

BY MERCY WOUND

THEMES OF INTEGRATED MISSION

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*I say that we are wound
With mercy round and round
As if with air....*

Gerard Manley Hopkins

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1. CREATION

When Pope Julius II chose Michelangelo to depict God in the act of creation on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel 500 years ago, the artist twice refused. He did not know what his own image of God was and he was sure that, however it came out, he would become a laughingstock. But the Pope, an impious and imperious man, insisted. “What image of God should I paint?” the artist wanted to know. “You must find,” Julius told him, “your own image.”

Michelangelo was a tortured soul, conflicted, promiscuous, knotted with guilt. What manner of god could he portray? He assembled his scaffold, and set to work feverishly, brushing into wet plaster a masterpiece. It is the sixth morning. The Creator thrusts out of a whirlwind toward Eden. His arm extends toward Adam as though in holy longing. And Adam, just awakening, reaches in response. Their index fingers almost touch.

We were created out of love

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was a vast waste, darkness covered the deep, and the spirit of God hovered over the surface of the water.

... Then God said, “Let us make human beings in our image, after our likeness, to have dominion over the fish in the sea, the birds of the air, the cattle, all wild animals on land, and everything that creeps on the earth.”

*God created human beings in his own image;
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them (Ge 1:1-2, 26-27, REB).*

It matters where we came from. In a common creation myth of the ancient world – the Middle East, Greece, Rome, Germany, Ireland, India -- humanity is created from the blood of a murdered god. The world then is seen as a theater of perpetual conflict in which the prize goes to the strong. The myth of redemptive violence endures to our day.

But behold the love of the Father, whose tenderness is caught by James Weldon Johnson, in the cadences of the southern black preacher:

Then God walked around,/ And God looked around/
On all that He had made./ He looked on His world/
With all its living things/ And God said:
I'm lonely still.

Then God sat down --/ On the side of a hill where He could think/
By a deep, wide river He sat down;/ With His head in His hands,/ God thought
and thought,/ Till He thought: I'll make me a man!

Up from the bed of the river/ God scooped the clay;/ And by the bank of the river/ He kneeled Him down;/ And there the great God Almighty/ Who lit the sun and fixed it in the sky/ Who flung the stars to the most far corner of the night,/ Who rounded the earth in the middle of His hand,/ This Great God,/ Like a mammy bending over her baby,/ Kneeled down in the dust/ Toiling over a lump of clay/ Till He shaped it in His own image;

Then into it He blew the breath of life,/ And man became a living soul... (www.nku.edu/~diesmanj/johnson.html).

... in the likeness of God.

Here is an idea so incredibly subversive it may be the most politically loaded claim of all. Who in Babylon, not to mention virtually the whole of the ancient world, was the image of god? The King, of course, who stands in for Marduk in the creation pageant, and whose authority is annually legitimated. Who, however, is in the liturgy of Israel? Humanity. Women and men. Human beings in community.... made for freedom and responsibility (Bill Wylie Kellermann in Walter Wink, 2002:28).

As the currency of England bears the likeness of the queen (see also Mt 22:15-22), so we carry a resemblance to God: rationality, self-consciousness, free will, our capacity for communion, our creativity, the enduringness of the self, the chance to share our Father's holiness and love, a homing instinct for him.

Dignity and freedom are our birthright.

In the Jewish tradition, the preciousness of persons is explained:

Only one single man was created in the world, to teach that, if any man has caused a single soul to perish, Scripture imputes it to him as though he had caused a whole world to perish, and if any man saves alive a single soul, Scripture imputes it to him as though he had saved a whole world.

Again, but a single man was created for the sake of peace among mankind, that none should say to his fellow, "My father was greater than your father." ... God has stamped every man with the die of the first man, yet not one of them is like his fellow. Therefore every one must say, "For my sake was the world created" (cited in Clark M. Williamson, 1999:132-133).

An angel goes before each person continually – tradition has it -- sweeping the path and saying, "Make way, make way, for the image of God."

God has set us in a moral place.

That moral nature is embodied in Jesus Christ. E. Stanley Jones wrote:

... Everything is made to work in its inner structure in Christ's way. If it works in His way, it fulfills the purpose of its creation – it works harmoniously, creatively, and happily.... If it works some other way, it works its own ruin, not by decree from without, but intrinsically; it is ruined by violating the law of its own nature. It is self-destroyed.

I believe that predestination is written not in the inscrutable will of God, as was once proclaimed, but written in our nerves, our blood, our tissues, our organs, our makeup. It is not merely written in the texts of scripture, but into the texture of our being.

Jones makes the prayer:

If I am on Thy Way, I am a train on the track running harmoniously and smoothly; but off Thy way, I bump along the ties. Save me. Amen (Jones, 1963:63).

He has garlanded us with promises.

Israel saw the Creation story in a larger covenant context.

*Rejoice in the Lord, O you righteous.
Praise befits the upright....*

*For the word of the Lord is upright,
and all his work is done in faithfulness.
He loves righteousness and justice;
the earth is full of the steadfast love of the Lord.*

*By the word of the Lord the heavens were made,
and all their host by the breath of his mouth.
He gathered the waters of the sea as in a bottle;
he put the deeps in storehouses.*

*Let all the earth fear the Lord;
let all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of him.
For he spoke, and it came to be;
he commanded, and it stood firm.*

*The Lord brings the counsel of the nations to nothing;
He frustrates the plans of the peoples.*

*... Truly the eye of the Lord is on those who fear him,
on those who hope in his steadfast love,
to deliver their soul from death,
and to keep them alive in famine.*

*Our soul waits for the Lord;
he is our help and shield.
Our heart is glad in him,
because we trust in his holy name.
Let your steadfast love, O Lord, be upon us,
even as we hope in you (Ps 33:1, 4-10, 18-22, NRSV).*

God intends to have a world “that generously and gladly attends to the goodness and extravagance of life. The power for life finally will not be administered in partisan ways by the ‘plans of humankind,’ by kings and nations, but is a power of undifferentiated generosity to which all have access, and to which the needy have privileged access. Those who seek to block this access and to violate this privileged access are, in the end, sure to be crushed by the very power they seek to control” (Walter Brueggemann, 1997:158).

Human flourishing is his delight.

God has written into our constitution the capacity for freedom, growth and responsibility. The Creator says to Adam, “Prosper! Reproduce! Fill Earth! Take charge!” (Ge 1:28, Message). It is the human vocation, the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire believed, to be Subject rather than Object. On this premise, he replaced the common domesticating, “banking,” form of education with an empowering, critical dialogue through which unschooled villagers emerged from their culture of silence to name, to act upon and transform their world.

Philip Yancey tells of going through old photos one holiday with his mother. They came upon one of himself in infancy. The photo was discolored and crumpled. Why? he wondered. His mother recalled that when he was 10 months old, his father contracted spinal bulbar polio and died three months later. He was totally paralyzed at age 24 and consigned to a large steel cylinder that did his breathing for him. There were few visitors except for Yancey’s mother. She would sit, day by day, where he could see her in a mirror bolted to the iron lung.

At his request, she affixed photographs – of herself and of the two children – between cold metal knobs. Yancey wrote:

I have often thought of that crumpled photo, for it is one of the few links connecting me to the stranger who was my father..... Someone I have no memory of, no sensory knowledge of, spent all day every day thinking of me, devoting himself to me, loving me as well as he could. Perhaps, in

some mysterious way, he is doing so now in another dimension (Yancey, 1988:255).

“Behold,” says St. John, “what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us...” (1 Jn 3:1, KJV).

2. INCARNATION

They all were looking for a king/ To slay their foes, and lift them high;/
Thou cam'st, a little baby thing,/ That made a woman cry (George
MacDonald, "That Holy Thing," 1883).

When God came down to us, he entered through a womb

Walter Wangerin imagines the human race as an abused teen, soiled and cold, living at the end of a tattered hall. She sits in her room, back to the door, knees tucked tight against her breasts, head down. Assuming the perspective of the heavenly Father, Wangerin wonders how he might reach the girl-child who is so afraid. If he knocked at the door, she would shudder and recoil. If he broke down the door or appeared at the window, it would prompt memories of unspeakable acts of violent men. If he should call, she would cower and cover her ears. Framing the divine dilemma, the author asks by what door then could love arrive to take her loneliness away, to make her beautiful and whole?

I'll make the woman herself my door – and by her body enter in her life....
However could she be afraid of her own flesh, of something lowly
underneath her ribs?

I'll be the baby waking in her womb. Hush: she'll have the time, this
way, to know my coming first before I come. Hush: time to get ready, to
touch her tummy, touching the promise alone, as it were. When she hangs
her head, she shall be looking at me, thinking of me, loving me while I
gather in the deepest place of her being....

And then, when I come, my voice shall be so dear to her. It shall call the
tenderness out of her soul and loveliness into her face....

And the sins that she suffered, the hurts at the hands of men, shall be
transfigured by my being: I make good come out of evil; I am the good
come out of evil (Wangerin in Calvin Miller, 1996:138-139).

*And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from
Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed. (And this taxing was
first made when Cyrenius was governor of Syria.) And all went to be
taxed, every one into his own city. And Joseph also went up from Galilee,
out of the city of Nazareth, into Judea, unto the city of David, which is
called Bethlehem; (because he was of the house and lineage of David)} To
be taxed with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child. And so it
was, that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she
should be delivered. And she brought forth her first-born son, and*

wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn (Lk 2:1-7).

... scorned, oppressed and poor.

Delicately, the story does not dwell on Mary's plight (Mt 1:18-21). In the United States where each year a million teenage girls get pregnant out of wedlock, her predicament loses its severity. In her culture, a betrothed woman who became pregnant was considered an adulteress and was subject to death by stoning. When the census was announced, Joseph could have left her behind. Did he bring her to Bethlehem to spare her the ignominy of childbirth in her home village? Philip Yancey observes, "... Small towns do not treat kindly young boys who grow up with questionable paternity" (Yancey, 1995:32).

Jesus entered a world of conflict and terror. He began life under the threat of death (Mt 2:16-18). Those who would have been his playmates were swept away by Herod's rage. Before he could walk, Jesus was a refugee.

Newspapers recorded the visit to the United States several years ago of a foreign monarch who brought four thousand pounds of luggage with two outfits for every occasion and mourning garb for an emergency, 40 pints of plasma and white kid leather toilet seat covers, a hairdresser, two valets and a platoon of other attendants. A brief visit abroad, it is said, can cost 20 million dollars. When God came into our neighborhood, there was no midwife, no family, no village chorus. Wrapped in random rags he was laid in a cattle trough.

He came to a little, peculiar place.

Jesus spoke Aramaic with a Nazareth accent, a trade language related to Arabic, a bitter reminder of Jewish subjection to foreign powers. Until adulthood he moved in the narrow orbit of a village boy. We are reminded,

The gospel always comes as the testimony of a community which, if it is faithful, is trying to live out the meaning of the gospel in a certain style of life.... Every interpretation of the gospel is embodied in some cultural form. The missionary does not come with the pure gospel and then adapt it to the culture where she serves: she comes with a gospel which is already embodied in the culture by which the missionary was formed. And this is so from the very beginning (Lesslie Newbigin, 1989:144).

He experienced the whole of our human drama.

... For whatever reason God chose to make man as he is – limited and suffering and subject to sorrows and death – He had the honesty and the courage to take His own medicine.... He can exact nothing from man that He has not exacted from Himself. He has Himself gone through the whole

of human experience, from the trivial irritations of family life and the cramping restrictions of hard work and lack of money to the worst horrors of pain and humiliation, defeat, despair, and death. When he was a man, he played the man. He was born in poverty and died in disgrace and thought it well worth while (Dorothy L. Sayers, 1949:4).

He emptied himself

The 17th century poet George Herbert, who himself forsook aristocratic privilege and a parliamentary seat to minister in obscurity till his death at 40, wrote:

Hast thou not heard,/ [what] my Lord Jesus did?/ Then let me tell thee a strange story./ The God of power, as he did ride/ In his majestic robes of glory,/ Resolv'd to light; and so one day/ He did descend, undressing all the way.

The stars his [tiara] of light and rings obtain'd,/ The cloud his bow, the fire his spear,/ The sky his azure mantle gain'd./ And when they ask'd, what he would wear;/ He smil'd and said as he did go,/ He had new clothes amaking here below (Herbert, 1981:276).

*[Jesus], though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death –
even death on a cross (Php 2:4-8).*

It is not in the nature of God to seize or clutch (*harpagnos*), but to pour himself out {*kenosis*} in exquisite generosity, in self-sacrificing love.

... took the form of a servant

“Before Jesus, almost no pagan author used ‘humble’ as a compliment” (Yancey, 1995:36). The service expressed an infinite care, as the servant song has it, “... He has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases” (Is 53:4).

Nearly one-fifth of the gospels is devoted to healing. Jesus sent out his disciples to continue this basic ministry (Mk 6:7-13; Mt 10:5-10; Lk 9:1-6). His interest in physical and mental health was greater than that of any other leader or religious system from Confucianism to Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam. Morton Kelsey writes:

If Jesus had any one mission, it was to bring the power and healing of God's creative, loving spirit to bear upon the moral, mental and physical illnesses of the people around him. It was a matter of rescuing us from a situation in which we could not help ourselves. Jesus disclosed a new power, a ladder to bring us out of the pit of our brokenness and evil (Kelsey, 1995:53).

He came as a servant (Mk 10:45; Is 42:1-4; 49:1-6; 50:4-11; 52:13-53:12; Lk 4:16-21). He was in fact what Tagore, the Indian writer, imagined God to be:

Here is thy footstool and there rest thy feet where live the poorest, and lowliest, and lost.

When I try to bow to thee, my obeisance cannot reach down to the depth where thy feet rest among the poorest, and lowliest, and lost.

Pride can never approach to where thou walkest in the clothes of the humble among the poorest, and lowliest, and lost.

My heart can never find its way to where thou keepest company with the companionless among the poorest, the lowliest, and the lost (Rabindrinath Tagore, 1935:8).

... and was obedient unto death.

Suffering is unavoidable: "Listen carefully: Unless a grain of wheat is buried in the ground, dead to the world, it is never any more than a grain of wheat. But if it is buried, it sprouts and reproduces itself many times over. In the same way, anyone who holds on to his life just as it destroys that life. But if you let it go, reckless in your love, you'll have it forever, real and eternal.... Right now I am storm-tossed. And what am I going to say? 'Father get me out of this'? No, this is why I came in the first place. I'll say, 'Father, put your glory on display'" (Jn 12:24-25,27-28).

Stanley Beers came to India as a cashier at Territorial Headquarters, Trivandrum. In the tedium and heat he did his work but with an eye to the moiling crowds below with poverty's terrible toll of disability, disfigurement, disease and death. He bought a medical book and began to pore over its pages under the weird glint of an oil lamp late into the night. For years he continued until he was released for study in England. In time, he returned to the sub-continent to add his skills to the medical enterprise of the Army. But his eyesight began to fail, perhaps a casualty of the study vigils of his early years. Eventually he became blind.

Perhaps, he thought: "Right now I am storm-tossed. And what am I going to say? 'Father get me out of this'? No, this is why I came in the first place. I'll say, 'Father, put your glory on display'" (Jn 12:24-25,27-28).

He returned to England for training as a physical therapist and came sightless to a new work in India, his hands become the hands of Jesus. Lt. Colonel Beers died in active service at Upper Coonoor. He was buried, a grain of wheat, on a fragrant slope of the Nilgiris. His was the pattern and power of his servant Lord.

Therefore God also highly exalted him.

*...and gave him the name
that is above every name,
so that at the name of Jesus
every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and
under the earth,
and every tongue should confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father (Ph 2:9-11, NRSV).*

In J.B. Phillips' fantasy, a senior angel is showing a very young one around the galaxies. When they come to our own, the senior points to a whirling body, undistinguished, small. "That," he says, drawing himself up augustly, "is the visited planet." The youngster is astonished. "This is where the Prince of Glory came? To become one of them?" the angel apprentice asks.

"... Strange as it may seem to us, He loves them," comes the answer. "He went down to visit them to lift them up to become like Him" (cited in Philip Yancey, 1995:44).

3. REDEMPTION

In the city of Bath in England, there is a venerable church with ten steeple bells. If you climb up to the tower midweek you can see ten parishioners at their practice, lunging at the huge ropes, enveloped in cheery cacophony as they “ring the changes.” St. Luke begins his gospel with such a joyous clatter, a carillon of hymns which are still sung throughout Christendom: of Mary (Lk 1:46-55), Zecharias (1:68-79) and of Simeon (2:29-32); Mary, of tender age, threadbare poor; Zecharias, marginal, rustic, childless; and Simeon, nameless except here, one of the Quiet of the Land. They had in common only this: that they were good. So they sang their hymns of redemption, ringing in the Savior’s nativity.

In their words, St. Luke anticipates the whole gospel drama.

Mary’s Song

My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,/ for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. /Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;/ for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name./ His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.

He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts./ He has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly;/ he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty./ He has helped his servant Israel in remembrance of his mercy,/ according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever (Lk 1:46-55).

The mighty one, the holy, redeems his people.

Mary’s prayer is electric with images of power: the arm of God which sweeps rulers from their thrones and cradles and lifts the broken, that fills the empty with “good things” (1:53). In awe she begins: (in the order of the Greek) “For did *to me* great things the Mighty One” (1:49). Quickly her mind moves out to generations past and generations to come, to promises that endure. She takes up the language of Hannah (1 Sa 2:10), ecstatic too at the birth of a miracle boy. She remembers Abraham and, doubtless, her ancestor David. All the light of sacred story gathers round.

‘Tis mercy all. How long! How wide!(1:50).

Mary cannot yet know that redemption will be strangely won, by God’s weakness, not his strength. Wrote M. Scott Peck:

I cannot be any more specific about the methodology of love than to quote these words of an old priest who spent many years in the battle: “There are dozens of ways to deal with evil and several ways to conquer it. All of them are facets of the truth that the only ultimate way to conquer evil is to let it be smothered within a willing, living human being. When it is absorbed there like blood in a sponge or a spear into one’s heart, it loses its power and goes no further.”

The healing of evil – scientifically or otherwise – can be accomplished only by the love of individuals. A willing sacrifice is required... I do not know how this occurs. But I know that it does.... Whenever this happens there is a slight shift in the balance in the world (cited in Philip Yancey, 1995:204).

His people are the world.

On Jacob’s ladder, Calvary love has made the stair a very wide one.

There’s a wideness in God’s mercy/ Like the wideness of the sea;/ There’s a kindness in his justice/ Which is more than liberty.

But we make his love too narrow/ By false limits of our own;/ And we lose the tender shepherd/ In the judge upon the throne.

For the love of God is broader/ Than the measure of man’s mind;/ And the heart of the eternal/ Is most wonderfully kind (Frederick William Faber in The Salvation Army Song Book, 1987:265).

In E. Stanley Jones’ Round-Table Conferences with devotees of many faiths, he would say:

We are all religious men, some more and some less, and we have all been experimenting with this matter of religion over a number of years. We have tried it as a working hypothesis of life. As we face the problems of life – its joys and its sorrows, its perplexities and its pains, the demands of duty, the moral struggle with sin and evil, the upward call to higher life, the desire to help our fellow men and to be of use, the craving for God, for redemption – what has religion brought to us? What has it brought to us of light, of moral dynamic for personal and social life, of inward peace and harmony, of redemption from sin and from the power of this world, of God?

Writing in 1928 after scores of such conferences, he was confirmed in his judgment that humanity is one. “I can no longer think of a man as a mere Hindu or Moslem or Parsee or Christian. He is a brother....” We have no right to teach others, he believed, if we are not learning from them. “The fundamental need of the human heart,” he concluded, “is

redemption. Life is not what it ought to be. The ‘ought to be’ stands over against the ‘is’ and will not let us rest.”

There was not a single situation that I can remember where before the close of the Round Table Conference Christ was not in moral and spiritual command of the situation..... As men listened to what those who were in touch with him were quietly saying, they instinctively felt that here was something redemptively at work at the heart of life, redeeming men from themselves and from sin, putting worth and meaning into life, giving an unquenchable hope to men, lighting up the inward depths of life, bringing them into fellowship with God in beautiful intimacy and furnishing a dynamic for human service..... Here was life catching its rhythm and bursting into song (Jones, 1928:21-22, 47-51).

Zechariah’s Song

Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,/ for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them./ He has raised up a mighty savior for us in the house of his servant David,/ as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old/ that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us./ Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors,/ and has remembered his holy covenant,/ the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham,/ to grant us that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies,/ might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all our days./

And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High;/ for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,/ to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins./

By the tender mercy of our God,/ the dawn from on high will break upon us,/ to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,/ to guide our feet into the way of peace (Lk 1:68-79).

As in the bursting of a dam, Zechariah’s words flood out in celebration of God’s redemption (1:68,69,71,77). But what does redemption mean? We have only pictures.

God sets us free.

He is like the kinsman-redeemers of Old Testament lore, like the shattered Hosea buying back the fallen Gomer in the glare of the marketplace – 15 shekels of silver, a homer of barley, a measure of wine. How much is the beloved worth? Slaves by dint of birth, or debt, or war, or crime – it did not matter. Ransom is paid (Lev 25:47f.; 1 Pe 1:8-19). Karl Barth in a Swiss prison, preached:

We are all great sinners. Please understand me: I include myself.... Sinners are people who in the judgment of God, and perhaps of their own consciences, missed and lost their way.... We are such sinners, and we are prisoners. Believe me, there is a captivity much worse than the captivity in this house. There are walls much thicker and doors much heavier than those closed upon you. All of us, the people without and you within, are prisoners of our own obstinacy, of our many greeds, of our various anxieties..... We are all sufferers.... We spend our life in the midst of a whole world of sin and captivity and suffering....

But now listen. Into the depth of our predicament the word is spoken from high: *By Grace you have been saved!* (Barth in Charles Van Engen, 1999:28).

He bears away our guilt.

It is a picture of the altar, where the cycle of failure is broken, our sins carried away (He 9:11-28) as on the head of the scape-goat Azazel, driven away, far into the wilderness (Lv 16:6-10).

He wipes our record clean.

The accused stands in the court room, resourceless and afraid, when by a miracle, the sentence is commuted, the record is expunged (Ro 3:23-26; 1 Pe 2:24). A child in one parish was said to hear God speak. The bishop called and said, "My dear, you are very young to make such claims." But the child insisted. "Very well then," said the bishop, "I will test you. Ask God what I said in my last confession." The child agreed and returned the next day with her answer. Did she speak to God, the bishop wanted to know. Yes. And did God speak to her. Yes. What did the bishop say at his confession. The child replied, "God couldn't remember."

He overthrows the powers.

"He disarmed the rulers and authorities and made a public example of them, triumphing over them" (Co 2:15; 1 Jn 3:8). Walter Wink writes:

According to the gospel, God has, through the event of Jesus, freed us from every Power that could separate us from the love of God (Ro 8:31-39). If, then, we are not yet free, it is either because we are unaware of our bondage, or because we think we are benefiting in some way from continuing to allow a Power other than God to have sovereignty over us. Since God has broken their power definitively, the Powers now have only such power over us as we continue to allow them" (Wink, 1992:285).

He vows to us his love.

In Jesus, God has committed himself to our race, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health (Jn 14:22-24). “He is able for all time to save those who approach God through him, since he always lives to make intercession [*entugchanein*, to act on the behalf of those to whom one is committed] for them (He 7:25).

To my mind, which sees things in pictures, Christ does not bow before the Father in supplication that God will have mercy on his own children, but rather that Christ endlessly is at work with and within man, by all the ways open to love – without coercion, or bribing, or favouritism – to effect a unity, an at-one-ment between man and God (Leslie Weatherhead, 1965:77).

Simeon’s Song

Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace,/ according to your word;/ for my eyes have seen your salvation,/ which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,/ a light for revelation to the Gentiles/ and for glory to your people Israel (Lk 2:29-32).

The dawn breaks upon the nations

Simeon, we may imagine, was elderly, his view of the nations tempered now. He knew that by the dawn light, grace can be seen in unlikely places. Said Wesley,

The benefit of the death of Christ is not only extended to such as have the distinct knowledge of his death and sufferings, but even unto those who are inevitably excluded from this knowledge. Even these may be partakers of the benefit of his death, though ignorant of the history, if they suffer his grace to take place in their hearts, so as of wicked men to become holy (cited in Theodore Runyon, 1998:35).

Hence our solidarity with women and men of every faith and of none. As a race, our bark is small, the sea is dark. We owe each other a terrible loyalty.

... and glory crowns the mercy seat.

Simeon ends with the glory of Israel, where of old, the shekinah hovered above the mercy seat.

Malcolm Muggeridge, the curmudgeonly journalist, reared in an agnostic home, wrote:

I would catch a glimpse of a cross – not necessarily a crucifix; maybe two pieces of wood accidentally nailed together, on a telegraph pole, for

instance – and suddenly my heart would stand still. In an instinctive, intuitive way I understood that something more important, more tumultuous, more passionate, was at issue than our good causes, however admirable they might be....

It was, I know, an obsessive interest.... I might fasten bits of wood together myself, or doodle it. This symbol, which was considered to be derisory in my home, was yet also the focus of inconceivable hopes and desires....

As I remember this, a sense of my own failure lies leadenly upon me. I should have worn it over my heart; carried it, a precious standard, never to be wrested out of my hands; even though I fell, still borne aloft. It should have been my cult, my uniform, my language, my life. I shall have no excuse; I can't say I didn't know. I knew from the beginning, and turned away (cited in John Stott, 1986:45-46).

Later, he turned back.

4. KINGDOM

“He showed me a little thing [wrote Julian of Norwich, the 14th century anchoress] the quantity of a hazel nut in the palm of my hand; and it was as round as a ball. I looked thereupon with the eye of my understanding and thought: What may this be? And it was answered generally thus: It is all that is made.... In this Little Thing I saw three properties. The first is that God made it, the second is that God loveth it, the third, that God keepeth it” (cited in Evelyn Underhill, 1964:24).

With Julian’s comment, an American professor gave a hazel-nut to a friend racked with the pain of terminal cancer. After his death, the hazel-nut was found cracked under his pillow. It had cracked as he held it daily through the pain. He found comfort in the symbol of God’s loving intention.

The kingdom is where God’s will is revered and revealed

Jesus set the kingdom in our daily prayer:

After this manner therefore pray ye: Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil: For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen (Mt 6:9-13).

... and all life’s powers bloom.

The kingdom, Jesus said, is the realm of right relationships, a place of unimpeded growth, the residence of holiness, the protectorate of shalom.

The yearning for the kingdom is a universal archetype of Eden. In the imagery of the wilderness, the prophet wrote:

... Water gushes in the desert,/ streams in the wasteland,/ the scorched earth becomes a lake/ the parched land springs of water./ The lairs where the jackals used to live/ become thickets of reed and papyrus..../ And through it will run a highway undefiled/ which shall be called the Sacred Way.... The redeemed will walk there.... They will come to Zion shouting... everlasting joy on their faces (Is 35:6-10, JB).

And again, in the language of the mysterious Servant Songs which Jesus took as his own:

The spirit of the Lord Yahweh has been given to me,/ for Yahweh has anointed me,/ He has sent me to bring good news to the poor,/ to bind up hearts that are broken;/ to proclaim liberty to captives,/ freedom to those in

prison;/ to proclaim a year of favour from Yahweh... / to comfort all those who mourn and to give them/ for ashes a garland;/ for mourning robe the oil of gladness,/ for despondency, praise (Is 61:1-3, JB; see Lk 4:16f.).

Our Lord loved to speak of the kingdom, and in the most homely ways.

The kingdom grows unseen.

The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened (Mt 13:33).

Here is the aroma of Mary's kitchen as she bustles at the bread board, three measures of flour – enough for a large family -- a little leaven, and lo, a transformation. The gospel has indeed wrought such a change for (among others) the weak and the ill, the aged, the dispossessed, the abused. “There is nothing in history so unanswerably demonstrable as the transforming power of Christianity and of Christ on the individual life and on the life of society” (William Barclay, 1958:90).

The smallest sign is not disdained.

The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches (Mt 13:31-32).

Here is the charm of Jesus' childhood garden, little hands caressing a seed, committing it to the dark soil and waiting for what might arise from a beginning so insignificant and small.

Precious it is beyond all measure

... What woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, “Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost” (Lk 15:8-9).

Is this Mary again? The coin may have belonged to her marriage head-dress, valuable yes, but dear for sentiment's sake. Was Joseph now gone? Was the coin an emblem of his rugged worth? In the dark house, as she sweeps the earthen floor, there is a glint, an exclamation of joy.

... and accessible to all.

Someone gave a great dinner and invited many. At the time for the dinner he sent his slave to say to those who had been invited, “Come; for

everything is ready now.” But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said to him, “I have bought a piece of land, and I must go out and see it; please accept my regrets.” Another said, “I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I am going to try them out; please accept my regrets.” Another said, “I have just been married, and therefore I cannot come.” ... “Go out at once into the streets and lane of the town [said the owner] and bring in the poor the crippled, the blind and the lame.” And the slave said, “Sir, what you ordered has been done, and there is still room.” Then the master said to the slave, “Go out into the roads and lanes, and compel people to come in, so that my house may be full” (Lk 14:16-23).

Matthew condenses Jesus’ invitation: “Change your life. God’s kingdom is here” (Mt 4:12-17, Message; see also Mt 3:2; 10:7; 12:28). But its fullness lies ahead.

The kingdom is our only cause

... Being Christians means being followers of Jesus, by definition. So being Christian means nothing other than living and struggling for Jesus’ cause.... To look at things with Jesus’ eyes, we have to look at everything... from the standpoint of the Reign, from its interests; to feel things with Jesus’ heart, we have to feel everything out of passion for the Reign, lying in wait for the Reign” (Pedro Casaldaliga and Jose-Maria Vigil, 1994:81).

Whenever women and men, under whatever flag, pursue justice and righteousness and peace they serve Kingdom ends. They are our comrades in the battle for a better world.

... our only ground of hope.

Lesslie Newbigin, for many years Bishop of Madras, asked what new thing has dawned with the coming of Jesus. The answer is twofold:

First, that the kingdom of God is no longer a formal concept into which we are free to pour our own content in accordance with the spirit of the age. The kingdom of God now has a name and a face: the name and the face of Jesus....

Second, the new thing that we have already been given a foretaste of the kingdom in the gift of the Spirit to the believing and committed community. It is the presence of this foretaste, this *arrabon*, this gift already of a true measure of the justice and peace of the kingdom, that makes the Church a witness to the gospel and that makes its preaching gospel and not law. It is the presence of this new reality which (when the church is faithful) prompts the questions to which the preaching of the gospel is the answer. The true missionary dialogue, in other words, is not initiated by the Church. In a secondary sense it is initiated by the outsider

who is drawn to ask: What is the secret of this new reality, this life of praise, of justice, and of peace? In the primary sense, however, it is initiated by the presence of the Spirit... (Newbigin, 1989:134).

One of the brothers came to Mother Theresa in distress. “My vocation is to work for the lepers. I want to spend all my life, my everything, in this vocation.”

“You are making a mistake, brother,” she responded. “Your vocation is to belong to Jesus. He has chosen you for himself and the work is only a means of your love for him in action. Therefore it does not matter what work you are doing, but the main thing is that you belong to him... and that he gives you the means to do this for him (Theresa, 1985:87).