away. Indeed, it surprises me that there still are some people who not only attend but seek membership.

There is one other group of persons, broadly speaking, who surprise me when they seek membership. They are the ones who have a broad vision of the needs of the world, who know the wars, the famines and the oppressive structures that burden the lives of so many people, and who have an idea of what ought to be done. Will they be able to live with the church? Will they not

become impatient with the church, with the complications that so often hinder its efforts, with its limited vision, and with its seeming inability to harness its enormous resources. When those who sense the urgency of the situation and who have an imagination for what ought to be done, still come and seek membership in a Christian church, then I am surprised almost to the point of bewilderment.

And so, my first response to those who inquire about church membership is usually quite cautious. To some I feel like saying, "Would it not be better if you joined some big organization or action movement that really gets things done?" To others I feel like saying, "Would it not be better if you sought out a more meditative group where your inner awareness of the Spirit can flourish?" Are they not all expecting more from the church than it will give? Will it not just be disappointing in the long run?

I wish now, and not only for the sake of a balanced sermon, that I could tell you that other things soon come to mind which overcome the surprise and bewilderment and change them to joy. But it is only in part that I can do so. To the extent that this change takes place, it begins by sensing that there is something in the great visions of the way the world might be, and in the perfect harmonies sensed in silence, that yearns for expression. Nowhere is this yearning expressed more clearly than in the early preaching of Peter, the apostle of Jesus. After the crucifixion the apostles were very downhearted. But they regrouped themselves and after the Pentecost experience they began to preach. They preached with conviction and power and when Peter was asked what this was all about he said, ". . . we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard" (Acts 4:20).

In reality, Peter was preaching much more

than the actual events of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus that he had seen and heard. It was the meaning of these events that had overwhelmed him and it was this that he was preaching. Though there were many obstacles it was simply not possible for him to keep quiet.

The story of the great Russian writer, Solzhenitsyn, is similar in some ways. Recently I was given the speech that he prepared for the reception of his Nobel prize for literature. He, like Peter, I believe, feels compelled to proclaim the meaning of the things that he has seen and heard. He talks especially about the context within which events have to be understood. He talks about it as a higher harmony of life, as a common spirit, as a heartfelt unity in which the eternal themes of truth, beauty, goodness and justice find their place. The activities of life have to be understood in terms of this harmony and it has to be proclaimed, he says, because people at both the personal level and the world level need to have some sense of it, or else they will cease altogether to understand each other.

Not only does this higher harmony have to be proclaimed, it somehow demands to be proclaimed. It cannot be held back, he says. Then he describes in a sorrowful way, how forces in his country have tried to stifle the sense of it, how rulers have denied its spiritual nature, how they have pretended that it could be molded and manipulated and how many people have thereby lost the sense of its substance. But it could not be put out completely. They, as prisoners, attained an ever keener sense of it. "In agonizing moments in camp," he says, " in columns of prisoners at night, in the freezing darkness, through which the chain of lanterns shone, there often arose in our throats, something we wanted to shout out to the world."2 He talks of the temptations to himself and others "to retreat, to lose faith in the steadfastness of good, in the indivisibility of

truth."3 But they could not, not completely. It was there and it had to be given expression.

A Mennonite pastor writes about something similar, but at a personal level. Ralph Lebold, in a recent newspaper editorial, talks about the way some simple words of encouragement to one another can help us sense this harmony, this divine spirit and right purpose within ourselves. He says, "As Christians we must recognize the importance of affirmation as a positive ingredient in a Christian community, as a means for spiritual and personal growth. To be affirmed as a person provides a unique resource for developing the emotional and spiritual dimension of our lives."4 Then he talks of some recent experiences where people have given him encouragement and he says, "The net effect has been a deep sense of gratitude to God and others as well as a renewed sense of purpose and meaning for my life. It has helped further to focus my gifts, to lift my spirit. . . most of all it has freed me to love God more deeply and to care more honestly for my neighbour."5

It sounds very ordinary. But the words which Lebold wants us to say at the personal level and those which Solzhenitsyn would like to proclaim to the world, receive their power, I believe, from the same Spirit. They lead to truth, beauty, goodness and justice. They call forth the harmony that lies dormant in persons and in societies and whose author is God.

Tomorrow our country will pause to remember those who died in wars. Mennonites, for four hundred and fifty years, have felt that participation in military efforts is fundamentally wrong. If the ceremonies tomorrow are to bring glory to those efforts then we cannot participate in them. But if they are to remember the suffering and the tragedy of the wars then we do well to pause with our fellow countrymen. We

do well to reflect on the things that lie behind these terrible and ongoing conflicts. In doing so, we will be led ultimately to the fact that men have not yet sensed the true harmony of life or responded to God its author, that we carry too much envy and fear within us and not enough goodness and beauty, and that our political relations instead of being ordered by justice are often the mere balance of egoisms. We need to hear that higher harmony put into words and to see it lived in the world.

That this true harmony of life be lived out among people is even more important than that it be put into words. Father Padovano says that "human history requires a people structured as a community to stand for life. . .; men must be encouraged to believe in life because we are constantly tempted to lose faith in it; we must be reminded of life's sacredness because we continually seek to make it secular and keep ourselves insulated from God. . . "6

The words of St. Paul, in his Letter to the Ephesians, are similar. There he says,

> . . . you are no longer strangers and sojourners, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure is joined together. . . To me though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given. . . to make all men see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things; that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known. . ." (Ephesians 2:19-3:10).

This idea that eternal truths are to be made known to the larger world through a people is evident throughout the Bible. It is there early in the Old Testament when Abraham is called; it is there late in the New Testament when Peter, writing to some of the early Christian churches says, "You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you. . . " (I Peter 2:9). God is seeking a people who will know Him, who will live by His ways and through whom He can bless the world. One of our beloved hymns closes with the prayer, "Kindle in us love's compassion, so that everyone may see, in our fellowship the promise, of the new humanity."7

Formal membership in a Christian Church does not make one part of such a people and the lack of formal membership does not exclude one from it. But the institution of formal membership can help to bring about a clearer expression of the true harmony of life, of the goodness, beauty, justice and right purpose that flow from the Spirit of God and which are meant for all.

That God continues to give to men and women a sense of this true harmony of life, that He continues to bring them together in a church knowing that many within it will repeatedly give way to pettiness, egoism and blindness, and that He continues to build His church, is all part of an ongoing incarnation. God is becoming incarnate in human form. This incarnation is something like the great incarnation at Bethlehem. When it was announced to the shepherds, it came as an overwhelming surprise, but it also brought great joy.

Footnotes:

1. Anthony T. Padovano, *Belief in Human Life*, Paramus, New Jersey, Paulist Press, 1969, p. 60.

2. Alexander Solzhenitsyn, *Nobel Lecture* (Translated from the Russian by F. D. Reeve), New York, Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1972, p. 10.

3. Ibid., p. 27.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 27.

4. Ralph Lebold, "Affirmation: a needed tonic" in *Mennonite Reporter*, Waterloo, Ontario, October 14, 1974, p. 6.

5. *Ibid.*

6. Padovano, *op.cit.*, p. 16.

7. "Heart with Loving Heart United," written by Nikolaus Ludwig von Zinzendorf 1723, translated by Walter Klaassen in 1965, found in *The Mennonite Hymnal*, 1969, Scottdale, Pennsylvania, Herald Press, p. 386.

## *OUR FAITH AND OUR HOPES*

*Let us hold fast the confession of our hope. (Hebrews 10:23-25).*

It has been said, "if you want to know what a person's real faith is you must find out, not what he says he believes, but what he really hopes for."

This is an unusual way of describing what it means to have faith. I find it very thought-provoking. I would like for us to consider it. What are our hopes? What are the things that we hope for?

We probably hope for a measure of personal well-being, for good health, good jobs, adequate income, opportunities to do things that are interesting and worth doing, some friends, a sense of happiness in the communities where we live and so on.

Maybe we hope for very specific things like a university degree, a certain job or promotion, or a particular position in society. Maybe our hopes are more general, for things like peace and justice in the world and food for everyone. Maybe, we rarely reflect on what our hopes are. Maybe we do not hope.

I believe it is important that we learn to hope —in the right way and for the right things. To help us do this let us look at some beautiful pictures of hoping in some very common areas of life. Think of the way parents hope for their children. They imagine things for them. They see potential. When the child is discouraged with homework, the parent does not give up hope that eventually the child will find something that it can do well. When the child tells a lie, the parent does not give up hope that it will eventually learn to tell the truth and that it will stand up for the

truth, and commit its life to the truth. When the child becomes angry and vicious, the parent still has firm hope that someday the child will be a loving person.

Young people also do a lot of hoping. They hope that they will get into the right schools, that they will get the right jobs and that they will meet the right people. They have all kinds of hopes for the way things will be when they leave their parental home. We see hope also in good teachers. They have hopes for their students. They see the potential. They want to build it up.

We see hope portrayed also in Jesus. He hoped for Jerusalem: that instead of killing its prophets it would listen to them; that it would fulfill the vision of truth and righteousness and mercy that they had pointed to; that it would recognize its sons and daughters and make a home for all of its children (Matthew 23:37). Yet, in a way, Jesus recognized that it was not to be, at least not at the time. He began to accept that he too would have to die. But he hoped, "that somehow Jerusalem would hear his death and heed his pain and from his very flesh and blood listen to the Word he sought to speak."1

Do we hear the Word that he is speaking to us? Does God have hopes for us? I believe that he does; that he has hopes for us as individual persons, as a church and as humanity. He hopes that we will seek first of all His Kingdom and his righteousness (Matthew 6:33). He hopes for a world, where people will "beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks" (Isaiah 2:4); where "the wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, and the desert shall rejoice and blossom" (Isaiah 35:1); where "the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped" (Isaiah 35:5). He hopes that from each person there will grow the fruit of the Spirit, namely "love, joy, peace, patience,

kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control" (Galatians 5:22).

Although God hopes these things for us, he knows that most of us do not hope for them very strongly. He knows that we have not learned how to hope for them. He wants to guide us in our hoping. He wants to give us direction. The New Testament carries a number of stories where Jesus directs people in their hoping. Let us look at three such stories.

In one story, a rich young man came to Jesus and asked what he must to to have eternal life (Matthew 19:16-22). This man was not particularly sinful. In fact, it appears that he was an unusually good person. He had kept the commandments. But somehow he knew that he was missing the mark. He asked Jesus, "What still do I lack? " Jesus replied, "If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me." With these words Jesus gave him direction for his life. They set out one central pursuit, but it appears that the young man did not accept it. He walked away. Perhaps his hope for eternal life was not as strong as he had thought.

In another story, Jesus met a man who had been ill for thirty-eight years (John 5:2-9). For a long time he had been sitting by a pool of water which apparently had a peculiar healing power for the person who got into it first on those occasional times when it bubbled. But this man never got into it first. Jesus asked him, "Do you want to be healed? " The man's reply is significant. He did not say yes, in a straight-forward way, although that must surely have been his hope. Instead his words were excuses for not being healed. He talked about the difficulty of getting into the water quickly on those times when it bubbled. Is it not often that way with

us? Yes, we have certain hopes, deep down. But we have built up so many excuses to console ourselves in our failure to reach them that the real hopes are virtually smothered. Perhaps we no longer know what our hopes really are.

In our third story we see Jesus talking to a Samaritan woman at the well near Sychar (John 4:5-26). Jesus asked her for water. As they talked further it became known that she had had five husbands and was now with a sixth, but that he was not a real husband either. Imagine what this woman had gone through. She had given her heart to one after another but always, it seemed, they failed her. Is it not that way with us? We place our hopes on so many things only to discover, again and again, that they do not fulfill our real hopes. Some people become hard and cynical. Others become so torn that their spirits wither and die. That might have happened to this woman. But Jesus offered her living water with the promise that it would become within her a spring welling up to eternal life.

Having hope is somewhat like having a spring of living water. With such a spring, one's life can become like a river which flows quietly, steadily, patiently and confidently. Its origin is somewhere in the hills. Its source is a mystery. But it begins to flow and it cannot be stopped. It always finds a way around obstacles. It can flow through deserts and fertile fields. It can make any number of detours. But eventually it will make its way to the sea.

Hoping is different from wishing. It belongs to reality, not to fantasy. It takes things as they are and sees what they can lead to. But it knows that often they do not lead to the things that they should. It knows disappointment. Yet it believes that disappointments and failures are never final. It believes that the truly important things will somehow prevail. Father Anthony

Padovano has described this with the following words,

> The wonder of life derives from the realization that so few of the really important things go wrong. Most of us suffer distress not in the fact that realities which truly matter go awry but in the frustration of artificial goals, conventional values, arbitrary objectives. This is not to dismiss tragedy but it is to put it into perspective. Few of us need to be reminded that there is terrible pain in life. No man lives long without hurting and bleeding. Almost every man conceals the scars and sometimes the bitterness of a lifetime of injury, rejection, disappointment. This side of life, however, is less than half the story. The tragedies which break our hearts again and again are not more numerous than the healing influences which mend us.2

These are unusual words. Are they really true? Are the healing influences really stronger? It is hard to believe, even for us as religious people. Perhaps we are so taken up with the tragedies and the sorrows and the injustice that we no longer see that some important things are going right. Perhaps we are by nature prone to be taken up with the negative. Do we find a moral satisfaction in dwelling on it? Do we not have the inner freedom to be joyful? Do we truly believe that God is our redeemer? If that is our faith, then we will hope accordingly.

Maybe we find it difficult to see God's redemptive work in the conditions of modern life. Maybe we think that earlier generations found it easier to hope. Their way of life was so different.

Our parents and grandparents lived in smaller communities. They understood them. They knew that there were certain things which they could do and certain things which were clearly beyond their power. Things moved a little more slowly. They had a sense of the gradual development of things. It seems more natural for them to hope. Also, they lived more closely to the land. They planted the grain in the spring and then waited and hoped for a harvest. There was little else to do but wait and hope.

Today we live in a different world. In one sense it is a bigger world. We have much more information coming towards us. Almost every aspect of life in the world is portrayed on television screens. But we do not know what it means. We do not understand it nearly as well as our parents understood life in their communities. We do not see what it can lead to. We do not know what to hope for. For this reason we have become inwardly withdrawn. Our spirits do not reach out. We feel very small.

We feel small also because we make our living by working as small parts in big systems. Often we feel very insignificant, as if our parts mean nothing. Thus we hope for little more than that we will be able to keep our jobs and provide for ourselves. We feel uninvolved in the larger purposes of which our jobs are a part. To think that we should hope for these larger purposes makes little sense to us.

On the other hand, there are those who run the systems. They appear to feel all powerful. They seem to think that they can accomplish whatever they want to and whenever they want to. Thus they do not need to hope either. It makes no more sense for the powerful to hope than for the powerless to hope.

But is there not something false in these views

which people have of themselves? Surely no one is all powerful and no one is completely powerless. I believe there is a much greater interdependence than most people realize. Few of the really important things in life happen just because someone made up his mind that he wants them. The truly valuable things often develop gradually and from the contributions of more than one person. They come like flowers which grow slowly. They need to be hoped for. Otherwise we may not even recognize them when they blossom before our eyes.

People who have hope stand out as oases in a desert. The administrator who sees the larger purpose of the program and hopes for its fulfillment will give to each worker an understanding of the part which he contributes; he will be able to keep administrative techniques and procedures in their proper perspective; he will be a good administrator to work for.

The worker who understands the larger purpose of his work, even though his specific activities may play only a small part, will not weary as quickly or become narrow or bitter in his outlook.

The person who sees and hears many things in the mass communication media, but who identifies those things that relate to God's purposes and places his hopes on them, instead of watching the world like a spectator, will become a fountain of wisdom.

The person who has hopes for the other people in his life—his neighbours, his fellow workers, his sisters and brothers in the church—will soon be discovered as a most cherished friend. People become starved if no one has hopes for them.

Hoping is a way of reaching out beyond our-

selves—to others, to the world, to God. It is a sign that we believe that God is still at work—in ourselves, in others and in the world.

Let us learn to hope. Let us not become weary in hoping. Let us, with the New Testament writer, "hold fast the confession of our hope. . . let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works. . . not neglecting to meet together. . . but encouraging one another" (Hebrews 10:23-25).

Footnotes

1. Anthony T. Padovano, *Dawn Without Darkness*, Paramus, New Jersey, Paulist Press, 1971, p. 25.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 15.

## *THOSE WHO SOUGHT JESUS*

*Ask, and it will be given you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. (Matthew 7:7).*

One of the striking things in reading the four books that deal with the life of Jesus–Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John–is the very personal nature of the Gospel. We see that Jesus was a teacher of great truths and a doer of great deeds. But we see more. We see that he was and is, a person. This is evident especially in the encounters that he had with people. Let us look at some of those encounters.

Let us begin with the story of Zaccheaus. It is recorded in Luke 19:1-10. Zaccheaus was a tax collector in Jericho. Not only that, he was the superintendent. And since Jericho was a commercial centre, a "gateway to the world," many taxes must have been collected there and his position must have been prominent.

As a tax collector, –and this also meant being an agent of the occupying Roman forces,– he was disliked. Tax collectors are still disliked. To get a sense of that we need go only to some other part of our own country and listen to what people say about Ottawa. It is the tax collection centre. Their words are not always very kind.

Zaccheaus, for his part, though superintendent, rich and prominent, is not happy. He has a conscience. And he is bothered by what he is doing with his life and what he is doing to other people. The story does not tell us this in so many words, but the fact that he was so eager to see Jesus and the way he responded when they came together, suggest that he had been fighting a lonely inward struggle. We can picture him going into his parlour and looking at a beautiful chan-

delier on the ceiling and a thick rug on the floor and being haunted by visions of the people at whose expense he had gained them. We can imagine that his spirit was torn in many ways.

No doubt, he had enough worldly knowledge to think of arguments with which he might rationalize his actions. He probably gave to charity He probably brought happiness to some people. And probably there were many who were worse than he was. There always are. But there is no evidence that he found satisfaction in such rationalizations. Perhaps he was too sensitive a man.

He wants to find a way out of his dark corridor. He hears that Jesus is coming. And the account says, "He was eager to see what Jesus looked like." He wants to see whether this man holds the power to help him. Zaccheaus wants more than an opportunity to read about his teachings or hear about his works. He wants to get a look at Jesus and he spares no effort to ensure that he will be able to do so.

We get a sense that his search is basic and honest. It is not like that of some seekers who pride themselves in forever seeking, who delight in the romance of the search and who do not really want to find. Zaccheaus, I believe, really wants to find.

Still, he approaches the matter somewhat like that of a spectator. The account says that he was eager to see what Jesus looked like. It does not say that he wanted to meet Jesus or speak with him. But all this changes. When Jesus comes to that place where Zaccheaus is sitting up in the tree Jesus looks up and calls Zaccheaus by name and speaks to him directly.

Is it not often that way? The prodigal son recognized that he had to turn around, but

before he reached home, his father came out to meet him. When we, after a time of struggle, take a step that we know to be right, we often find that things are coming out to support us.

It is noteworthy too that Jesus calls Zaccheaus by name. It probably surprised him. Jesus immediately becomes very personal. For that moment, it is as if the two are alone. Jesus is given full attention to Zaccheaus.

It was that way too in the encounter of Jesus with the woman at the well. She too was surprised when Jesus spoke to her. She asked "How is it that you a Jew ask a drink of me a woman of Samaria? " (John 4:9). Jesus still comes to us more directly than we expect him and in ways that are very personal.

It is noteworthy too that when Zaccheaus meets Jesus, he wants to confess. He says, "Behold Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor, and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I restore it four fold." It sounds almost like boasting. But I believe it is more a sign that Zaccheaus wants to open up, that he has suddenly sensed what true communion is all about.

For our second story of a personal encounter with Jesus, let us look at the woman who had had a flow of blood for twelve years and who came to Jesus believing that if only she could touch his garment then she would be healed. This story is recorded in Mark 5:25-34. This woman would seem to play a very minor role in the whole New Testament story. She is not one of the twelve. She is not a Rabbi coming to Jesus for a theological discussion. She appears only once and only for a brief moment.

Her appearance comes on an occasion when there are great crowds. Jesus had become widely known so all kinds of people came to him, the

poor, the blind, the lame, those with personal problems and those with questions.

This woman also comes to him. But she does not come to him directly. The account says, "She came up behind him in the crowd." It appears that she does not want to meet him or have a personal discussion with him. She would prefer to remain unnoticed. She wants only to touch his garment, believing that if she can do so she will be healed.

It is a picture of one close to desperation. She wants to make one more try. The account says, she "had suffered much under many physicians, and had spent all that she had, and was no better but rather grew worse."

I am reminded of an incident that took place out west some time ago. A man claimed he had a cure for cancer. He prepared a certain fluid and sold it—hundreds of gallons of it. Of course he kept secret the formula for the fluid. Later it was discovered to be only tomato juice and sugar. But until the hoax was revealed scores of people had come, from far and wide, wanting to make one more try.

To understand this woman's approach we must also remember that under Mosaic Law a woman in her condition was like a leper. She was regarded as unclean. She was to be shunned. For someone to touch her or for her to touch someone else was to pass on her uncleanness. It was to contaminate the other. Imagine the burden of guilt and shame that this woman must have carried. It is no wonder that she wanted to remain unnoticed.

We feel very sorry for her but must we not still say that her approach is wrong? Surely, faith in the living God is not a matter of touching garments. That is like primitive magic. It is

the sort of thing that appears from time to time, as in the medieval ages when things, claimed to be slivers from Jesus' cross, threads from his robe or locks from his hair, were passed around, for a fee of course, and were thought to possess all kinds of powers. Surely that is not a Biblically grounded faith.

In spite of this, Jesus responds to her. He helps her at once. And he gives her more than she bargained for. He turns and speaks to her. But the woman, feeling herself identified, falls down before him in fear and trembling.

It is no wonder that she trembled. We must remember that she was regarded as a leper and thus should never have been in a crowd of people. By touching Jesus, it is assumed that she passed on to him her uncleanness.

But Jesus does not rebuke her. He accepts her. Is it not that way with us? Does Jesus not seek to share our shame and guilt? Is he not our companion in every affliction? He does not wait until we have disentangled ourselves from all our false presuppositions and come to him with the right approach. If we truly recognize our need and as much as stretch out a finger to touch his garment, will he not turn and say to us, as he said to this woman: "Daughter, your faith has made you well, go in peace, and be healed of your disease? "

For a third personal encounter let us look at the story of Jesus coming to the disciples at night while they are storm-tossed on the sea and where Peter almost sinks into the water. It is recorded in Matthew 14:22-33. It is a peculiar story. It is not as far out as the story of Jonah and the whale. Nevertheless, some parts of it are a bit strange.

It takes place after Jesus and the disciples

have been ministering to large crowds. Jesus wants to be alone. So he sends the disciples away in a boat, dismisses the crowds and goes into the hills to pray.

By the fourth watch of the night there is a wind. The sea is beaten by waves. The disciples are in serious danger. And Jesus comes to them. But they do not recognize him. Indeed, it appears that even though they were frightened, they did not expect Jesus to come to them. It is hard to understand. They were the disciples. They had been so close. They had seen him do great and wondrous things. But in their hour of need, it does not occur to them that Jesus might actually come to them. And when he does, they do not recognize him.

Is it not that way with us too? We sing his praises on Sunday. We say we have him in our lives. But do we really expect Jesus to come to our situations of need, those around us and those in our world? When he does, we sometimes fail to recognize him.

When Jesus comes to the disciples on the sea, they think it is a ghost. They are frightened. Then Jesus says, "It is I; have no fear." But they are not sure. So Peter decides to test it. He says, "Lord, if it is you, bid me come to you on the water."

Is it not foolish to test Jesus this way? Is it not immature? Had Jesus not spoken of the foolish generation that looks for signs? Was that not part of the reason why he had refused to jump down from the pinnacle of the temple? The human heart has a natural fascination with the spectacular but surely the walk of faith and obedience is something else. Is that not the reason why, after a miracle, Jesus often told his disciples to tell no one?

The Lutheran Theologian, Helmut Thielicke, from whom some of the ideas for this sermon come, writes

> No one has as conclusively rejected miracles as Jesus himself, as soon as they threatened to become substitutes for faith. And yet all who met him knew that nothing less than a miracle had happened to them. . . as they came away from his presence, they suddenly knew that it had been a miracle, when he pulled them free from the sin-guilt cycle and bondage to their burdened past, when he gave them a new future. . . when he declared God's grace to them and brought them out of their anxiety-ridden life into the blessedness of being carefree children of their heavenly Father.1

But, if Jesus does not want miracles to become substitutes for faith, why then does he say to Peter, "Come"? Why does he invite him to step out on to the water? Thielicke speculates and says,

> Perhaps he rejoices that for once someone wants to test out his faith cheerfully, completely and without theological brakes and uninhibited by reflection. Those who...meditate too long on what they pray and how far they ought to go in their prayers, and who, out of pure anxiety over demanding something impossible from God, end up by saying only "Thy Will Be Done," ultimately have no confidence in God at all.2

Peter's little experiment does not amount to

much. He runs into difficulty. But Jesus does not let him drown. In my view we should be careful not to let his little walk become the centre of this story. Let us look rather at the story as a whole, at the way it illustrates that God's love for us is greater than our faith, that he cares for us even when we do not think about it, that he comes to us even when we do not expect him to, and that he loves us with a love that will not let go.

Many things could yet be said about these and other encounters that people had with Jesus. But maybe it is enough to help us appreciate a little more fully the personal dimension of the Gospel. I, for one, sometimes shy away from this personal dimension. One is more inclined to talk about his teachings, and these are important. We need to study them, learn them and follow them. But we need also to discover the personal God, who knows us individually, to whom we bring our lives in prayer, and who comes to us as soon as we take a sincere step toward him.

Footnotes:

1. Helmut Thielicke, *How to Believe Again*, Fortress Press, Philadelphia, 1972, p. 66.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 73.