

Action in Waiting

Christoph Friedrich Blumhardt

IT IS ADVENT AGAIN. We call this time Advent because it reminds us of what comes from God for the creation of his kingdom on earth. We who are here have been led in a special way to keep what is coming on our hearts and to shape ourselves according to it. That which comes from God – that is what moves our hearts, not only in these days but at all times. That which is to come from God is the most important thing we have, in the past and in the present as well as in the future. It is only in God's coming that even the Bible itself has value to us, let alone all the other things we call "means of grace." Unless what comes from God is a part of it, it remains

like a dead seed and does not achieve what must be achieved if God's kingdom is to be.

There are many today who sigh to heaven, "Savior, come now!" But they are not sighing for the sake of God's kingdom. They cry out like this only when they are in trouble and want God to help them. And they don't know of any help that is more effective than to have a Savior come and put a quick end to their troubles.

When it comes to the things of God, however, we must not be concerned for what is ours, but only for what belongs to Christ. We should do this not merely for our own edification; we must become workers for God. This leads us to God's vineyard, a place where there is not a great deal of talk, but where everyone is intent on deeds.

This is what it means to prepare for Advent. Jesus says, "Be ready for action, and have your lamps lit; be like those who are waiting for their master to return from the wedding banquet...blessed is the slave whom his master will find at work when he arrives" (Luke 12:35-48). Here Jesus is speaking of his disciples and their preparation for his coming. Take note that God's kingdom is not formed by any hu-

man discovery or intention, however daring and noble, but by the coming of Christ. Our faith, our ardor, must be for this coming. Otherwise it would be better to put aside our meditations on Advent. The reign of God is a marvelous thing. To worldly wisdom God's kingdom seems like foolishness, and yet it gives shape to the whole world, the whole creation, making it God's eternal coming.

It is remarkable that not only God, creator of heaven and earth, but also God's people must be a part of this plan. There need to be men and women who give themselves up for God's kingdom and its justice. Otherwise Jesus would not have said, "Blessed are those servants whom the master finds awake when he comes." It is obvious that much depends on our activity. We can even read between the lines that if there is no one to watch out, God's coming will be delayed. Speaking in terms of the parable, if the doorkeeper does not open the door, it is possible that even the master himself, who has given him the key, cannot get in unless he forces his way.

There have to be people who, first of all, have dressed themselves for action and have lit their lamps. In other words, while their master is absent

they are busy preparing everything in the house for his arrival and keeping everyone in the house aware that the state they are living in is only temporary.

Secondly, there must be people who stand by the door and listen for him and who open it quickly when he knocks. Workers, not slackers, are dressed for service. Slackers wear their Sunday best. A person who is getting ready to work with his hands takes his coat off and rolls up his sleeves so that he can get at the matter without further ado. God has work that has to be done in work clothes, not in one's Sunday best. As long as God's kingdom has to be fought for, it is more important to be dressed for work – ready for action – to make an effort to do something in keeping with God's plan, often against the whole weight of the world. A practical way exists and we must be ready for this with our whole being.

"But," someone may ask, "what sort of thing, exactly, are we to do? What will truly serve God and his coming reign?" That is a serious question; no human being can answer it. We have to learn to live in what is coming from God every day and to carry a light from this awareness into the darkness. For the essence of God's everlasting order has been darkened

by the principalities and powers of this world. Throughout practically every realm of life there is an enslaving force. It is characteristic of everything, even the highest human undertakings of nations or of individuals; it is egoism. What can we get out of this or that? What will meet our momentary interest? We are only concerned with our immediate interest, and call this good and true. In this way the darkness comes.

We find it so difficult to put God's service into our daily life, but this is because we weak human beings don't really want to know what is true. We live in a mass of wrongs and untruths, and they surround us as a dark, dark night. Not even in the most flagrant things do we manage to break through. We are hardly repelled anymore by murder, adultery, or theft. We now have customs and laws under whose protection one person can kill another. We have lifestyles of pleasure that poison everything way beyond human help. We have customs of acquisitiveness by which some people live at the expense of others. What can be done to help?

Anyone whose attention is fixed on the coming reign of God and who wants to see a change brought

about in God's house will become more and more aware that there exists a universal wrongness that is pulled over us like a choking, suffocating blanket. He will know that the thing to do is to take hold of God's hand so that there is some effect on this night, so that at least a few areas are made receptive to God's truth and justice and are made ready to receive God himself. But to do this work we have to have a light. With this light we can then illuminate every corner where we have some work to do. Then we will see where the garbage is, where there is work to be done.

This is really very hard work, but this is what preparing for Advent means. But look out! When someone holds a light in his hand and shines it here and there, he is immediately asked, "What business have you here?" Thus so many people let their light go out again. It is too awkward, too inconvenient to keep holding up a light and showing people the dirt and saying, "There, clean that up; the way you are doing things now isn't right in God's eyes. Cut off your hand! Tear out your eye! Cut off your foot!" – as Jesus says, figuratively, when there is something about the hand or eye or foot that stands in God's way.

"The light shines in darkness, and the darkness cannot overcome it." A light has a purpose; a light ought to shine into our lives so that we can see what needs to be done and set our hand to it and clean it up. Jesus, with this light, was not well received, and neither were his apostles. "If only that light weren't there," people said. In the times of the early church, the Christians were accused of causing confusion in the world, of undermining law and religion, and they were bitterly persecuted for this. The truth – the fact that people's lives are not right – is too much for most people to grasp. It seems like a crime to them to think that things they consider quite all right ought to be changed. The sacrifice of Christ, which makes it possible for a new humanity to arise in the resurrection – this sacrifice appears as foolishness.

So people turn finally to this Sunday religion and holiday worship. Going to worship is supposed to be enough. God is supposed to be satisfied with it and do without the weekday work. But let us not give the name of worship, or service to God, only to things that benefit us, only to things that soothe our own souls.

Fortunately, many people no longer feel that Sunday religion is enough. No matter how people

talk, work clothes must come back. A new spirit is awakening, and there are many who seek for God's advantage, even though they may not know how to go about it. Others may polish themselves up spiritually to get their little souls in order for God. They can do this, but it is not enough. Anyone who has eyes will see this and consider how he can forget himself in devotion to God's kingdom and become ardent for the reign to come – to this he is called.

Closely connected with this first work is that of standing at the door and opening it. In regard to this work one often speaks of the first, second, or third watch; and, I would like to add, the fourth, the fifth, and the sixth. We must stand by the door constantly, ready to open it, even though there may be no knock for a long time. We must be prepared for the first, second, or third watch; even if it includes the fourth, the fifth, and the sixth watch.

Jesus came and departed. But his resurrection means that everything in God's kingdom is alive; in every moment there is something happening. He himself may yet come again; he may soon send a messenger to knock. When the door is opened he will say, "Listen, do this and that; tell the people in the

house to watch out for this or that." Another time there is another knock, and the door is opened. This time perhaps the word is, "What is the foolishness you're doing in this house? You act as if things were going to always stay the same. Don't settle down as if you were the masters!" And this goes like the breath of God's wrath through the whole house, by way of the doorkeeper. Another time there is a knock, the doorkeeper opens, and the warning is heard, "Watch out for idolatry! Do you want to serve both God and mammon? Do you want to sit at both God's table and the demons' table? Who is your master? Do you want to work with the methods of this world or by the spirit of God? Truly, my house is not a house of human wisdom, but of God's."

For those who listen for Christ's coming, a knock sounds over and over again. The things that come forth are not necessarily highly spiritual. Sometimes they are very simple things. For instance, we may be told, "Don't neglect your bodies. Don't you know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit? (1 Cor. 3:16) Why do you drink so much wine? Why do you eat so much food?" This seems contemptibly small. Doesn't Paul say, "The kingdom of God does not

consist in eating and drinking?" That is true. Yet for those who want to hear, there is a knock on the door for the coming future of Jesus Christ telling us to live for God in everything (1 Cor. 10:31). It is not only your souls that matter, but your bodies too. Whoever is wise will open the door when God's messengers speak about this. Whoever is wise will go at it joyfully and confidently.

We must speak in practical terms. Either Christ's coming has meaning for us now, or else it means nothing at all. Sometimes the knock has to do with our life together, or with the arrangements of our life in relationship to the world. For example, on a large estate there are managers, farmers, gardeners, cooks, and so on. The cook has learned cooking, the farmer farming, the gardener gardening, all according to the customary methods. They have learned their trades well and are able to carry them on, even to excel in them. But suppose there is a knock, the door is opened and they are told, "Listen now, don't simply keep house as the world does; stop and think how to do things so as to please me!" Maybe you will answer, "What do you mean? That's the way I learned it and that's how everybody else does it." True, everybody

does it that way; but you do not need to. Those intent on Christ's coming have to bring a different way into their situations. Must things always be done in the style of the world? (2 Cor. 10:3-4) According to human wisdom? Should the kingdom of God run according to what most of us are used to?

A person who keeps watch for God, who lives for his coming, will be glad to hear even about little things like this, even if he is told, "Do everything differently from the way you have been doing it till now." When such a person hears the hint to do it differently, he will stop and listen. He will ask, "Differently? How shall I do it differently?" First you will have to become poor, and see where you have acted foolishly, like someone who has no light. Then you must grieve that you are not any cleverer than anyone else when it comes to opening the door to the Master.

This is what it means to watch. We have to begin with what we can see. Then there will come times when we are allowed to watch in higher things. If you look for the truth in small matters you will not go astray in big ones. You will be able to recognize truth there and carry out the command that comes.

Let us keep staunch in our eagerness to do whatever comes to us of the truth. Then there will be knocks on our door, over and over, and God's coming will not be hidden. For devoted hearts the light will keep dawning from him who is merciful and compassionate.

The work for God goes on quite simply in this way; one does not always have to wait for something out of the ordinary. The all-important thing is to keep your eyes on what comes from God and to make way for it to come into being here on the earth. If you always try to be heavenly and spiritually minded, you won't understand the everyday work God has for you to do. But if you embrace what is to come from God, if you live for Christ's coming in practical life, you will learn that divine things can be experienced here and now, things quite different from what our human brains can ever imagine.

Black Rook in Rainy Weather

On the stiff twig up there
Hunches a wet black rook
Arranging and rearranging its feathers
in the rain.

I do not expect a miracle
Or an accident

To set the sight on fire
In my eye, nor seek
Any more in the desultory weather
some design,
But let spotted leaves fall as they fall,
Without ceremony, or portent.

that man with his intellectual gifts squanders his superiority of mind – his intelligence and passion – on animal disputes and purposes. In contrast to this, the mystery of the Incarnation brings us an eternally new, uniquely real message – a message that points to the sole fundamental solution of the problem facing all mankind: pure spirit penetrates dust-born life, leaves aside all temptation, accomplishes the whole Passion of the divine Spirit in an unspiritual world, and returns to eternity pure. But we plunge right and left into every temptation, every challenge, every folly – and the wages of sin are paid to us every time, without fail. But we will not admit that we are constantly being punished because we are constantly falling from our God-given calling; that is, because we are constantly confusing the temporal and earthly with the heavenly and the eternal.

Waiting for God

Henri Nouwen

WAITING IS NOT a very popular attitude. Waiting is not something that people think about with great sympathy. In fact, most people consider waiting a waste of time. Perhaps this is because the culture in which we live is basically saying, "Get going! Do something! Show you are able to make a difference! Don't just sit there and wait!" For many people, waiting is an awful desert between where they are and where they want to go. And people do not like such a place. They want to get out of it by doing something.

In our particular historical situation, waiting is even more difficult because we are so fearful. One of the most pervasive emotions in the atmosphere

around us is fear. People are afraid – afraid of inner feelings, afraid of other people, and also afraid of the future. Fearful people have a hard time waiting, because when we are afraid we want to get away from where we are. But if we cannot flee, we may fight instead. Many of our destructive acts come from the fear that something harmful will be done to us. And if we take a broader perspective – that not only individuals but whole communities and nations might be afraid of being harmed – we can understand how hard it is to wait and how tempting it is to act. Here are the roots of a “first strike” approach to others. People who live in a world of fear are more likely to make aggressive, hostile, destructive responses than people who are not so frightened. The more afraid we are, the harder waiting becomes. That is why waiting is such an unpopular attitude for many people.

It impresses me, therefore, that all the figures who appear on the first pages of Luke's Gospel are waiting. Zechariah and Elizabeth are waiting. Mary is waiting. Simeon and Anna, who were there at the temple when Jesus was brought in, are waiting. The whole opening scene of the good news is filled with

waiting people. And right at the beginning all those people in some way or another hear the words, “Do not be afraid. I have something good to say to you.” These words set the tone and the context. Now Zechariah and Elizabeth, Mary, Simeon and Anna are waiting for something new and good to happen to them.

Who are these figures? They are representatives of the waiting Israel. The psalms are full of this attitude: “My soul is waiting for the Lord. I count on his word. My soul is longing for the Lord more than a watchman for daybreak. (Let the watchman count on daybreak and Israel on the Lord.) Because with the Lord there is mercy and fullness of redemption” (Psalm 130:5–7). “My soul is waiting for the Lord” – that is the song that reverberates all through the Hebrew scriptures.

But not all who dwell in Israel are waiting. In fact we might say that the prophets criticized the people (at least in part) for giving up their attentiveness to what was coming. Waiting finally became the attitude of the remnant of Israel, of that small group of Israelites that remained faithful. The prophet Zephaniah says, “In your midst I will leave a humble and

lowly people, and those who are left in Israel will seek refuge in the name of Yahweh. They will do no wrong, will tell no lies; and the perjured tongue will no longer be found in their mouths" (Zephaniah 3:12-13). It is the purified remnant of faithful people who are waiting. Elizabeth and Zechariah, Mary and Simeon are representatives of that remnant. They have been able to wait, to be attentive, to live expectantly.

But what is the nature of waiting? What is the practice of waiting? How are they waiting, and how are we called to wait with them?

Waiting, as we see it in the people on the first pages of the Gospel, is waiting with a sense of promise. "Zechariah,...your wife Elizabeth is to bear you a son." "Mary,...Listen! You are to conceive and bear a son" (Luke 1:13, 31). People who wait have received a promise that allows them to wait. They have received something that is at work in them, like a seed that has started to grow. This is very important. We can only really wait if what we are waiting for has already begun for us. So waiting is never a movement from nothing to something. It is always a movement from something to something more. Zechariah,

Mary, and Elizabeth were living with a promise that nurtured them, that fed them, and that made them able to stay where they were. And in this way, the promise itself could grow in them and for them.

Second, waiting is active. Most of us think of waiting as something very passive, a hopeless state determined by events totally out of our hands. The bus is late? You cannot do anything about it, so you have to sit there and just wait. It is not difficult to understand the irritation people feel when somebody says, "Just wait." Words like that seem to push us into passivity.

But there is none of this passivity in scripture. Those who are waiting are waiting very actively. They know that what they are waiting for is growing from the ground on which they are standing. That's the secret. The secret of waiting is the faith that the seed has been planted, that something has begun. Active waiting means to be present fully to the moment, in the conviction that something is happening where you are and that you want to be present to it. A waiting person is someone who is present to the moment, who believes that this moment is *the* moment.

A waiting person is a patient person. The word *patience* means the willingness to stay where we are and live the situation out to the full in the belief that something hidden there will manifest itself to us. Impatient people are always expecting the real thing to happen somewhere else and therefore want to go elsewhere. The moment is empty. But patient people dare to stay where they are. Patient living means to live actively in the present and wait there. Waiting, then, is not passive. It involves nurturing the moment, as a mother nurtures the child that is growing in her. Zechariah, Elizabeth, and Mary were very present to the moment. That is why they could hear the angel. They were alert, attentive to the voice that spoke to them and said, "Don't be afraid. Something is happening to you. Pay attention."

But there is more. Waiting is open-ended. Open-ended waiting is hard for us because we tend to wait for something very concrete, for something that we wish to have. Much of our waiting is filled with wishes: "I wish that I would have a job. I wish that the weather would be better. I wish that the pain would go." We are full of wishes, and our waiting easily gets entangled in those wishes. For this reason, a

lot of our waiting is not open-ended. Instead, our waiting is a way of controlling the future. We want the future to go in a very specific direction, and if this does not happen we are disappointed and can even slip into despair. That is why we have such a hard time waiting: we want to do the things that will make the desired events take place. Here we can see how wishes tend to be connected with fears.

But Zechariah, Elizabeth, and Mary were not filled with wishes. They were filled with hope. Hope is something very different. Hope is trusting that something will be fulfilled, but fulfilled according to the promises and not just according to our wishes. Therefore, hope is always open-ended.

I have found it very important in my own life to let go of my wishes and start hoping. It was only when I was willing to let go of wishes that something really new, something beyond my own expectations could happen to me. Just imagine what Mary was actually saying in the words, "I am the handmaid of the Lord...let what you have said be done to me" (Luke 1:38). She was saying, "I don't know what this all means, but I trust that good things will happen." She trusted so deeply that her waiting was open to

all possibilities. And she did not want to control them. She believed that when she listened carefully, she could trust what was going to happen.

To wait open-endedly is an enormously radical attitude toward life. So is to trust that something will happen to us that is far beyond our own imaginings. So, too, is giving up control over our future and letting God define our life, trusting that God molds us according to God's love and not according to our fear. The spiritual life is a life in which we wait, actively present to the moment, trusting that new things will happen to us, new things that are far beyond our own imagination, fantasy, or prediction. That, indeed, is a very radical stance toward life in a world preoccupied with control.

Now let me say something about the practice of waiting. How do we wait? One of the most beautiful passages of scripture is Luke 1:39-56, which suggests that we wait together, as did Mary and Elizabeth. What happened when Mary received the words of promise? She went to Elizabeth. Something was happening to Elizabeth as well as to Mary. But how could they live that out?

I find the meeting of these two women very moving, because Elizabeth and Mary came together and enabled each other to wait. Mary's visit made Elizabeth aware of what she was waiting for. The child leapt for joy in her. Mary affirmed Elizabeth's waiting. And then Elizabeth said to Mary, "Blessed is she who believed that the promise made her by the Lord would be fulfilled." And Mary responded, "My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord" (Luke 1:45-46). She burst into joy herself. These two women created space for each other to wait. They affirmed for each other that something was happening that was worth waiting for.

I think that is the model of the Christian community. It is a community of support, celebration, and affirmation in which we can lift up what has already begun in us. The visit of Elizabeth and Mary is one of the Bible's most beautiful expressions of what it means to form community, to be together, gathered around a promise, affirming that something is really happening.

This is what prayer is all about. It is coming together around the promise. This is what celebration is all about. It is lifting up what is already there. This

The Penitential Season

William Stringfellow

WE LIVE NOW, in the United States, in a culture so profoundly pagan that Advent is no longer really noticed, much less observed. The commercial acceleration of seasons, whereby the promotion of Christmas begins even before there is an opportunity to enjoy Halloween, is superficially, a reason for the vanishment of Advent. But a more significant cause is that the churches have become so utterly secularized that they no longer remember the topic of Advent. This situation cannot be blamed merely upon...the electronic preachers and talkers, or the other assorted peddlers of religion that so clutter the ethos of this society, any more than it can be said,

simply, to be mainly the fault of American merchandising and consumerism.

Thus, if I remark about the disappearance of Advent I am not particularly complaining about the vulgarities of the marketplace prior to Christmas and I am certainly not talking about getting "back to God" or "putting Christ back into Christmas" (phrases that betray skepticism toward the Incarnation). Instead I am concerned with a single, straightforward question in biblical context, What is the subject of Advent?

Tradition has rendered John the Baptist an Advent figure and, if that be an appropriate connection (I reserve some queries about that), then clues to the meaning of the first coming of Christ may be found in the Baptist's preaching. Listen to John the Baptist.

"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matt. 3:2). In the Gospel according to Mark, the report is, John appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. It should not be overlooked, furthermore, that when John the Baptist is imprisoned, Matthew states, "From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, 'Re-

pent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand' " (Matt. 4:17). And later, when Jesus charges his disciples, he tells them to preach the same message.

For all the greeting card and sermonic rhetoric, I do not think that much rejoicing happens around Christmastime, least of all about the coming of the Lord. There is, I notice, a lot of holiday frolicking, but that is not the same as rejoicing. In any case, maybe outbursts of either frolicking or rejoicing are premature, if John the Baptist has credibility. He identifies *repentance* as the message and the sentiment of Advent. And, in the texts just cited, that seems to be ratified by Jesus himself.

In context, in the biblical accounts, the repentance that John the Baptist preaches is no private or individualistic effort, but the disposition of a person is related to the reconciliation of the whole of creation. "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

The eschatological reference is quite concrete. John the Baptist is warning the rulers of this world and the principalities and powers, as well as common people, of the impending judgment of the world in the Word of God signaled in the coming of Christ...

The depletion of a contemporary recognition of the radically political character of Advent is in large measure occasioned by the illiteracy of church folk about the Second Advent and, in the mainline churches, the persistent quietism of pastors, preachers, and teachers about the Second Coming. That topic has been allowed to be preempted and usurped by astrologers, sectarian quacks, and multifarious hucksters. Yet it is impossible to apprehend either Advent except through the relationship of both Advents. The pioneer Christians, beleaguered as they were because of their insight, knew that the message of both Advents is political. That message is that in the coming of Jesus Christ, the nations and the principalities and the rulers of the world are judged in the Word of God. In the lordship of Christ they are rendered accountable to human life and, indeed, to all created life. Hence, the response of John the Baptist when he is pressed to show the meaning of the repentance he preaches is, "Bear fruits that befit repentance."

In another part of the Bible traditionally invoked during Advent, Luke 1: 52-54, the politics of both

Advents is emphasized in attributing the recitation of the Magnificat to Mary:

He has put down the mighty from their thrones,
and has exalted those of low degree;
He has filled the hungry with good things,
and the rich he has sent empty away.

In the First Advent, Christ the Lord comes into the world, in the next Advent, Christ the Lord comes as Judge of the world and of all the world's thrones and pretenders, sovereignties and dominions, principalities and authorities, presidencies and regimes, in vindication of his lordship and the reign of the Word of God in history. This is the truth, which the world hates, which biblical people (repentant people) bear and by which they live as the church in the world in the time between the two Advents.

From the Stable to the Cross

J. Heinrich Arnold, Edith Stein

JESUS' LIFE BEGAN in a stable and ended on the cross between two criminals. The Apostle Paul said he wanted to proclaim nothing but this crucified Christ. We, too, have nothing to hold on to except this Christ. We must ask ourselves again and again: Are we willing to go his way, from the stable to the cross? As disciples we are not promised comfortable and good times. Jesus says we must deny ourselves and suffer with him and for him. That is the only way to follow him, but behind it lies the glory of life – the glowing love of God, which is so much greater than our hearts and our lives.

J. HEINRICH ARNOLD

The Original Revolution

John Howard Yoder

IN THE WHOLE BODY of Jewish and Christian liturgy, only a very few texts might be more widely known – and more vainly repeated – than the two songs from the beginning of Luke's Gospel.

One of these songs is found on the lips of the maiden Mary. Catholic tradition knows it by its opening word *Magnificat*, "My soul doth magnify the Lord." But what it says is the language, not of sweet maidens, but of Maccabees: it speaks of dethroning the mighty and exalting the lowly, of filling the hungry and sending the rich away empty. Mary's praise to God is a revolutionary battle cry.

That simple observation should suffice to locate our topic. The fad word not long ago of both Protes-

tant and Catholic social thought was "revolution." From the black ghettos of the U.S. to the 1968 World Council of Churches Assembly in Uppsala, from the archbishop's residence in Recife to the Ivy League seminaries of the American Protestant establishment, from Peking to the Sorbonne, the slogans are the same. The system is rotten. Those whom it oppresses should submit to its tyranny no longer. It deserves nothing other than to collapse in upon itself, a collapse we will engineer.

It would be worthwhile sometime to dwell at more length on the way in which the term "revolution" confirms the intellectual relevance of Gresham's law, according to which the coinage with the least substance, value, and character will get the most circulation. The word "revolution" has passed through so many hands, over so many tongues and pens, that most of its meaning has worn off. Shaving cream is revolutionary if they put lime perfume in the can with the soap... But the fact that a word can be prostituted or violated does not take its real meaning off our serious agenda.

The old word, the technical term, for the change Mary was rejoicing in is "gospel"; but "gospel" has

become a tired old word. For some, it means the invitation to an individual to accept the forgiveness of sins, so that to preach the gospel, to "evangelize" is to spread the message of this invitation. For others, it means correct teaching about the work of Christ, so that "evangelicals" are those who hold to traditional doctrines. Elsewhere "evangelical" simply is the current word for "Protestant." For still others "gospel" represents a particular kind of country music.

If we are ever to rescue God's good news from all the justifiable but secondary meanings it has taken on, perhaps the best way to do it is to say that the root meaning of the term *evangelion* would today best be translated "revolution." Originally it is not a religious or a personal term at all, but a secular one: "good news." But *evangelion* is not just any welcome piece of information, it is news which impinges upon the fate of the community. "Good news" is the report brought by a runner to a Greek city, that a distant battle has been won, preserving their freedom; or that a son has been born to the king, assuring a generation of political stability. "Gospel" is good news having seriously to do with the people's welfare. Today we might speak of the end of the Vietnam war in

this sense; not merely an event that makes some of us happy, but one which shapes our common lives for the better. This is not only true of the meaning of the word we translate "gospel," in its ordinary secular usage outside the New Testament; it is true as well of the story which the New Testament calls by this name. Mary's outburst of social enthusiasm in the *Magnificat* is only one sample; but the response of her kinsman Zechariah to the birth of his son is to sing that God has now come:

... age after age he proclaimed by the lips of his holy prophets, that he would deliver us from our enemies, out of the hands of all who hate us...
(Luke 1:69-71)

When this son, John, began his own preaching, Luke describes it as "evangelizing the people" with predictions:

Already the axe is laid to the roots of the trees, and every tree that fails to produce good fruit is cut down and thrown on the fire. (Luke 3:9)

To those who asked him, "What shall we do?" he answered:

The man with two shirts must share with him who has none, and anyone who has food must do the same. (Luke 3:11)

Once again; whatever it is that God is about to do, it will be good news for the poor, bad news for the proud and the rich; it will be *change*, including changed economic and social relations.

This was the expectation that Jesus himself picked up, when in terms almost identical to John's, he announced that the "kingdom of heaven is near" and then more precisely:

The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me; he has sent me to announce good news to the poor, to proclaim release for prisoners and recovery for the blind; to let the broken victims go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. (Luke 4:18, 19)

The year of the Lord's favor of his "acceptable year" is the Jubilee, the periodic economic leveling-off provided for by the Mosaic law. Such a change is what Jesus says is now coming into view in his beginning ministry. It will involve attitudes, so it can be

called "repentance," *metanoia*, "turning-the-mind-around." But it also involves social practices, "fruits worthy of repentance," new ways of using possessions and power. The promised coming change involves social and personal dimensions *inseparably*, with none of our modern speculative tendency to dodge the direct claim on us by debating whether the chicken or the egg comes first.

This was John's agenda, and Jesus'; but it is also ours. Between their time and ours, there have been other ages when men were more concerned with other questions, other priority agenda. There were centuries when men were especially aware of the fragility of life and its brevity; they wanted a word from God that would speak to their fear of death and the hereafter. Man's basic need was seen as his mortality. In this context it is no surprise that Christian preaching and poetry dealt with mortality and that the good news we needed was spoken in terms of eternal life.

In other societies and cultures, people are plagued by anxiety, guilt, fear of judgment. In this context the good news is stated in terms of forgiveness,

acceptance by God, and acceptance by other men. Today some rephrase it as self-acceptance. In still other ages, other cultures, man thinks of his need as primarily for help in getting a job or in facing sickness or poverty. To this as well the Christian message can speak. People are still asking these questions, and Christian preachers are still proclaiming good news in all these ways; why should they not?

But for Jesus in his time, and for increasing numbers of us in our time, the basic human problem is seen in less individualistic terms. The priority agenda for Jesus, and for many of us, is not mortality or anxiety, but unrighteousness, injustice. The need is not for consolation or acceptance but for a new order in which men may live together in love. In his time, therefore, as in ours, the question of revolution, *the judgment of God upon the present order and the imminent promise of another one*, is the language in which the gospel must speak. What most people mean by "revolution," the answer they want, is not the gospel; but the gospel, if it be authentic, must so speak as to answer the *question* of revolution. This Jesus did.

Christmas Joy

Emmy Arnold

TO BECOME LIKE CHILDREN! The most beautiful childhood memory that comes to my mind is that of celebrating Christmas and the joy of Christmas.

Perhaps my experiences of Christmas came from the fact that I was born on Christmas Day. A hundred days before each Christmas we children would begin to count the days. Only a hundred times more I will wake up in the morning, and then, hurrah! it's Christmas Day! When at six o'clock on the eve of the First Sunday of Advent the bells rang in the Advent season, it seemed as though the angels were exulting, and we little earthly children joined in. "O welcome, thou blessed Christmas time!"

can never be its substance. Union with God means every bit of our human nature transfigured in Christ, woven up into his creative life and activity, absorbed into his redeeming purpose, heart, soul, mind and strength. Each time it happens it means that one of God's creatures has achieved its destiny.

Room for Christ

Dorothy Day

IT IS NO USE SAYING that we are born two thousand years too late to give room to Christ. Nor will those who live at the end of the world have been born too late. Christ is always with us, always asking for room in our hearts.

But now it is with the voice of our contemporaries that he speaks, with the eyes of store clerks, factory workers, and children that he gazes; with the hands of office workers, slum dwellers, and suburban housewives that he gives. It is with the feet of soldiers and tramps that he walks, and with the heart of anyone in need that he longs for shelter. And giving shelter or food to anyone who asks for it, or needs it, is giving it to Christ.

We can do now what those who knew him in the days of his flesh did. I am sure that the shepherds did not adore and then go away to leave Mary and her Child in the stable, but somehow found them room, even though what they had to offer might have been primitive enough. All that the friends of Christ did for him in his lifetime, we can do. Peter's mother-in-law hastened to cook a meal for him, and if anything in the Gospels can be inferred, it surely is that she gave the very best she had, with no thought of extravagance. Matthew made a feast for him, inviting the whole town, so that the house was in an uproar of enjoyment, and the straitlaced Pharisees – the good people – were scandalized.

The people of Samaria, despised and isolated, were overjoyed to give him hospitality, and for days he walked and ate and slept among them. And the loveliest of all relationships in Christ's life, after his relationship with his Mother, is his friendship with Martha, Mary, and Lazarus and the continual hospitality he found with them. It is a staggering thought that there were once two sisters and a brother whom Jesus looked on almost as his family and where he

found a second home, where Martha got on with her work, bustling around in her house-proud way, and Mary simply sat in silence with him.

If we hadn't got Christ's own words for it, it would seem raving lunacy to believe that if I offer a bed and food and hospitality to some man or woman or child, I am replaying the part of Lazarus or Martha or Mary, and that my guest is Christ. There is nothing to show it, perhaps. There are no halos already glowing round their heads – at least none that human eyes can see. It is not likely that I shall be vouchsafed the vision of Elizabeth of Hungary, who put the leper in her bed and later, going to tend him, saw no longer the leper's stricken face, but the face of Christ. The part of a Peter Claver, who gave a stricken Black man his bed and slept on the floor at his side, is more likely ours. For Peter Claver never saw anything with his bodily eyes except the exhausted faces of the Blacks; he had only faith in Christ's own words that these people were Christ. And when on one occasion the Blacks he had induced to help him ran from the room, panic-stricken before the disgusting sight of some sickness, he was astonished. "You mustn't

go," he said, and you can still hear his surprise that anyone could forget such a truth: "You mustn't leave him – it is Christ."

Some time ago I saw the death notice of a sergeant-pilot who had been killed on active service. After the usual information, a message was added which, I imagine, is likely to be imitated. It said that anyone who had ever known the dead boy would always be sure of a welcome at his parents' home. So, even now that the war is over, the father and mother will go on taking in strangers for the simple reason that they will be reminded of their dead son by the friends he made.

That is rather like the custom that existed among the first generations of Christians, when faith was a bright fire that warmed more than those who kept it burning. In every house then, a room was kept ready for any stranger who might ask for shelter; it was even called "the stranger's room"; and this not because these people, like the parents of the dead airman, thought they could trace something of someone they loved in the stranger who used it, not because the man or woman to whom they gave shel-

ter reminded them of Christ, but because – plain and simple and stupendous fact – he *was* Christ.

It would be foolish to pretend that it is always easy to remember this. If everyone were holy and handsome, with *alter Christus* shining in neon lighting from them, it would be easy to see Christ in everyone. If Mary had appeared in Bethlehem clothed, as St. John says, with the sun, a crown of twelve stars on her head, and the moon under her feet, then people would have fought to make room for her. But that was not God's way for her, nor is it Christ's way for himself, now when he is disguised under every type of humanity that treads the earth.

To see how far one realizes this, it is a good thing to ask honestly what you would do, or have done, when a beggar asked at your house for food. Would you – or did you – give it on an old cracked plate, thinking that was good enough? Do you think that Martha and Mary thought that the old and chipped dish was good enough for their guest?

In Christ's human life, there were always a few who made up for the neglect of the crowd. The shepherds did it; their hurrying to the crib atoned for the

people who would flee from Christ. The wise men did it; their journey across the world made up for those who refused to stir one hand's breadth from the routine of their lives to go to Christ. Even the gifts the wise men brought have in themselves an obscure recompense and atonement for what would follow later in this Child's life. For they brought gold, the king's emblem, to make up for the crown of thorns that he would wear; they offered incense, the symbol of praise, to make up for the mockery and the spitting; they gave him myrrh, to heal and soothe, and he was wounded from head to foot and no one bathed his wounds. The women at the foot of the Cross did it too, making up for the crowd who stood by and sneered.

We can do it too, exactly as they did. We are not born too late. We do it by seeing Christ and serving Christ in friends and strangers, in everyone we come in contact with.

All this can be proved, if proof is needed, by the doctrines of the Church. We can talk about Christ's Mystical Body, about the vine and the branches, about the Communion of Saints. But Christ himself

has proved it for us, and no one has to go further than that. For he said that a glass of water given to a beggar was given to him. He made heaven hinge on the way we act toward him in his disguise of commonplace, frail, ordinary humanity.

Did you give me food when I was hungry?

Did you give me to drink when I was thirsty?

Did you give me clothes when my own were rags?

Did you come to see me when I was sick, or in prison or in trouble?

And to those who say, aghast, that they never had a chance to do such a thing, that they lived two thousand years too late, he will say again what they had the chance of knowing all their lives, that if these things were done for the very least of his brethren they were done to him.

For a total Christian, the goad of duty is not needed – always prodding one to perform this or that good deed. It is not a duty to help Christ, it is a privilege. Is it likely that Martha and Mary sat back and considered that they had done all that was expected of them – is it likely that Peter's mother-in-law grudgingly served the chicken she had meant to keep

till Sunday because she thought it was her "duty"? She did it gladly; she would have served ten chickens if she had had them.

If that is the way they gave hospitality to Christ, then certainly it is the way it should still be given. Not for the sake of humanity. Not because it might be Christ who stays with us, comes to see us, takes up our time. Not because these people remind us of Christ, as those soldiers and airmen remind the parents of their son, but because they *are* Christ, asking us to find room for him, exactly as he did at the first Christmas.

Shipwrecked at the Stable

Brennan Manning

DO YOU THINK you could contain Niagara Falls in a teacup?

Is there anyone in our midst who pretends to understand the awesome love in the heart of the Abba of Jesus that inspired, motivated and brought about Christmas? The shipwrecked at the stable kneel in the presence of mystery.

God entered into our world not with the crushing impact of unbearable glory, but in the way of weakness, vulnerability and need. On a wintry night in an obscure cave, the infant Jesus was a humble, naked, helpless God who allowed us to get close to him.

In the center of the silver star was a circular hole. That was the bull's eye, God's quondam target.

Crouching people leaned forward to wipe their fingers across the hole's flat bottom. When it was my turn, I knelt, bent under a fringed satin drape, reached across half the silver star, and touched its hole. I could feel some sort of soft wax in it. The hole was a quarter inch deep and six inches across, like a wide petri dish. I have never read any theologian who claims that God is particularly interested in religion, anyway.

Any patch of ground anywhere smacks more of God's presence on earth, to me, than did this marble grotto. The ugliness of the blunt and bumpy silver star impressed me. The bathetic pomp of the heavy, tasseled brocades, the marble, the censers hanging from chains, the embroidered antependium, the aspergillum, the crosiers, the ornate lamps – some human's idea of elegance – bespoke grand comedy, too, that God put up with it. And why should he not? Things here on earth get a whole lot worse than bad taste.

"Every day," said Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav, "the glory is ready to emerge from its debasement."

To You Christ Is Born

Martin Luther

The angel said to them, "Behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which shall be to all the people; for there is born to you this day a Savior, who is Christ the Lord."

LUKE 2:10

THE GOSPEL TEACHES THAT Christ was born, and that he died and suffered everything on our behalf, as is here declared by the angel. In these words you clearly see that he is born for us.

He does not simply say, Christ is born, but to you he is born. Neither does he say, I bring glad tidings, but to you I bring glad tidings of great joy. Furthermore, this joy was not to remain in Christ, but it shall be to all the people. This faith no condemned

or wicked man has, nor can he have it. Christ has a pure, innocent, and holy birth. Man has an unclean, sinful, condemned birth; as David says (Psalms 51:5): "Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me." Nothing can help this unholy birth except the pure birth of Christ. For this purpose Christ willed to be born, that through him we might be born anew.

O, this is the great joy of which the angel speaks. This is the comfort and exceeding goodness of God that, if anyone believes this, he can boast of the treasure that Mary is his rightful mother, Christ his brother, and God his father. For these things actually occurred and are true, but we must believe. This is the principal thing and the principal treasure in every Gospel. Christ must above all things become our own and we become his. This is what is meant by Isaiah 9:6: "Unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given." To you is born and given this child.

Therefore see to it that you do not treat the Gospel only as history, for that is only transient; neither regard it only as an example, for it is of no value without faith. Rather, see to it that you make this birth your own and that Christ be born in you. This

will be the case if you believe, then you will repose in the lap of the virgin Mary and be her dear child. But you must exercise this faith and pray while you live; you cannot establish it too firmly. This is our foundation and inheritance, upon which good works must be built.

The Gospel does not merely teach about the history of Christ. No, it enables all who believe it to receive it as their own, which is the way the Gospel operates. Of what benefit would it be to me if Christ had been born a thousand times, and it would daily be sung into my ears in a most lovely manner, if I were never to hear that he was born for me and was to be my very own? If the voice gives forth this pleasant sound, even if it be in homely phrase, my heart listens with joy, for it is a lovely sound which penetrates the soul.

If Christ has indeed become your own, and you have by such faith been cleansed through him and have received your inheritance without any personal merit, it follows that you will do good works by doing to your neighbor as Christ has done to you. Here good works are their own teacher. What are the good works of Christ? Is it not true that they are good

because they have been done for your benefit, for God's sake, who commanded him to do the works in your behalf? In this then Christ was obedient to the Father, in that he loved and served us.

Therefore since you have received enough and become rich, you have no other commandment than to serve Christ and render obedience to him. Direct your works that they may be of benefit to your neighbor, just as the works of Christ are of benefit to you. For this reason Jesus said at the Last Supper: "This is my commandment, that you love one another; even as I have loved you." Here it is seen that he loved us and did everything for our benefit, in order that we may do the same, not to him, for he needs it not, but to our neighbor. This is his commandment, and this is our obedience. Christ helps us, so we in return help our neighbor, and all have enough.

Notice then how far off those are who expend their energies uniting good works with stone. Of what benefit is it to your neighbor if you build a church entirely out of gold? Of what benefit to him is the frequent ringing of great church bells? Of what benefit to him is the glitter and the ceremonies in the churches, the clergy's robes, the sanctuary? Of

what benefit to him are the many candles or the singing of vigils and liturgies? Do you think that God wants to be served with the sound of bells, the smoke of candles and such fancies? He has commanded none of these, but if you see your neighbor going astray, sinning, or suffering in body or soul, you are to leave every thing else and at once help him in every way in your power and if you can do no more, help him with words of comfort and prayer. Thus has Christ done to you and given you an example for you to follow.

Here Jesus does what he says: "And the poor have good tidings preached to them," and "Blessed are the poor in spirit; for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Mt. 11:5; 5:8). Here are no learned, no rich, no mighty ones, for such people do not as a rule accept the Gospel. The Gospel is a heavenly treasure, which will not tolerate any other treasure, and will not agree with any earthly guest in the heart. Therefore whoever loves the one must let go the other, as Christ says, "You cannot serve God and mammon" (Mt. 6:24).

This is shown by the shepherds in that they were in the field, under the canopy of heaven, and not in

houses, showing that they do not hold fast and cling to temporal things. And besides being in the fields by night, they are despised by and unknown to the world which sleeps in the night, and by day delights so to walk that it may be noticed; but the poor shepherds go about their work at night. They represent all the lowly who live on earth, often despised and unnoticed but dwelling under the protection of heaven; they eagerly desire the Gospel.

That there were shepherds means that no one is to hear the Gospel for himself alone, but every one is to tell it to others who are not acquainted with it. For he who believes for himself has enough and should endeavor to bring others to such faith and knowledge, so that one may be a shepherd of the other, to wait upon and lead him into the pasture of the Gospel in this world, during the nighttime of this earthly life. At first the shepherds were sore afraid because of the angel; for human nature is shocked when it first hears in the Gospel that all our works are nothing and are condemned before God, for it does not easily give up its prejudices and presumptions.

Therefore let us beware of all teaching that does not set forth Christ. What more would you know?

What more do you need, if indeed you know Christ, as above set forth, if you walk by faith in God, and by love to your neighbor, doing to him as Christ has done to you. This is indeed the whole Scripture in its briefest form: that no more words or books are necessary, but only life and action.

Let everyone examine himself in the light of the Gospel and see how far he is from Christ, and what is the character of his faith and love. There are many who are enkindled with dreamy devotion, and when they hear of the poverty of Christ, they are almost angry with the citizens of Bethlehem. They denounce their blindness and ingratitude, and think, if they had been there, they would have shown the Lord and his mother a more kindly service, and would not have permitted them to be treated so miserably. But they do not look by their side to see how many of their fellow humans need their help, and which they ignore in their misery. Who is there upon earth that has no poor, miserable, sick, erring ones around him? Why does he not exercise his love to those? Why does he not do to them as Christ has done to him?

The Journey of the Magi

"A cold coming we had of it,
 Just the worst time of year
 For a journey, and such a long journey:
 The ways deep and the weather sharp,
 The very dead of winter."
 And the camels galled, sore-footed, refractory,
 Lying down in the melting snow.
 There were times we regretted
 The summer palaces on slopes, the terraces,
 And the silken girls bringing sherbet.
 Then the camel men cursing and grumbling
 And running away, and wanting their liquor
 and women,

And the night-fires going out, and the lack
 of shelters,
 And the cities hostile and the towns unfriendly
 And the villages dirty and charging high prices:
 A hard time we had of it.
 At the end we preferred to travel all night,
 Sleeping in snatches,
 With the voices singing in our ears, saying
 That this was all folly.

 Then at dawn we came down to a temperate valley,
 Wet, below the snow line, smelling of vegetation;
 With a running stream and a water mill
 beating the darkness,
 And three trees on the low sky,
 And an old white horse galloped away
 in the meadow.
 Then we came to a tavern with vine-leaves
 over the lintel,
 Six hands at an open door dicing for pieces
 of silver,
 And feet kicking the empty wineskins.
 But there was no information, and so
 we continued

And arrived at evening, not a moment too soon
 Finding the place; it was (as you may say)
 satisfactory.

All this was a long time ago, I remember,
 And I would do it again, but set down
 This set down
 This: were we led all that way for
 Birth or Death? There was a Birth, certainly,
 We had evidence and no doubt. I had seen birth
 and death,
 But had thought they were different; this Birth was
 Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.
 We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,
 But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,
 With an alien people clutching their gods.
 I should be glad of another death.

T. S. ELIOT

The Showing Forth of Christ

John Donne

*Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to
 thy word: for my eyes have seen thy salvation.*

LUKE 2:29-30

THE WHOLE LIFE OF CHRIST was a continual Passion; others die martyrs but Christ was born a martyr. He found a Golgotha, where he was crucified, even in Bethlehem, where he was born; for to his tenderness then the straws were almost as sharp as the thorns after, and the manger as uneasy at first as the cross at last. His birth and his death were but one continual act, and his Christmas day and his Good Friday are but the evening and morning of the same

Love Alone

The Child we seek
 doesn't need our gold.
 On love, on love alone
 he will build his kingdom.
 His pierced hand will hold no scepter,
 his haloed head will wear no crown;
 his might will not be built
 on your toil.
 Swifter than lightning
 he will soon walk among us.
 He will bring us new life
 and receive our death,
 and the keys to his city
 belong to the poor.

GIAN CARLO MENOTTI

The Disarming Child

Jürgen Moltmann

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shined... The people will rejoice... For the yoke of their burden and the staff on their shoulder and the rod of their oppressor thou hast broken as on the day of Midian. For every boot of the tramping warrior in battle tumult and every garment rolled in blood will be burned as fuel for the fire. For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government will be upon his shoulder, and his name will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty Hero, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, upon the throne of David, and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and righteousness from this time forth and for evermore. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.

ISAIAH 9:2-6

THIS MIGHTY VISION of the prophet is founded on the liberation of oppressed men and women through the disarming birth of the divine child. Its goal is the turn from bloody war to the peace that endures and is unbroken. And in order to portray this hope for liberation and peace, the prophet falls back on a picture that is positively expressionist in style. The images jostle and tumble over one another, distorted beyond any possible reality into what is impossible for human beings – possible only to God...

Realistically, though the prophet talks about hunger, slavery and occupying troops, he ends messianically. He lets his vision of the birth of the child and the appearance of the peace of God shine like a light into the conflicts and experiences of real life.

It is not easy to keep these dimensions together when one is used to splitting up faith and politics, God and experience, and when one is accustomed to celebrate Christmas only in the heart and in the bosom of one's own family. But the message of the prophet is a realistic vision, and what it talks about is a visionary reality. It is a message for the people, a message sent into the camps of the exiled, and into the slums of the poor. It is a word against the cap-

tains of the arms industry and the fanatics of power. If we really understand what it means, it bursts the bonds of Sunday worship. For if this message really lays hold of us, it leads us to Jesus the liberator, and to the people who live in darkness and who are waiting for him – and for us.

Anyone who belongs to the people who dwell in the land of darkness, or anyone who has ever belonged to it, will find this message about the disarming birth of the child as alluring as it is unbelievable. The people in deep darkness: whom does this mean? In the prophet's time it was that section of Israel that had fallen under Assyrian dictatorship. Every imprisoned Israelite knew the tramp of the invading boots, the bloody coats and the rods of the slave-drivers. Today we can still see Assyrian warriors and overseers like this in the frescoes, with their iron shoes, their cloaks and their sticks. But for the prophet, Assyria is more than just Assyria. She is the representative of the power that is hostile to God, and this makes her at the same time the very quintessence of all inhuman oppression. The prophet looks at the specific plight of his people, but talks about a misery experienced by people everywhere. That is

why his words and images are so wide open that prisoners in every age have been able to find in them their own fate and their own hope.

A people in darkness – Isaiah 8 tells us what this means: “They will pass through the land, greatly distressed and hungry; and when they are hungry, they will be enraged and will curse their king and their God, and they will stare up to the sky and look down to the earth, and will find only distress and darkness; for they are in the darkness of fear and wander lost in the darkness.” God has hidden his face from them. But instead of waiting for his light, they run to fortune-tellers and mediums, and become more and more confused.

A people in darkness: let me add a personal word here. This phrase touched me directly when in 1945 we were driven in endless and desolate columns into the prisoner-of-war camps, the sticks of the guards at our sides, with hungry stomachs and empty hearts and curses on our lips. But many of us then, and I was one, glimpsed the light that radiates from the divine child. This light did not allow me to perish. This hope kept us alive.

A people in darkness: today I see before me the millions of the imprisoned, the exiled, the deported, the tortured and the silenced everywhere in the world where people are pushed into this darkness. The important point is not the nations, which can be accused of these things. What is important is the worldwide brotherhood of the men and women who are living in darkness. For it is on them that this divine light now shines.

Peoples in darkness: how that cries out today from the Third World in Africa and Asia, and from the Third World in our own country – cries out for liberation and human rights! The struggle for power and for oil and for weapons ruins the weak, enriches the wealthy, and gives power to the powerful. This divided world is increasingly capable of turning into a universal prison camp. And we are faced with the burning question: on which side of the barbed wire are we living, and at whose cost? The people in darkness sees the great light. To this people – to them first of all – the light shines in all its brightness. To these people the child is born, for the peace of us all. Do we belong to this people, or do we cling to our

own lights, our fortune-tellers and our own interpreters of the signs of the times, people who tell us what we want to hear, from Nostradamus and astrological calendars down to the learned interpreters of the laws of history?...

More is promised here than can be expressed simply through old-soldier reminiscences. For God's victory does not come about through new armaments and force levied against force, or through alliances and solidarity. God has his own, divine kind of victory. For God's victory puts an end to all human wars and victories once and for all. It is a final victory, which serves peace, not one that leads to the next war, as our melancholy victories usually do. The prophet gives his images of war so alien an orientation that they actually describe the conquest of war. Every weapon becomes a flame, every aggression fuel for the fire. God's victory puts a final end to the victories of human beings. People lose their taste for them. Swords are turned into ploughshares and peace treaties replace the atom bombs.

But how is this supposed to happen? Does not the power to liberate the masses stem from rifles just as much as the forces of oppression? How can oppres-

sion and war be fought against and overcome without bringing new oppressions and new wars into the world, again with bloody coats and the tramp of boots through the streets?

All the images the prophet uses to paint the possible future point to one fact: the birth of the divine child. The burning of the weapons, the jubilation and the great lights are all caught up in the birth of God's peace-bringer. They are all to be found in him. Now the prophet stops talking in intoxicating images and thrilling comparisons, and comes to the heart of the matter: the person of the divine liberator. "To us a child is born. To us a son is given." This future is wholly and entirely God's initiative. That is why it is so totally different from our human plans and possibilities. If liberation and peace are bound up with the birth of a little helpless and defenseless child, then their future lies in the hands of God alone. On the human side, all we can see here is weakness and helplessness. It is not the pride and strength of the grown man which are proclaimed on the threshold of the kingdom, but the defenselessness and the hope of the child.

The kingdom of peace comes through a child, and liberation is bestowed on the people who become as children: disarmingly defenseless, disarming through their defenselessness, and making others defenseless because they themselves are so disarming.

After the prophet's mighty visions of the destruction of all power and the forceful annihilation of all coercion, we are now suddenly face to face with this inconspicuous child. It sounds so paradoxical that some interpreters have assumed that this is a later interpolation. The prisoners who have to fight for their rights also find it difficult to understand how this child can help them. But it is really quite logical. For what the prophet says about the eternal peace of God which satisfies our longings can only come to meet us, whether we are frightened slaves or aggressive masters, in the form of the child. A child is defenseless. A child is innocent. A child is the beginning of a new life. His defenselessness makes our armaments superfluous. We can put away the rifles and open our clenched fists. His innocence redeems us from the curse of the evil act that is bound to breed ever more evil. We no longer have to go on like this. And his birth opens up for us the future of a

life in peace that is different from all life hitherto, since that life was bound up with death.

"For to us a child is born. To us a son is given. The government is upon his shoulders." The liberator becomes a pleading child in our world, armed to the teeth as it is. And this child will become the liberator for the new world of peace. That is why his rule means life, not death; peace, not war; freedom, not oppression. This sovereignty lies on the defenseless, innocent and hopeful shoulders of this child.

This makes our fresh start into the future meaningful and possible. The oppressed will be free from oppression. And they will also be free from the dreams of darkness, the visions of revenge. They stand up and rejoice, and their rejoicing frees their masters too from their brutal armaments. The oppressors with their cudgels, their iron shoes and their bloody coats will be freed from their grim machinations and will leave the poor in peace. For the new human being has been born, and a new humanity will be possible, a humanity which no longer knows either masters or slaves, either oppressed or oppressors. This is God's initiative on behalf of his betrayed

and tormented humanity. "The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this." It is the zeal of his ardent love.

There is no other initiative we can seize with absolute assurance, for ourselves or for other people. There is no other zeal for the liberation of the world in which we can place a certain hope.

There are certainly many other movements, and much fervent zeal for the liberation of the masses. It certainly sounds more realistic for people in darkness to dream of God's day of vengeance, finding satisfaction in the hope that at the Last Judgment all the godless enemies who oppress us here will be cast into hellfire. But what kind of blessedness is it that luxuriates in revenge and needs the groans of the damned as background to its own joy? To us a child is born, not an embittered old man. God in a child, not as hangman. That is why he prayed on his cross: "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do." It sounded more heroic when, forty years ago, in 1934, Hitler's columns marched through Tübingen, singing with fanatical zeal: "One day, the day of revenge. One day, and we shall be free." It was a zeal that led to Auschwitz and Stalingrad...

Emperors have always liked to be called emperors of peace, from Augustus down to the present day. Their opponents and the heroes of the people have always liked to be called "liberators," from Arminius of the Cherusci to Simón Bolívar. They have come and gone. Neither their rule nor their liberation endured. God was not with them. Their zeal was not the zeal of the Lord. They did not disarm this divided world. They could not forgive the guilt, because they themselves were not innocent. Their hope did not bring new life. So let them go their way. Let us deny them our complete obedience. "To us this child is born." The divine liberty lies upon his shoulders.

What does his rule look like? We have to know this if we want to begin to live with him. He will establish "peace on earth," we are told, and he will "uphold peace with justice and with righteousness." But how can peace go together with justice? What we are familiar with is generally peace based on injustice, and justice based on conflict. The life of justice is struggle. Among us, peace and justice are divided by the struggle for power. The so-called "law of the strongest" destroys justice and right. The

weakness of the peacemakers makes peace fragile. It is only in the zeal of love that what power has separated can be put together again: in a just peace and in the right to peace.

This love does not mean accepting breaches of justice "for the sake of peace," as we say. But it does not mean, either, breaking someone else's peace for the sake of our own rights. Peace and righteousness will only kiss and be one when the *new person* is born, and God the Lord, who has created all things, arrives at his just rights in his creation. When God is God in the world, then no one will want to be anyone else's Lord and God anymore...

But is this really possible here and now, or is it just a dream?

There is nothing against dreams if they are good ones. The prophet gave the people in darkness, and us, this unforgettable dream. We should remain true to it. But he could only see the shadowy outline of the name of the divine child, born for the freedom of the world; he called him Wonderful Counselor, Mighty Hero, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

The New Testament proclaims to us the person himself. He is Jesus Christ, the child in the manger,

the preacher on the mount, the tormented man on the cross, the risen liberator.

So according to the New Testament the dream of a liberator, and the dream of peace, is not merely a dream. The liberator is already present and his power is already among us. We can follow him, even today making visible something of the peace, liberty and righteousness of the kingdom that he will complete. It is no longer impossible. It has become possible for us in fellowship with him. Let us share in his new creation of the world and – born again to a living hope – live as new men and women.

The zeal of the Lord be with us all.