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LAY CHRISTIANITY

Christmas Message by the Rev. Denis Muller Assistant Minister at the Swiss Church in London

"How can one speak of God as a layman? How can we live as secular and 'undevout' Christians, form a Church without considering ourselves as the heirs to a privileged spiritual calling and partake fully in the life of the world? Only then will Christ be more than a mere matter 'Religion' and really become the Master of this World."

Thus wrote the German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer to his friend Eberhard Bethge from his cell in the Berlin-Tegel prison in 1944, one year before being executed by the Nazis. He added: "We should speak of God not as lying on the fringes of life, but at its heart; not associate him with weakness, death and sin, but with strength, life and the goodness of man. God is at the centre of our lives and at the same time beyond our lives. The Church is not built on the outer reaches of human power, but in the centre of the village. This is what the Old Testament says,—and we all too often forget the relationship between Old and New Testaments."

The point made by Bonhoeffer is fundamental and has given rise to the most passionate theological discussions of the post-war days. The tragedy of the Church today is that it attempts to supply the answers to questions which hardly trouble the majority of people. Christians often fail to take the real problems of their contemporaries seriously and have difficulties in putting themselves in their place. They preach and do their best to live up to a Gospel which has no roots in the community and is devoid of meaning for the majority. Some Christians have even broken up with the Church because of its loss of credibility and its distance from the Gospel of Christ.

The true mission of the Church should be to bring to the world a Gospel which should help men to see clearly, and face their small and big problems in a responsible way. We live in a time of crisis requiring all our energy in solving such urgent and difficult problems as pollution, violence, unemployment, inflation, housing, sex, the generation gap, education and the decay of our traditional institutions.

The gift of love

A point which should be stressed and which has so often been forgotten is that the Gospel brings a message of joy and is given in a spirit of selfless

love. Faith is not a duty or a necessity, but a potentiality which is given to us freely and which arouses joy and energy when it is accepted. God offers himself freely to the knowledge and love of mankind because he is Love. "We love, because He loved us first", says St. John. Take the creation of the universe. Far from being a determined and programmed construction, as Voltaire would have us believe with his picture of the Grand Watchmaker, it is a free act, performed with the gratuitous pleasure of loving creation. In the same way, faith is a joyous and free response to the God's creative and constantly renewed initiative:

*It is good to give thanks to the Lord,
to sing praises to thy name,
O Most High;
to declare thy steadfast love in the
morning,
and thy faithfulness by night,
to the music of the lute and the
harp,
to the melody of the lyre.
For thou, O Lord, hast made me
glad by thy work;
at the works of thy hands I sing
for joy.
(Psalm 92)*

The use of the Gospel

What connection is there between our society and the freely-given character of the Gospel? It seems that if we had a better understanding of the dynamic nature of the Gospel, we would face our many duties in this world with more courage and a better conscience. Instead of bending slavishly under the burden of bourgeois morality, social convention and ideological conformism, we would answer God's call and the challenge of our times in a spirit of real freedom. Did God not create us to his image so that we should also become bold creators?

To say that the Gospel is gratuitous, that is, given freely, does not mean that it is of no use and intended only for the esthetic and selfish pleasure of a few believers illuminated by pious visions. The joy of believing cannot go hand in hand with the complacent acceptance of things as they are and inaction. On the contrary: by grasping that love is free and gratuitous, one breaks from the chains of selfishness and gives oneself entirely, without expecting anything in return.

An image can make this clear:

To some people, God's revelation comes as a kind of celestial fireball gripping them with extraordinary bliss. But this fireball whirls within them without reaching outside. However great the happiness of these people may be, it is useless. This experience in fact shuts them off from meeting their fellow men and can be considered as the wrong kind of piety because it has no hold on the outside world. Bonhoeffer had it in mind when he criticised "religion" and foresaw a new, secular and non religious, christianity. But there are other people whose flame sheds warmth on their surroundings. God's call doesn't shut them in and isolate them from other people. In this case, God's revelation opens up and changes an existence, brings men closer to each other, to society, and helps them to face concrete problems.

Christian and politics

The Bible tells us clearly that our spiritual life and our commitment to the word go together. Take the episode of Moses and the burning bush in Exodus 3. God appears to Moses in an unexpected and mysterious way: A burning bush that was not consumed. Challenged by Moses to give his identity, God answers: *I am who I am*. God thus presents himself as the One that is absolutely, the one that exists in fullness and in gratuity. Generations of scholars have sought to interpret this lapidary answer, but one tends to forget that God's self-revelation had a real and practical purpose. God did show himself to Moses in a kind of abstract exercise, but in the concrete political and social context of Israel. The Israelites were at that time held in slavery in Egypt and God appeared to Moses with the aim of setting them free. The author of the Book of Exodus expressed the truth so often preached by the prophets after him: No knowledge of God is possible without accepting the full responsibilities of life.

It is often said that a Christian, and particularly a minister, should stay out of politics and stick to his own field, which is "religion". It is difficult to be more mistaken. How can a man whose God is Love and Justice not speak out against the crimes and the injustice which he sees before him? Protecting faith against the so called secular invasion is not to enhance its value but to mutilate it and deprive it of all significance. Christ has come to save the whole of man, and not just

his beautiful soul. Moreover, he did not speak of individual salvation, but of the coming of the Kingdom, which is a community. How can one bear witness to the King of such a community if one refuses to obey his practical commandments in social, political and other domains? It is no longer possible to abide by an entirely theoretical faith ignoring concrete realities.

This brings us back to Bonhoeffer's question: How does one live the Gospel in the world today?

Firstly, Christians should bear witness to the fact that the Gospel was given to them as a free gift by commit-

ting themselves freely in some voluntarily service, with joy and no expectation of a reward. Under the guidance of the Holy and creative Spirit, they need to find new solutions and free themselves from the prejudices rendering all change impossible. Such a task can only be achieved in a life of loving and intimate communion with the God of Jesus Christ.

Secondly, Christians should give serious and competent consideration to the problems of society. Obviously, the Gospel may not supply a textbook answer to every particular problem that crops up. There may therefore

not be *one* Christian answer to the problems of pollution and abortion. Nevertheless, these problems must always be approached in the guiding, and sometimes perilous, light of the Gospel.

The Lord of joy and dancing tells us to go in the world, take all our fellow human beings by the hand, and build a kingdom. The magnificent task which we are called to undertake with an uncompromising sense of responsibility will bring its reward of priceless joy.

COMMENT

THE FREE-TRADE AGREEMENT HOW IT WILL AFFECT THE SWISS

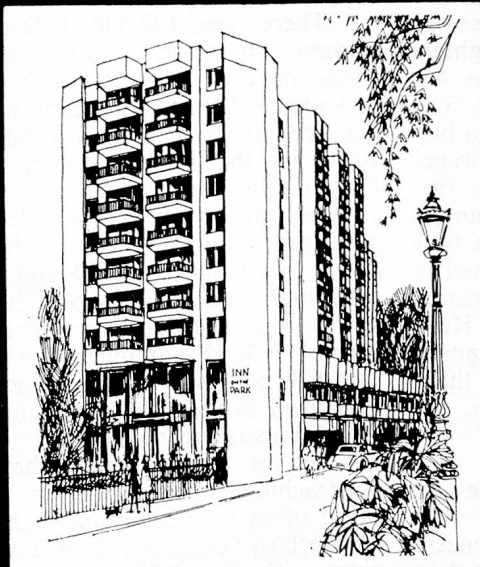
The Swiss people expressed their approval of the Swiss-EEC agreement on 3rd December. This democratic exercise was an almost foregone conclusion. The Swiss-EEC agreement being mainly a technical one, with direct effect on exchanges in industrial goods, our institutions will be left unchanged and the political involvement in Europe will remain as it has been so far: symbolic. Because the cherished principles of neutrality and direct democracy will not be put into question by the agreement, and also because it will not effect the livelihood

or way of life of significant sections of the population (as the fishermen of Norway), the issue cannot be said to have aroused much controversy.

The Swiss people, whether or not they have studied the lengthy document which was sent to them for their information, took the Swiss-EEC agreement as an accepted reality. All the parties except the National Action and Republicans have accepted the term of the agreement, and so have virtually all industries. What is more, the trade unions, which in Great Britain are the standard bearers of opposition to entry, supported the Brussels agreement. Contrary to British trade unions, which consider the Common Market as an invention of international capitalism, Swiss trade unions have realised that it offered possibilities for the improved welfare of their members.

There had been no constitutional need for bringing the issue to the people and the idea met with strong opposition from several experts. But the Federal Council and Parliament considered that direct democracy was not a dead letter and gave the Swiss people a chance of expressing their position on a matter affecting the future of the nation in the world.

The central provision of the agreement is that within five years, Swiss industry will enjoy a market of 290 million consumers. Present agreements with the Free Trade Association will naturally be ended with an initial impact on certain branches of industry, more particularly watches. But as barriers are progressively abolished, Switzerland will be open to, and have free access to, the first economic power in the world: the European Economic Community.



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Inn on the Park

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