

Religion NOW

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THE NAZARETH PROGRAMME

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim
release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour."

- St. Luke 4:18,19.

The New Testament Gospels tell us that early in his ministry Jesus went, as had been his custom from boyhood, into the synagogue on the Sabbath day to worship. He was invited to read the Scripture lesson and to speak. He read the above words of the prophet Isaiah, then he applied the words to himself and them. We are told the congregation disbelieved him and openly expressed their anger by rejecting him and the message.

Two thousand years have elapsed and the message is still preached and still being rejected. What is wrong? Is it the idea? Is it us? The people of Nazareth had the chance to hear the message from Jesus himself and, instead of being persuaded became angry and drove the messenger away. Christianity has swept the world, yet the message, though proclaimed, is not taken seriously nor actively tried.

The cynics will claim that the human being, by our very nature, wants to crush opponents, and the vast destruction caused by innumerable wars down the ages, is proof that humans are destroyers.

Yet the history of humankind indicates that when given the opportunity we are principally builders, searchers for better modes of life and for wider horizons. What counts most is the will of individuals to improve themselves.

The hope of a secure and livable world lies in the disciplined and dedicated minds and hearts, set not on the preservation of any status quo, nor of the sanctified stupidities of the past, but on the building of an order in which the possibilities of life may be

realized.

The historical background of Jesus' message was the belief that a people, the Hebrews in this case, had been given the revelation and purpose to promote the kingdom of God in the world. With exactly the same meaning we may more understandably use the term the realm of God. The very heart of the New Testament teaching is that the nearness of the realm of God is a promise of the closeness and familiarity of the power for good to be found within us.

The realm of God seeks consciences. It deals with character, not birth or position. It has no boundaries.

Jesus, like the Hebrew prophets

(The Nazareth Programme, cont'd)

before him, lived in the hope of a great transformation of the national, social, and religious life about him. Jesus sought to lead people to this goal. He rejected all violent means and thereby transferred the inevitable conflict from the field of battle to the antagonism of mind against mind, and of heart against lack of heart.

The fundamental virtue in the ethics of Jesus was love, because love is the society-making quality. Christianity seeks to prepare people for the nobler social order of the realm of God by stimulating and developing the dormant faculty of devotion to the common good in all of us.

Love in the New Testament description is not a casual sympathy, but the highest and most steadfast energy of a will bent on creating fellowship. In fact, the writers of the New Testament had to create a new word to differentiate the meaning of love as they had experienced it. They used the Greek word *agape* meaning love so different from ordinary love that it could be used to describe God. It is love that is unconditional, a matter of will rather than emotion, and conveys the idea of *showing* love by action.

This divine type of love or *agape* knows no limits. It reaches out and down even to ones enemies. Like God who causes the sun to shine upon the just and the unjust, Christian love enables one to love their enemies and pray for them that persecute them.

The application of *agape* to social relations and problems is our best hope for a solution to our social, political, world problems. There must be energetic and beneficent good will on the behalf of others; there must be an unselfish giving of ourselves for others if we are to relieve the tensions and distresses of our world. Only in this way can the atmosphere be created which will be favourable to a

resolving of the conflicts between competing groups and classes.

Some people consider it far-fetched to believe that *agape* can and will be applied in and to the world and its problems. They contend that it is unrealistic to think that *agape* can ever be a reality in the world. The early Christians taught that love is at the centre of human nature and quite possible to be developed fully. As the First Letter of John states, "...if we love each other God does actually live within us and his love grows in us towards perfection." It also exhorts, "...let us love not merely in theory or in words - let us love in sincerity and in practice!"

The Nazareth programme is a manifesto to every generation. It contains the principles by which we must judge ourselves and our society.

"To study justice seems a contradiction in terms.

How can we study justice?

Justice means acting, making decisions, trying to break the barriers and equalize inequity, doesn't it?

Justice means struggling against principalities and powers

Learning what the vision of the Realm of God is all about,

Becoming a prophet as well as a politician,

Being responsible for our own actions

But also realizing that we are governed by the society in which we live,

So that we must move out and try to change that society."

- Nancy Hardy

THE ANGEL STANDING IN THE SUN

"Then I saw an angel standing in the sun."

- The Revelation to John, ch 19, vs 17.

Symbolism is an important element in our learning and experience. Imagination weaves the visual context of knowledge. When that which we can see, taste, or feel are not present, we imagine them as we have perceived them. When we have not seen an object, we use imagination to portray it.

Symbolism comes from two Greek words meaning to put two things together. We take the unseen but sensed object and describe it as an obvious object. This is the way we harmonize our existence.

For example, I hold in my hand a five dollar bill. It is worth very little in itself - a little paper and fancy printing. But its worth is symbolic for it stands for trading value which enables me to receive for it goods, products, and services from others.

The prevalence of figurative language in religion is due to religion's attempt to make a connection between two things of which one is concrete and physical, the other abstract and referring to intellectual, moral, and spiritual matters. Symbols are a common way of giving tangible expression to ideas belonging to the realm of the spiritual.

The book of the Revelation to John in the New Testament contains a great deal of symbolic language. One of these is the statement, "I saw an angel standing in the sun."

Here we have a symbol of the heavenly vision, being able, supposedly, to gaze directly into the blazing midday sun. It represents divine vision and learning.

A disordered generation such as ours shakes the confidence of many in religion's basic truths. When science

puts in place of the certainty of faith the uncertainty of knowledge, the conscious mind sees itself isolated in a world of psychic variables, with no roots or connecting relationships. The changeableness of the world around us causes our trusted stabilities to fail, leaving us in a disturbed society, feeling out of control and without continuity.

Let us look at this symbol for the heavenly vision, this discernment of things spiritual, this awareness of the divine and eternal in our midst.

First of all let us recognize that there is THE SPIRITUAL IN THE MATERIAL.

When we speak of heaven we are not speaking of a physical place. The term is a metaphor for the inner spirit, knowledge, vision. Here is to be found ones dynamic centre of being. We are more than trained animals, we have moral imagination, creativity, knowledge as our destiny.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning has immortalized the knowledge of the spiritual in the material in a few lines of verse:

"Earth's crammed with heaven,
And every common bush afire with God;
But only he who takes off his shoes,
The rest sit round it and pluck
blackberries."

The symbol of the angel standing in the sun suggests also that we look for THE DIVINE IN THE HUMAN. If it is the leaven of spirituality that gives meaning to the material world, it is the element of the divine within us that gives

(Spiritual in Material, cont'd)

significance to human life.

In India there is a beautiful greeting in which the palms of ones hands are placed together symbolic of prayer, and you bow to the other person. This symbolic act says that the god that is in you recognizes the god in the other. This is a recognition of the divine presence in humanity. When you visit an Indian home as a guest, you are greeted as a visiting deity.

After a Sunday morning worship service I conducted, a thoughtful boy approached me and asked me where was God in this church building he had heard called "God's house." I don't remember my answer, but it was inadequate. A few Sundays later the lad came to me after church, a wide smile on his face and declared he had found the answer to his question of a few weeks past. He said the answer came to him during that morning's service as he continued to muse over his question. He said, I looked around over the congregation of people and realized that God was here in the people present. He had found God in God's house.

We talk too much these days about punishment and responsibility, and not enough about discovering and developing the good within one another until it blossoms in even better lives. As the writer of the Letter to the Romans stated, "Don't allow yourself to be overpowered by evil. Take the offensive - overpower evil with good."

This symbol of the angel standing in the sun suggests as well THE ETERNAL IN THE TEMPORAL.

This word "eternal" is not used much by us, but it means timeless, unchangeable, happening very often, unceasing, endless. This is as opposed to the temporal which is temporary, lasting only for a time, limited, transitory. The

temporal is concerned with clocks and watches, schedules, and time tables. The eternal has to do with meaning, bliss, steadfastness, and perpetuation.

The New Testament beatitudes speak firsthand of eternal meanings. They emphasize the "blessedness" of the inner disposition of a person rather than something which outward circumstances may have caused them. Blessed means something like contentment and happiness. Charles Templeton pointed out that "Most men and women want to find happiness, but you don't find happiness any more than you find steel. You refine steel from the rough ore and you fashion happiness from life's opportunities."

Happiness, or blessedness, is not having what you want, but wanting what you have. One can be poor, know what sorrow means, lonely, desire goodness, seek mercy and peace, yet find the spiritual resources to overcome and to live life to the full.

There is a force, a strong force for good in our world, and like the force of gravity is to our physical world, the Law of Love as taught by the New Testament is to our moral world; a silent but mighty and all-persuasive force, throwing its magical aura upon the isolated actions of the everyday, giving impulse and direction to the whole of life, ruling alike the little eddies of thought and the wider sweeps of benevolent activities.

Centuries ago St. Paul confronted his world and said, "I have complete confidence in the gospel for it is the power of God." Today, in the world of megawatts and nuclear fission, we can say the same thing.

"Religion NOW" is published in limited edition for family and friends by the Rev. Ross E. Readhead, B.A., B.D., Certificate in Corrections, McMaster University. Address mail to comments@religionnow.ca