

THE CHILD OF HOPE

Scripture Reading; Luke 2:8-14, RSV

One book I periodically reread is *Letters and Papers from Prison* by Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Those of you who recognize his name will recall that he was put in prison by the Gestapo for activities inimical to the Nazi regime. He spent several years in prison before his execution, just days before the Allies completely liberated that particular prison camp.

Bonhoeffer wrote especially poignant letters at Christmas and he also wrote two prayers for himself and his fellow prisoners to recite, one for the morning and another for the evening. I would like to quote from one of the letters and also the prayers that he wrote at Christmas in 1943.

For a Christian there is nothing peculiarly difficult about Christmas in a prison cell. I daresay it will have more meaning and will be observed with greater sincerity here in this prison than in places where all that survives of the feast is its name. That misery, suffering, poverty, loneliness, helplessness and guilt look very different to the eyes of God from what they do to man, that God should come down to the very place which men usually abhor, that Christ was born in a stable because there was no room for him in the inn—these are things which a prisoner can understand better than anyone else. For him the Christmas story is glad tidings in a very real sense. And that faith gives him a part in the communion of saints, a fellowship transcending the bounds of time and space and reducing the months of confinement here to insignificance.

On Christmas Eve I shall be thinking of you all very much, and I want you to believe that I too shall have a few hours of real joy and that I am not allowing my troubles to get the better of me...

When one remembers the time of terror so many are having in Berlin, it brings home to one more than anything else how much there is to be thankful for. It will certainly be a quiet Christmas for everybody, and the children will look back on it for long afterwards. But for the first time, perhaps, many will learn the true meaning of Christmas. (Fontana Books, p. 36.)

This Christmas prayer, uttered on Christmas morning of 1943, is indicative of the discipline of Bonhoeffer's devotional life in prison:

O God,  
Early in the morning do I cry unto thee.  
Help me to pray,  
And to think only of thee.  
I cannot pray alone.

In me there is darkness,  
But with thee there is light.  
I am lonely, but thou leavest me not.  
I am feeble in heart, but thou leavest me not.  
I am restless, but with thee there is peace.  
In me there is bitterness, but with thee there is patience;

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Thy ways are past understanding, but  
Thou knowest the way for me.

O heavenly Father,  
I praise and thank thee  
For the peace of the night.  
I praise, and thank thee for this new day.  
I praise and thank thee for all thy goodness and faithfulness throughout my life.  
Thou hast granted me many blessings:  
Now let me accept tribulation from thy hand.

Thou wilt not lay on me more  
than I can bear.  
Thou makest all things work together for good  
for thy children.

Lord Jesus Christ  
Thou wast poor  
and in misery, a captive and forsaken as I am.  
Thou knowest all man's distress;  
Thou abidest with me  
when all others have deserted me;  
Thou dost not forget me, but seekest me.  
Thou wilt that I should know thee and  
turn to thee.  
Lord, I hear thy call and follow thee;  
Do thou help me.

O Holy Spirit  
Grant me the faith that will protect me from despair;  
deliver me from the lusts of the flesh.  
Pour into my heart such love for thee and for men,  
that all hatred and bitterness may be blotted out.  
Grant me the hope that will deliver me from fear and timidity.

O Holy, merciful God,  
my Creator and Redeemer,  
my Judge and my Saviour,  
Thou knowest me and all that I do.  
Thou hatest and dost punish evil without respect of persons  
in this world and the next.  
Thou forgivest the sins of them  
that heartily pray for forgiveness,  
Thou lovest goodness and rewardest it on this earth  
with a clear conscience, and in the world to come  
with the crown of righteousness.

Chiefly do I remember all my loved ones,  
my fellow-prisoners, and all who  
in this house perform their hard service.

Lord have mercy.  
Restore me to liberty,  
and enable me so to live now,  
that I may answer before thee and before the world.  
Lord, whatever this day may bring,  
Thy Name be praised.  
Amen.

The evening prayer was written on the same day;

O Lord my God, I thank thee that thou  
hast brought this day to a close;  
I thank thee that thou hast given me peace  
in body and in soul.  
Thy hand has been over me and has protected  
and preserved me,  
Forgive my puny faith,  
the ill that I this day have done,  
and help me to forgive all who  
have wronged me.

Grant me a quiet night's sleep beneath  
thy tender care.  
And defend me from all the temptations  
of darkness.

Into thy hands I commend my loved ones  
and all who dwell in this house;  
I commend my body and soul.  
O God, thy holy Name be praised.  
Amen.

(pp. 167-170.)

This letter and these prayers reveal Bonhoeffer struggling in the midst of despair. One can still sense, however, that hope has triumphed. Bonhoeffer was a great theologian but above all he was a pastor, and his pastoral heart beats powerfully in his writings. Against the advice of American friends, he went back to Germany after the war broke out to be with his congregation. He went because he felt compelled by his ethical imperatives to do something to destroy the Hitler regime. He was arrested and finally executed.

I want to compare and contrast Bonhoeffer's mood and hope with a poem by Matthew Arnold entitled "Dover Beach." Arnold uses the image of the tide coming in and out:

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The Sea of Faith  
Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore  
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled.  
But now I only hear  
Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,  
Retreating, to the breath  
Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear  
And naked shingles of the world.

Ah, love, let us be true  
To one another! for the world, which seems  
To lie before us like a land of dreams,  
So various, so beautiful, so new,  
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,  
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;  
And we are here as on a darkling plain  
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,  
Where ignorant armies clash by night.

This is a poem of despair, of hopelessness. Like the withdrawing waters of the ocean at low tide, faith is losing its force. The only thing Arnold has to give him hope is that he loves someone and that their love for each other will remain true. Even in Matthew Arnold's day, if human love was the basis and foundation of one's sense of hope, you didn't have much. Why has faith lost its force? He says it is "the turbid ebb and flow of human misery." Suffering has a way of deeply affecting the lives of a Bonhoeffer and an Arnold. It either pushes one to great faith, to an affirmation of hope, or it pushes one over the brink to despair and hopelessness. It tends to divide the waters. I don't want to give the impression that if you have chosen hope that you have chosen the easy way. As you read Bonhoeffer, you sense that within himself he is struggling for faith, struggling for hope, struggling against despair.

When I first met with the Sligo Church Search Committee several years ago, they gave me a detailed job description and talked to me about all of the exciting opportunities I would have in this church. The members of the committee were not wrong: It is a great church. It is a great pulpit. It is a great congregation. It is exciting to preach to so many people week by week. It is exciting to be on the radio. It is challenging to work with a multiple staff. It is interesting to be close to the General Conference.

After all this long list of challenges, the one thing that nobody told me about (and I should have been smart enough to understand) was that by taking a position with this church, I was to participate in suffering in a way I hadn't done before. Nobody told me that being involved in the lives of the people of this church means being involved not only in their joy but in their suffering.

Young preachers don't think about that very much. While they are studying theology, they see themselves standing behind the pulpit. They see themselves chairing board meetings. If they think about the more dismal aspects of the ministry, they see themselves mimeographing bulletins or worrying about the budget. But they don't think about this other dimension and neither had I. As a college teacher, I dealt with very few people who were suffering terribly. There is an optimism and buoyancy among college students that is almost natural.

Shortly after coming to Sligo, Ben Plumb asked me to accompany him to the hospital to visit a small girl who was dying with a brain tumor. I must say that I was very apprehensive about this. You would like to think you could prepare a speech that would be helpful but you can't. We went and I sensed that the child's parents and friends looked to Ben and to me for comfort, sympathy, sharing but above all for hope. Feeling utterly helpless I sensed the frustration of Matthew Arnold—the tug of this scene of suffering was pulling my faith away.

On my way home with my eyes moist, I had an argument with God. I said, "Why don't you make an exception in this case? Let's have a miracle for once. Let's do something and really get people excited. Let's have hopelessness replaced with hope. Do me a favor. Get my ministry off to a good start."

But I had missed the point which I had preached so often and which is the source for my concern for this sermon. The miracle has happened! The joy is real. The hope is certain. It's certain because another child was born into a world where death would overtake him later. The tragedy is that most people today are not driven by the story to a deeper faith in time of adversity but to more cynicism and despair. Suicides go up around Christmas not down. People feel more lonely than before. Domestic quarrels increase. Crime goes up.

The story of the babe and the Christmas narrative has been so romanticized and sentimentalized and covered with so many layers of saccharin that it is irrelevant to the real world. People like to see the Baby Jesus with a halo around his head on a Hallmark greeting card. They like to see him as a symbol of peace on earth, good will to men. They don't see him as an aid in the struggle of life. The brilliant star that shines on the Christmas cards reminds one of Pinocchio's star, not the star of Bethlehem. Pinocchio's star says make a wish and all of your dreams will come true. The star of Bethlehem says, Make a wish and whatever hits you—bad or good—you can handle it. You can cope because there is hope.

A lot of people say the Christmas story is not believable, it is only a symbol. There are many historical elements in the story, however, that can be verified. For example, the Messianic hopes were rampant in the time of Jesus. In the Roman world the poets were expressing hope for a Savior.

In relationship to the star there are several interesting reasons why the appearance of a star was important at the birth of Jesus. Yes, there was the statement in Numbers about the star. Another major reason was that astrology had become widespread in the time of Christ. It developed early in the Mediterranean and had become a kind of quasi science. In the time of Alexander the Great in the fourth century, the study of astrology was accepted everywhere. (Later in Egypt it became the kind of astrology we know today.) [See *Anchor Bible*, Matthew, p. 14]

The Old Testament condemned astrology. The Jews were warned not to participate in it, yet there was considerable evidence that they were heavily involved in it. Josephus tells us that "the veil of the temple was adorned with stars and many excavated synagogues in Rome and Palestine have been found to have the signs—of the zodiac depicted in them." (*Jewish War*, V. 214.)

This means that in the minds of the people at that time, it would have been inconceivable for a Messiah to be born if a star did not accompany his birth. Knowing both the Old Testament stream that feeds into the belief of a star and also the Jewish preoccupation (although wrongly) with astrology God

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accommodates his people by sending a star. This is not a sentimentalized, romanticized version of Pinocchio. We are talking about an event that has strong historical roots.

The wise men from Babylon frequently traveled throughout the Mediterranean area and they found a welcome audience anywhere they went—courts, market places, etc. The consultation of the magi by kings and prominent persons is well attested outside the Bible. It is not unrealistic to believe that when Herod heard that three wise men had come from Babylon and were looking for a king, he would hasten to get them into the court. Herod was "constantly concerned with real or imagined usurpers." (*Ibid.*, p. 15.)

This story is not a sweetened version of a myth. It is a historical narrative. Because of this, we can have hope.

In my own life, Christmas does give that sense of hope. When I was growing up, we were at times very poor, but the one time of the year when it seemed there was surfeit of everything—food, presents—was Christmas. My grandmother was the one who made sure of that for her grandsons who had no father.

We visited our relatives in downtown Brooklyn and out on Long Island. My memories of Christmas are of Lionel trains going around the tree, of lights, laughter, good food, love, sharing, caring. Even though my life was far from ideal in many respects, that Christmas experience is something I both looked forward to and looked back on all year long. Until this day Christmas is still my favorite season.

I realize that it has become too commercialized and that the Baby Jesus has been buried under wrapping paper and tinsel. I think, however, that we should also remember that this is the time of the year when we consciously make an effort to tell people that we really care, that they matter, when we really try to share and when we set out to make people happy. This is a time when families can get together and reaffirm those warm ties. At least at Christmas hope can occupy the center of the stage and despair has to go into the wings.

I realize that I'm addressing some people who have recently buried spouses or close loved ones, but this spirit applies to you as well. This is the time of the year to rejoice. That doesn't mean that you have to go around in a giddy way. There is a sense in which one has to grieve. But I want you to understand that at the base of your being you are going to affirm something at Christmas that is real and true in the Scriptures. The Messiah has come. The Hope of the world has come—he is Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of Joseph and Mary, the Son of God. The Messiah will come again. For that reason we will not allow despair to dominate our lives, "For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord. And ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger."

As the shepherds did so long ago, may each of us find that Child of hope this Christmas.