

THE GREAT DISPENSATION

At a Basel University Christmas Service, 1957

O Lord, our God! Thou hast humbled thyself that we may be exalted. Thou hast become poor that we may be rich. Thou hast come to us to draw us to thee. Thou hast become man like us to make us partake of thine eternal life. All this thou hast done in thy free and undeserved compassion. This thou hast done in thy dear Son, our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

Lost in wonder before this mystery, we are met here to adore thee, to proclaim and to hear thy word. Yet we know that we lack the power to do it unless thou makest us free to lift up our hearts and minds to thee. Therefore we pray: Descend now into our midst! Reveal and open for us the way to thee by the power of thy Holy Spirit! Enable us to see with our own eyes the light that has come into the world, and to be thy witnesses in every act of our lives!

'Our Father . . .'

The Lord is at hand. Have no anxiety about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be known to God.

PHILIPPIANS 4.5-6

DEAR FELLOWSTUDENTS, COLLEAGUES, FRIENDS, a good friend of mine wrote me from Holland a week ago to wish me for the Christmas season as much celebration and as little ceremonial as possible. I liked that. Yet I don't want to waste one minute in criticizing or decrying the many religious and secular Christmas ceremonies of a public or a private nature. Their questionable features are well enough known. Of one thing I am certain. Christmas is an occasion for celebrating, and not for ceremonial.

Celebrating! This suggests holy days and holidays. We think of vacations, of rest and relaxation, of pausing in the rough-and-tumble and fret of everyday life. In peace of mind we shall celebrate Christmas. Let us take special notice right here that Christmas is not a short-lived affair as holidays usually are. A true Christmas celebration is an event that penetrates our hearts and our lives. It takes possession of us and does not relinquish us any more. We breathe freely and no longer gasp. We are permanently freed from unrest.

This 'celebrating' is indicated by Paul when he says, *Have no anxiety about anything*. Dear friends, this is the announcement of the great Christmas holy day and holiday, of everlasting and complete vacations. We shall not be anxious? No, we need not be anxious! We can afford not to have anxiety about anything. We may accept this dispensation and make use of it. This is the true Christmas celebration, *Have no anxiety about anything*.

When we do have anxiety, we take ourselves so seriously as to imagine that we are able to solve the great problems of life by ourselves. We feel in duty bound to shoulder, like Atlas, the great burden of life and all the lesser loads, to manipulate them, master them and get them out of the way. We realize—don't

we?—that anxiety has a great deal to do with ceremonial. When we are anxious, we get ceremonial. Where there is ceremonial, anxiety lurks backstage.

Burdens and questions of life—yes, they are real. We all want so much to be happy, conceivably because we are somewhat unhappy. This is a problem in our life. Another one is how to discern our purpose in life, and how to live up to it. Still another question is how I rate with the people around me. Am I sufficiently esteemed? Do I get my due? How can I get along with this fellowman or that one, how can I stand him, how can I perhaps even help him? What about human existence? Is it bearable, is there any sense in being born? A very serious question indeed! He who has never considered it shall go to Sartre and Camus and learn from them how to take it seriously. What is man's eternal destiny, his salvation or maybe his damnation?

Paul's comment on all these questions, including the last one, is, *Have no anxiety about anything*. This is the great dispensation. It does in no way deny the seriousness and genuineness of these questions. It only asserts that we are freed from the compulsion to tackle and solve these problems by ourselves. It is not your business to procure your own happiness; it is not your business to stake out the purpose and task of your life, even less to determine whether or not you live up to it. Hands off! Quit worrying about the limitations and the results of your work. Furthermore, it is not up to you to make out your fellowman, neither in terms of his shortcomings nor in terms of his achievements. And lastly, it is not up to you to decide whether human existence is meaningful, let alone to gain eternal salvation or damnation.

Have no anxiety! This is to have a good holiday, to pause and breathe, to take it easy, definitely to enjoy vacations!

You ask perhaps how these comments relate to Christmas, to the celebration of Christmas. They have a great deal, even

everything to do with it! For if it is truly deliverance from anxiety, if it is truly genuine, then this celebration is allowed and commanded by the message of our text. If it were not the celebration of Christmas, it would indeed be a dubious undertaking. It would betray a foolish, even a pernicious blindness to the seriousness and the burdens of life, of arbitrary and inexcusable frivolity, of existential hoax. Or it would denote a worn-out and irresponsible scepticism. God keep us from these 'celebrations' which are but manifestations of disguised anxiety! We can dispense with them, too!

The invitation to a genuine, anxiety-free celebration is extended by the Lord who is at hand. It is the Lord whose birth the angels announced to the shepherds at Bethlehem, he 'who is Christ the Lord in the city of David'. The Lord whose star is not only a thousand times but infinitely more important than the successful Russian sputnik and its unsuccessful American counterpart! The Lord of heaven and earth, the eternal God who deemed it not too high and not too low to become like us so that we may become his. The Lord who in his life and death as a man loved the world and reconciled it unto himself. The Lord who took upon himself all questions and all burdens of life, putting them out of the way to make us live with him and in him. 'Glory to God in the highest and peace on earth towards men with whom he is so infinitely well pleased!'

The Lord is at hand. Not, some comforts of religion are at hand; these are but another sign of man's inability to comfort himself. Nor is the Church at hand with its old and new teachings and theologies or with its orders and institutions and with its traditions. The Church's existence is validated not by witness to itself, but only by witness to the Lord who is not dead, but alive, who has not passed away and is past, but comes. He comes now and he comes not only to the other fellow, but to you and to me. 'Behold, I stand at the door and knock.'

The coming of this Lord is the mystery of the great dis-

persation. As the storms of spring thaw the ice and snow, and the fire kindles the tinder, the Lord wipes out our anxieties and sweeps them away. We need not care because we are taken care of, because we are rightfully released from the grip of anxiety, because it would be wrong to worry all the same.

You ask me: 'What remains to be done by us, the carefree?' With this question a new anxiety creeps in, disguised in proud defiance. It is stubborn yet violent, as if the best and most sacred qualities of human life came under attack. What odd creatures we are! We talk about our anxieties, they make us miserable, yet when the great dispensation is announced and we are told not to be anxious, then it becomes evident how much we appreciate, even treasure and nurture our worries and our own self in them. I shall never forget the phone call I once received from a good old friend of mine who dished out her complaints. She was suffering from asthma and depressions and I tried to comfort her with an old nursery rhyme:

*Der lieb Gott het recht an mi denkt, und het mer hit vyl Fraide
geschenkt
Er b'hietet me and segnet me: s'isch hitte luschtig gsi!*

The good Lord thought of me today, he gave me lots of fun,
He watches me and blesses me: my place is in the sun.

She interrupted most violently. 'No, the Lord did not think of me; no, I did not have lots of fun!' Her troubles were too dear to her heart, and she refused to get rid of them. It is, of course, also quite possible that I failed to convey to her the right word of comfort.

But, you will object, is this resistance to depart with our anxieties not appropriate and important at times? Let us suppose we avail ourselves of the great dispensation. Then what? The

questions and burdens of life which our Lord has taken upon himself are still with us, casting their shadows about, although the anxiety is gone, melted like ice or burnt like tinder. Are we condemned to folding our hands in our lap and being idle? Would this be a respectable existence, a life worth living? Might not this state of suspense give birth to new anxieties?

No, we are not kept in abeyance. When the Lord is at hand and shuts the door to anxiety, he opens another door for us. He leads us on firm ground and proposes things and activities that are far better than worrying. Paul describes these 'far better things' as follows: *But in everything . . . let your requests be known to God.* This is what Christmas invites and encourages us to do as those whom our Lord saved and freed, and delivered from the prison of anxiety. God does not need to be told all our troubles and fears, but we, like children, may bring before him and talk over with him all our concerns, great and small, important or less important, intelligent or foolish. We may tell him how difficult life is, how we are puzzled by things and persons around us, above all where we have to blame ourselves for these difficulties and fail to get along with each other. We may indeed tell him all these things *in prayer*, in great and genuine humility; *in supplication*, in childlike insistence and trust; with *thanksgiving* for the knowledge that our Lord has already put aright man's disorder, and for the grace to come into his presence. All these are summed up in our *requests* that his countenance may not cease to shine upon us amidst the surrounding shadows, and that we never cease hoping for their dissipation, for the lifting of the fog and the veils that dim our vision. These are the 'far better things' awaiting us when we are delivered from anxiety.

Only *prayer*, then? Yes, only prayer! Have you ever really tried to cast all your cares before the Lord in fervent and insistent prayer? Not as a routine matter, but because the Lord is at hand? Have you ever (as you should) dared letting all your requests be known before God, praying as his brother,

as his sister, as God's child? Whoever has tried and done this knows that such prayer, nothing but prayer, includes vigilant, steady and effective action. He is not afraid that prayer might not be sufficient. Rather, through prayer, he will be incited to bring his life, his thoughts, his words, and his deeds step by step into accordance with his supplications. He will make small and unassuming, yet very definite steps, confident and even gay steps despite bewilderment. In an unintentional and unforeseeable way, he will shed some light for others on this dark earth.

In this sense, let us celebrate Christmas joyfully. We may and we can do it; we have every reason to do it—*The Lord is nigh!* How can we *not* keep a joyful feast?

Dear Father through our Lord Jesus Christ! Put aright what we did wrong, including this imperfect worship service and the many other Christmas celebrations to which we look forward with understanding or foolish hearts! Thou art able to make water flow from the rock, to change water into wine, and to beget children of Abraham from these stones. Thou dost so in the unspeakable faithfulness which thou hast pledged to thy people and evidenced again and again. Thy loving-kindness shines through the gospel, and we may abide in it in all adversities of life. For this we give thee thanks, imploring thee not to let us harden our hearts against it. Keep stirring us from the sleep of indifference and from the bad dreams of our pious and impious passions and greeds! Never cease to lead us back to thy ways!

Restrain the folly of the cold war and the mutual threats whereby the community of men is exposed to mortal danger. Bestow upon the governments and upon those who mould public opinion new wisdom, patience and decisiveness that are so sorely needed for establishing and preserving the rights of all men on thy good earth! Grant, we beseech thee, that the work done in our city, in our churches, in our University and in our schools be not deprived of thy light and thy

blessing, to the well-being of us all and to thy glory. Above all we pray today for the many whose Christmas joy is overshadowed: for the poor, known and unknown, for those ageing in loneliness, for the sick and the mentally ill, for the prisoners. May thy light brighten their days! Lastly, we entrust to thy care our loved ones near and afar, as well as ourselves, asking thee mercifully to extend thy hand over our life, and when the time comes, over our departing.

Lord, have mercy upon us! Thy name be praised, now and forever more. Amen.

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