MEDITATIONS ON THE CHRISTIAN HOLIDAYS

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CHRISTMAS
A WHITE CHRISTMAS
A green Easter can almost be taken for granted, but that people in Australia even celebrate a green Christmas -- well, that is something we find difficult, if not impossible to envision. Most of us would probably think it very unsuitable to celebrate Christmas in shirtsleeves, have turkey dinner on the patio, and hear "glory-to-God" in the summer vacation.

Our Christmas just isn't authentic unless it has snowed. Our Christmas cards often depict Bethlehem swathed in blankets of snow, and our poems rhyme the wise men through snow drifts to the door of the stable:

the three kings cough between their red ears, their noses run and there's frost in their beards.

It seems the longing for a white Christmas has numerous sources penetrating even to the very depths of our subconscious. Snow drops in on us like welcome company during the holiday season because it makes things all the more thoroughly a time of domestic warmth, motherhood, and child-like innocence. Snow has almost (most certainly has) become the exclusive prize -- property of department store managers who, during Christmas time (that sweet, harm-
less, peaceful, and voracious little delirium), according to Van Ranwijk, time and time again, prove themselves to be the most up to date and efficient soul winners. If along with all the other store rooms at their disposal they also had command over a storehouse of snow, they would no doubt see to it that every year had a white Christmas as long as the white beard of Santa Claus. People seem to know how to give a little color to everything -- even to the birth of Christ -- without realizing just how clearly they reveal the true colorlessness of their own lives. Our white Christmases are dangerously close at home between the whitewashed graves full of dead-men's bones.

The snow on Christmas cards certainly isn't fresh snow, and there can be no prancing around in it with our brand new boots on. At best we can only glide over it in a reindeer sleigh. Christmas isn't the time for us to pretend we are Laplanders either. The real Laplanders are more at home with the "never more to sleep" of Hermans than with the "sleep my children sleep" of old St. Nick. Real snow can be so prosaic that Carmiggelt could relate in his innocent way: "My friend Ben from Eysselstein once prayed poetically: 'Oh Lord, let it snow'. And at that very moment his prayer was heard,
This has all been just a preface, since the title probably had you expecting some sort of admonition, and we did not want to disappoint you on the very first page. After all, nowadays it is quite reasonable to expect a contemporary Christmas book, or essay, to take issue with all the old clichéd Christmas wishes -- since it still seems that even a contemporary preacher really can't get in the right mood for Christmas until he first gets a little worked up over "the true Spirit of Christmas."

But the angels did not sing: "good will to men -- except for the Christmas card salesmen and turkey farmers!" The intention of their hymn of peace on earth was hardly that we should chime in with our lament over the counterfeit peace in many department store cash registers and in many church pews! Do we think that the Lord -- who preached his first sermon by changing water to wine -- had the same objections against lavish Christmas dinners as his stingy disciples?

How much of a homey hot-chocolate flavor has really disappeared anyway, now that old Christmas stories (in which all the snow was trampled flat by frostbitten lost sons on their way home) have been replaced by interviews in
which (to revive the spirit of brotherhood) well-known celebrities explain how they hope to spend their Christmas? After all, whereas the lost sons came home, the celebrities usually stay at home. Is staying at home however, only possible in the manner of the eldest brother? And is going away for Christmas only possible by following in the footsteps of the youngest son? Is everything romantic or dramatic always from the devil? Or may we not also be as delighted as the little girl who had so often heard talk of how much better pre-world war products were, that one white Christmas morning she asked "Is that there pre-world war snow?" "God does marvelous things" said Job "because he says to the snow" fall on the earth!"

In reaction against Schleiermacher's "Christmas celebration" and everything (even vaguely) resembling it, some preachers have for years already been quick to warn: Christmas is not poetry, but sacred fact; not candlelight, but dogma; not homey holy family time, but antithesis between the seed of the woman and the serpent; not a little stable with a tiny crib, but the critical intersection of all the lines of history; not the story of an ox and an ass, but of a dragon in the air; not a time for intimacy, but for apostleship. This ought to, and perhaps does
speak to contemporary youth who have become cold and hard in a cold and hard world. The Christ child probably shivered a little himself, and the crib must have been as hard as the heart of the innkeeper. But behind the coolness of modern youth is a longing for warmth and things romantic.

With poetry having all but disappeared from most Christmas sermons, some people have begun to get nostalgic again for the ox and donkey. The prose-proclamation of the first Christmas angel has crowded out the poetry of the multitude of heavenly hosts praising God. We would really like to recover some of the "warm good heartedness" of the old Reformed writers who, according to B. Wielinga, we have nearly intellectualized to death. In many traditions people have turned Christmas night into too much pure daylight. Christmas night has become completely illuminated in all its nooks and crannies by our theological spotlights.

It is true that the manger is the center of the universe and the Christ child himself has set the stars in their courses. It is true that we must open wide the door of the stable in order to get an outlook on the whole history of the world. It is true that the word "and" with which
the Christmas story begins invites us on the 25th of December to turn the pages back to Genesis. It is true that there is little reason to take pleasure in the fact that no newspaper appeared on Christmas. It is true that Bethlehem lies in the middle of the world -- deep in politics and taxes. But when such deep backgrounds open up behind the manger that the walls of the stable get pushed back over the horizon, we might understandably also begin to long for the medieval poems in which we can smell the warm straw. Is that romantic drive in us something the gospel demands we answer only in an individual manner? Or is it possible for the intimacy of Bethlehem's stable to actually get lost in the space of redemptive history? That is certainly something to consider when we see how the intimacy of life can get lost in our "technological space age". It is interesting and perhaps worth noting that the American astronauts (those space travellers by profession) have become very attached to a great variety of mascots. Likewise, swarms of toothaches and motor-troubles bedevil people in advertisements and Rodenko has called this "a poeticizing of an all too abstract-technical world." Redemptive history and cosmology can also become hobby horses that cast shadows over the word of Gabriel: "You shall name him Jesus." After too many sermons about "Christmas and world history" or "Rome and
Jerusalem" or "Christ the officebearer" or "Christ and Cosmos" we are tempted to sigh: take the world, but give me Jesus!

Contemporary man passes himself off as a man of broad daylight who would never think to keep any thing under cover in Bethlehem. But he is also sensitive to the mystique of twilight: "I am an evening man" (Achterberg), "I am a man for the red evening sky" (Hans Ledeizen).

It is true that Christmas is too cosmic and too universal to be shut up in the snug atmosphere of family life (in some regions people have never yet even had the opportunity of seeing the cosmic meaning of Christ's birth). Yet shouldn't the thought that Jesus comes to save the whole creation be expounded at least once in such a way that it becomes clear to modern man: Jesus comes also to restore warmth, the coziness of candlelight, poetry, and snowflakes falling past the window? He has also come for the twilight man!

What men won't do to keep warm! They take to drink and loose company, and it has been said that in areas dominated by inclement climatological circumstances, alcohol serves the limited and specific function of an extra warm pull-over. So perhaps when the Christmas season becomes the
liquor season it is due to the coldness of the white Christmas in people's hearts: "Those cold hearts like frozen birds without a sheltered nest in which to rest."

Shouldn't it rather be the time for homeless birds and restless Abrahams to find something of a nesting place again in the warm celebration of Christmas? No, -- no returning to the womb, no turning back to Ur, but perhaps at least an inn along the way, a blazing fire for people who are just passing through -- in the middle of politics and taxes. Our heart stays cold as long as we say: I need just one more "before I hit the road again." Yet even if we get what we want, we feel even more empty than before. But as soon as we begin to give we feel warm inside like the wisemen from the East, coming and going with their gifts for the child.

A Christmas sermon ought to be more than just a tirade against decoration, ornaments and tinsel. It is a chilling prospect to think that we may live in a time in which there is no room left for shepherds and angels, and ox and an ass, with a child in a stable, much less all normal children, not to mention all people in general. There can be found reflected in some art for example, the attitude that the only things of any importance anymore are primarily
things which are for consumption. I am thinking of a painting by Allan d'Archangelo ("Christmas Eve") in which a completely empty expressway is visible without a sign of any people around. There crops up in the distance only a little sign with an arrow and the word "Bethlehem". It stands there as purposelessly as a Christmas angel without shepherds, like a glory-to-God-in-the-highest without any peace-among-men-on-earth.

But a glory-to-God without people could never really be to the honor of God. God began with a white Christmas -- as white as the color of bright daylight fully reflected. The gospel begins with a white Christmas angel and follows through to the people in white clothes: God's light finally fully reflected. It speaks for itself that the Easter angel is robed in white: a red or purple angel is unthinkable. Besides such an angel has never sinned. But could a white angel appear to soiled men? Can what is holy call to a sinner: come here, fear not! If the Easter angel is white, it must mean that, seen from heaven, the women and disciples were already clothed in white as well -- like the followers of the rider on the white horse. After Jesus second coming it will be an everlasting white Christmas for God's people. So let's try to remember
everything this "color" points to in the Bible: white means, yes, forgiveness to be sure (even though your sins are as scarlet, they shall become white as snow), but also purity, peace, and victory.

So let's look at the snow during Christmas this way: in the eyes of the Father it is the white flag of our surrender; the Son sees in it the field that is white for harvest; and the Spirit recalls for us White Thursday before Good Friday: a token of the complete remission of all our sins.
two

WE WOULD RATHER FIGHT THAN KNEEL
On TV once an interviewer had a conversation with Abel Herzberg. As a fervent Zionist, he was asked: "How did you feel when the State of Israel was established?"

We thought he would say, "I stood aghast with joy."

But he said: "Ach..." (that was a shock; the work 'ach' at such a moment as that!) "I felt a little disappointed, because my ideal had been realized! In Israel, people were telling the story of a Jew shaking his head and saying, "We have been waiting 2000 years for this and it had to come all of a sudden in my lifetime!"

This specimen of typical Jewish humor casts a surprising light on the celebration of Christmas: A man can love ideals but shrink back from their fulfillment. It seems that we are especially fond of the anticipation of advent only because we do not have much taste for Christmas. Christmas has little meaning apart from a fact: the joy of our desiring become realized. But we prefer to extend our longing a while and therefore we clandestinely prolong the weeks of advent until old years eve. Christmas actually becomes a kind of fifth Sunday of Advent, and gets seen through the starry eyes of our unfulfilled longings. Our unfulfilled longings become the star of Christmas; and because unfulfilled desires occasionally give everybody
goosebumps, everyone fancies he is celebrating Christmas. With Easter this doesn't work quite as well since Jesus cries out all too clearly: it is finished.

How could the shepherds in Bethlehem after having been faced by an angel with what was an accomplished fact, then have thought "we have been waiting for the Messiah for thousands of years and he had to come all of a sudden tonight!?" If that's what they had thought they would have stayed put (all though somewhat out of sorts) and watched heaven fade out of sight and darkness cover everything again. They would have counted their sheep: "Yep, same number as before the angels invaded the pasture; everything is just like it was." Rather, instead they hurried to the stable -- to the fulfillment that brings an irrefutable end to an advent already centuries long.

It is strange we see more in the promise than in the fulfillment. We sometimes get a subtle nostalgia for the hunger winter of '44 when the only reason for living was up to our expectations. We had to look forward to something! During the war everyone said: it's going well -- as the bombers ploughed the whole night through. Today birds greet the dawn with hymns of praise and everyone
says: Things are going to the dogs. Children's cheeks are flushed with excitement before Christmas, but Christmas night itself they nearly go to bed of their own accord.

Our song is one of longing -- the story of our life. We think we can be human just with our Christmas wishes. We can still sing "O holy night...it is the night of the dear savior's birth" as long as we can add to it, "I'm dreaming of..." "Who is interested in problems that have already been solved?" asked Greshoff, "who is satisfied with a goal that has been reached already?" Realization and fulfillment doesn't suit us. We are fishermen, who aren't out for the fish, but for the fishing.

When Jacob had to work for Rachel, a thousand years were to him as a day. But as soon as we have our Rachel by our side the daily routine begins to sing its tiresome refrain a thousand times each day: "Waking up, washing and dressing, eating breakfast together, three hundred sixty five times a year" (Bloem). Vestdijk claims that his wife is still his prize possession, but "I would like to relive the first coolness, the twilight zone of those
predawn hours when one asks himself with a shiver: is it love yet? No, not yet, not quite....

We prefer the "not yet" of advent to the "Today" of the Christmas angel. We prefer "to cruise like Moses for forty years on the fringes and borders of success" (Kuyle) than to settle down in the promised land. The people in Nazareth enjoyed Jesus' advent sermon about the blind men who would see and the cripples that were going to walk. Such future expectations fit in so neatly with those of their own: Jesus fit neatly in their line of prophets and poets. But when Jesus turned it into a Christmas sermon: "Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your sight" they stuck their fingers in their ears and cut loose with a wail which would later crescendo into "crucify him!"

"Tomorrow the blind will see" said Jesus and the people applauded. "Today those who were blind have begun to see" said Jesus, and they concerted to throw him out of the city at once. He had said "Today". Did the kingdom have to come all of a sudden in their time? They preferred the twilight of the Old Testament where from one page to the next, from flood to captivity, men asked each other: is it love yet? no, not yet, not quite....
Even the longing of Marsman was directed to the past: he wanted to be a soldier in the most passionate days of all time. Herzberg would like to have lived again through the days when he was still fighting for his ideal. Jacob enjoyed the time he had to work for Rachel. We resist finding, because we are so much the center of attention in the seeking. "I am a seeker" sounds less bourgeois than "I have found solid ground." Seeking is something we can do for ourselves. But when the angel says: "you will find a child, lying in a manger" then we are at a loss. We cannot accept it that we should receive such a present.

A couple of students did an experiment once. They began handing out ten dollar bills on the street: "Would somebody please take one?" People stood still but no one wanted to take any. Finally the students began simply handing the bills to people as they passed by, but the people always gave everything back. Finally one man agreed to take a single ten dollar bill -- which he took straight to a bank to see if it was counterfeit. That is the difficulty of Christmas: when it is free we don't trust it anymore.
There has to be more to it. It's beneath our dignity to receive something like that. We all too gladly make Christmas into a celebration of giving -- which is not so bad, but is it really in keeping with Christmas to retreat into giving because we are afraid of receiving? The same Vestdijk who wanted to relive the twilight time, said about the grace of Christ, "I refuse to touch such overwhelming noble-mindedness." And the same Marsman who wanted to be a soldier was indignant over such animal-like meekness: "All the faithful knelt like falling grain, only those standing around the pillars remain." We would rather fight than kneel: the distance between the ideals in our heads and the solid ground at our feet is just too great.

But when we are touched by the liberating initiative of God and have shaken off the fear of liberation, then we can kneel like the wisemen next to the shepherds because God -- the infinite one who has wrapped his arms around our expanding universe including the endless discoveries of a restlessly advancing science -- this God has bent so low, and become so deeply involved, that right next to the greatest scholar even the smallest child can peek over the edge of the manger.
three

A CHILD HAS NO PAST
There is a Jewish witz -- which is more than just a joke -- about a woman who was reading the story of Joseph. When she came to the passage where his brothers put him into the pit she began to cry, "Oh you poor motherless orphan, what a cruel world it is!" But when she was reading the Bible again a year later and came across the same event, she no longer felt any sympathy for him. Instead she became angry and cried, "What a schlemiel you are! You don't deserve any sympathy; You know what kind of brothers you've got -- and you still start up with them all over again!"

In such a witz we can see a mixture of humor, tragedy, and simple wisdom. The woman thought Joseph was starting over because she was starting over. Even at a new beginning people take themselves as the yardstick. But as long as we start out of our own situation, any new beginning is more fancied than real. Any really new beginning is only possible with intervention from above. God knew what we were like and He still started up with us all over again. That is Christmas.

Christmas is the kind of beginning in which God comes as -- a child. "You will find a baby" was hardly what the shep-
herds must have expected to hear. But just because there is no really fresh start possible by beginning with us, He had to begin at the beginning.

When people in the previous century no longer thought it possible to believe that God had become a child — because that was contrary to human reason which was being acclaimed as a new god by the rationalists — they really should have abolished Christmas. They could say nice things about children in general but the child in the manger meant no more than any other child. Still, they did not want to do away with Christmas altogether, so they just paid homage to the "spirit" of it all.

In those days the long and short of Christmas became "the value of things." There were speeches about the usefulness of raincoats, and sermons about the value of adversities. In Germany one minister even abused the pulpit one Christmas morning by preaching about the value of keeping the stables clean: But what is left of Christmas when we are no longer led to the Christ child, but to the usefulness of a compost pile?

In the stable of Bethlehem there is no room for our hobby-horses or pet peeves.
A newborn child can't talk yet. But if it could, it would never utter certain sentences. A tiny baby would never sigh: "If I had only..." or "I wish I had..." With us, however, these are almost daily expressions. The trite refrain "If I had only stayed home by momma" is more profound than it first appears. Our life bears the stamp of a thousand if-I-had-only's: If I had only known; If I could only do it over again...; I wish I had never met him; If I had only listened to my father; If I had only kept my mouth shut. All these "if-I-had's" are sometimes hoarded for so many years down in the basement of our hearts that they start to get moldy.

But a new infant is unburdened with such things. A child has no past.

There has only been one child who was born with a past. The child of Bethlehem already had quite a life behind him. He was the very son of God, but he never said "If I had only..." or "I wish I had...."

He didn't try to live out of the thought, "If I had only stayed home by my father in heaven:" He came as a child, which is to say, a man without a past. He wanted to
completely forget that he was not like all other men. He wanted to be so completely one of us that he refused to be a man until he had first been a child.

He lay -- without if-I-had-only's -- in the manger, and He was nursed by his mother as if He had never seen the heaven of his Father. He slept right through the singing of the angels and probably wouldn't have recognized the Christmas angel even if He had seen Him. In becoming a man he left behind his previous home.

He didn't take His past with Him to Bethlehem. He became a man in becoming as a child.

Later when He was grown up, He spoke those words which so obviously conflict with our grammar: "Before Abraham was, I am." But in the manger he knew nothing of Abraham. God became a child without a past.

And what happens now when we go to meet him? Not being able to leave them at home even on Christmas, we enter the stable with all our if-I-had-only's of the past.

There are, to be sure, people who try to get away from their past by pulling themselves up by the hair of their
heads towards a "higher sphere." For them Christmas means stepping outside of themselves for a few days -- getting free from their past for at least a little while. (The past is like a bad joke you are forbidden to tell around the Christmas tree;.) So people sing about the hovering angels (even though the Christmas angels were standing) and even begin to float away themselves. There is never as much flying around as that which takes place around Christmas. It is as if the law of gravity had been declared out of order for a few days. Men who are in flight are men without if-I-had-only's. For that reason people must also think it very unpleasant to celebrate Christmas away from home, since that is when there is still one I-wish-I-were-at-home obstructing their flight.

German war criminals sang Christmas carols with tears in their eyes; homesickness still bound them so strongly to the past that they seemed like angels flying too close to the ground to keep from colliding into each other like punctured balloons. Even when we stay a little more down-to-earth, we aren't always entirely successful either.

Even on Christmas morning our if-I-had-only's accompany us to church. But that isn't bad -- that's just where
they ought to go. After all, why did Jesus leave His past at home? So that we can leave our past with Him:

We can never get anywhere with our if-I-had-only's. As long as we keep walking around with them, we will always eventually collapse under them. A man is ruined by his own past. A man of his past has no future anymore.

There is one address where we can rightfully come with our past: the stable of Bethlehem. There we may safely deposit all our if-I-had-only's or I-wish-I-had's....

We are newborn children. It is a breathtaking experience to suddenly let go of the past and still not hover, but to stand, with both feet on the ground. That is what the gospel calls forgiveness.

Forgiveness is not something we accept so that afterwards we can keep on going. Forgiveness takes hold of us. We are completely turned around. It makes us child-like again.

But that's easy, someone may say, it's just like a child on a visit -- everything is forgiven and forgotten. But
it is not that easy to find a real child. Michael Quoist wrote: "It is difficult to hold nothing back for yourself, to give everything away -- even your joy -- so it can be carried by the other; it is exceedingly difficult to always walk with Him, holding on to Him, reaching His hand, and to become so small, simple, and humble that finally people even consent to carry you." That is our turned around world: we become more and more of a child, and get a year younger every Christmas; first we walk, but at last we let ourselves be carried.

When my children were playing one Christmas vacation with crackling sparklers and fireworks, I was reminded of the king who wrote shortly before his death: "My life has been like a rocket, like a roman candle that has been lit and whizzes aloft strewing its luminescence all around itself; but when I had reached the apex -- with my sparks glittering like a thousand stars -- there was suddenly an ominous crackling, and, disappearing from the eyes of those who stood staring at me in amazement, I fell to the ground, turning to dust and ash."

That too belongs to becoming a child: no more of our past glories remain than of our past troubles either.
Besides our sorry if-I-had-only's we are also freed from our proud still-I-had's and but-I-was's. It no longer makes any difference who we descended from, and where we went to school and how we worked ourselves from the bottom up. We stand back -- very literally and concretely -- at the beginning. A baby in a crib doesn't wear medals. What a promotion it is for us that a child has no past! But also what mortification:

Now we can understand why Mary sang: "He has brought down mighty kings from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly." Only as a child would God reveal these thoughts to us. And now a new depth of meaning can also be seen in this verse. The proud ones who are brought down (who can no longer say: still I was once...:) can be the same people as the lowly who are lifted up (who need no longer say: if I had only...:).

When we climb down off our throne, we can leave our cares behind. What a child that must be who can successfully make us like children once again!
four

A THIRD INTERVenes
"Sometime when you are on television again," someone asked me, "couldn't you tell our family that we can't understand why they never visit us?" I never fulfilled that request because I was afraid that not only those concerned but also many others would think "he means us!" And while one would flare up: "That is just like Uncle Peter to ask the minister to do that" another would flip over backwards with "Now that is something my father-in-law ought to hear!" while yet another would stiffly observe "Let Aunt Jane come by us instead!"

In nearly every family there is some kind of feud. How can that be?

I am struck time and again by how often two people with the best of intentions can still misunderstand each other. Carmiggelt tells the story of a widower and his only son: one day the man came home and found that his silver cigarette case had been scratched with a sharp object. He began to scream "Who did this?" His little son tremulously confessed, "I did." The father became furious and the child burst into tears. Finally the father asked "What, for Pete's-sake, did you want to
carve on it for?" Then came the answer, "I wanted to carve on it 'Hi daddy. Love, John'."

We are like that child: we want to give someone something, but they take it wrongly. And we are also like the father: we get angry when we really should say "thank-you". We continually carve on each others cases.

Is it really possible to ever understand someone else? Kossmann wrote, "We are always busy trying to translate other people's cuneiform script into our own slightly deciphered language...; you sit day in day out creating, by means of observation and fantasy, an image of the other which in the last analysis doesn't bear even the remotest resemblance to them. People move so fast you can never really get involved with them." Others are always cuneiform characters to us. Is real deep-going contact with someone else possible?

I am reminded of a one act play about a home for the blind. The director -- who is the only one who can see -- is greeting in his office a lady accompanied by her deaf and dumb son. She wants to visit her blind cousin and the director, being friendly, accompanies her. Thus the deaf
and dumb boy, about sixteen years old, is left alone for a little while in the room. Then some of the blind people also enter the room. Hearing the deaf and dumb boy moving around they recognize it as an unfamiliar noise and so they begin to call out and feel around the room. When they get no answer, they become afraid. "Wasn't the staff payroll just brought in a few minutes ago?" "A thief must have broken into the room!" When the deaf and dumb boy notices the hostile gestures of the blind people, he also becomes afraid. He makes various meaningless gestures and tries to push his way out. The mutual fear then causes a serious fight to break out, and finally one of the blind persons excitedly grabs a knife and stabs the deaf and dumb boy in the eye -- at the very instant that his mother returns to the room.

The touching point of this piece is easy to grasp: there was no single form of communication which could take place between the blind and the deaf and dumb, so that the drama had to reach its inevitable conclusion. Things had to run amiss. Nothing would have gone wrong if a third party who could speak had entered the room. But as long as the blind and the deaf and dumb were left alone together, there was no grain of hope. They had good intentions, but their fear of each other threatened their own lives.
There we sit -- in the room of the director -- locked up within ourselves. We feel along the walls in order to find the enemy, and we make desperate gestures to show we have no lethal intentions, but we cannot reach each other and soon someone in his excitement goes and pushes the nuclear button.

How can that be stopped?

Well, most humane people -- those with the best of intentions -- say: we must accept each other and be tolerant and appreciative of each other. But in order to maintain our agreeability, we must understand each other. , , do you know what I mean? You do?: Good: Then we are agreed: But have we really understood each other then?: Even if the world were a bowl of nodding yes-men -- what then?: Granted that I have to understand you and you must understand me, but there is so much else that has to be done as well: What sense does it make to reach an understanding if nothing changes? If we will really understand each other, we must understand something else first. We must understand our situation. What does humanity mean? That is something we cannot look at because we are right in the middle of it. Blind and deaf and dumb people cannot solve their own problems by themselves (that is a dangerous
mistake in all our self-made world-views -- humanistic or religious -- we want to find a solution among ourselves).

But a third party must enter from the outside -- one who is neither blind or deaf and dumb -- but one who can see and explain to us the situation we are in -- someone who stands above our situation -- who is unprejudicially no respecter of persons; -- one who is totally impartial. This other one must open our eyes to the right way we should go.

As soon as we can see the way things fall together we can understand that father with his silver case and the son with his pointed object, but they could not understand themselves by themselves.

Unless a third party intervenes, and steps in between us, the drama will always reach its inevitable conclusion. And therefore Jesus Christ has come into the world -- into our office and our room. He doesn't go along with us -- as a man among men -- in our dramatic brotherhood of play actors. That we must understand for sure: All his words of wisdom wouldn't help us a bit if He were no more than just another one of us -- even if He were the best of us all.
He comes from another side. He comes from God. He is God. He **can** look at us.

Our condition must be announced to us because we are deaf and blind and too opinionated to recognize the fact. We would rather stay caught up in our inevitable drama than to listen to the one who enters into our situation, the only one who can **see**.

Jesus is not the best one, but the only one. And that is a scratch on the silver case of our conceit. So we get angry when we ought to say thank-you-very-much -- for the scratch is a cross that marks us for life.
five

THE SOL OF CAESAR
What happened with a certain lady television announcer in Wenen is almost enough to make you cry. Someone sent her a thousand shillings with the remark, "Because you always look at me so sweetly." The lady announcer reported the following day that the shillings in question could be picked up at such and such a place; she had no use for them; naturally someone else promptly showed up at the counter and was just as promptly picked up by the police and charged with attempted theft.

Someone said: "The announcer was in the right, she could look as sweetly as she wanted to, but the man was mistaken if he thought that among the millions of viewers she was looking only at him." That's true, of course, but the man was probably just longing for someone to smile at him. Some people can be perked up as quick as it takes to wink at them. There are people who have committed suicide who would have been stopped if just one person had said "good evening" to them that day on the street.

I literally feel I am not a man if I am only a little drop in the sea of humanity.
In an orchestra of Russian serfs, each person played one solitary note each time it appeared in the piece. Later as the players passed them on the street, people seeing them would say: "Look, there goes the do, or the re, or the mi, or the sol of Sir Narisjkin!"

Even today we easily get the same unavoidable feeling: all I ever play is one note, and never the whole score; just as, in an auto factory the man on the assembly line who gives each car that comes by a swipe of brown paint is known for the rest of his life as the brown-paint-applier, and another further down the line is forever the indicator-on-the-speedometer-setter. (Quite a mouthful, but hardly meaningful).

We too can feel: I am the sol of my company, I am the mi of the ministry, I am only an inconspicuous note on the staff and people do to me what music critics have been accused of doing: they break open the notes to see if there is anything inside to pour the salt of their criticism on.

I am only a person if I pay social security.
Is there really someone somewhere who can personally address me with a "you"?

Who am I really?

Will I eventually submerge into anonymous nothingness, or always remain a particular person? But then there must be someone who forever looks at me, who in a mass of people will look squarely at me. But who ever does that -- look at me?!

All their looks just rush past me; every gaze is just a grazing one, and thus a gibe. They all look, like announcers, not at Herman, but at everyman. People only look at you when they can see their own reflection in your glasses. Once in a while we do get a very personal invitation, but even with that it is likely we will still feel like the acquaintances of Elizabeth Taylor whom she invited to "a small intimate little party" -- of 18,000 guests. In that light it is almost comforting to hear a farmer's wife riding on a train exclaim: "Do you come from Amsterdam, sir? But then you must know our son Henry!"
Why are there so many "neurotic" people nowadays? Because there is no one to take a fully personal interest in them. Even doctors can be a little short-tempered with their "hyper-nervous" patients and not too subtly remind them that the waiting room is still full. They all too easily diagnose everyone as just another case of weak nerves, while they themselves are just blessed with extra sensitive feelings.

Just like some people need extra sleep or more vitamins than others, so there are also people who need more affection than others. But apparently all of society, including politics, the economy, education, art and science is based on disaffection.

Back in church people still sing "His eye is on the Sparrow..." so that we are assured He is still there; but isn't He much too great to take interest in me?

When a respected astronomer somewhere gave a lecture on the distances of the universe, a lady asked him this question: "Since the earth is so small and the universe so big, can you believe that God gives individual attention to each of us?" The scientist answered: "That
doesn't depend on the size of the universe but on the bigness of God." Such an impression is just what the star of Bethlehem must have left on those astronomers of old.

Just because God is so big, He has an eye for the little details.

When we set foot in a library, all we see are books, books, and more books. We are easily lost -- every row tells us as little as it does too much. But when the librarian comes in he sees the same library very differently; he knows it book by book, row upon row, stack after stack. In the same way God looks around the whole universe.

The TV announcer smiles at the camera, but God looks straight at you. As soon as you open the Bible, God is at your side and is not distracted at that moment by anyone else.

He is not talking about the faults of your neighbor, but those of your own. He is not like a policeman up in a box over an intersection directing traffic en masse, but
like a patrolman on the curb helping a single child to safely cross the street.

While the Romans took a census, God sent his Son to the earth. Jesus was just number such-and-such on the list -- the sol or the re of Caesar.

He came to stand next to us on the assembly line.
He wants to address me with "you".
He wants to let me see who I really am.
I can only be myself when I have looked in His eyes.
He wants to give the work of the brown-paint-applier a place on the big score of the angels: glory to God, peace on earth.

Even if I am as small as the eye of a needle, God made Himself small enough to still come and stand next to me.

Since he changes mass-men into children of the king, Christmas means more than just a few free days. It means liberated people. Neuroses are hardly conquered unless through Christ love is given a dominant place in daily life as well as the important decisions of every domain, and unless people are no longer the objects of political
and economic calculation, but politics and economics are simply seen as special branches of an all-embracing human love-service.

A janitress who mopped the floors each morning in a government office building related once that "none of the officials ever looked at me, but when the minister came in he always took off his hat and said 'good morning madam'!"

We can hardly celebrate Christmas unless we know: God himself is looking at me as if He had nothing else to do.

He can't keep his eyes off me and He says to me personally: Good night -- as if this was Christmas night itself.
six

TWO KINDS OF CERTAINTY
All the verses we sing during the nights of caroling bear little likeness to what we say during the day. We sing in the present perfect tense: "A light has shone upon us from on high..." That has happened. It is a fact. It is irrevocable.

But we speak in a subjunctive mood: if that would be the case, then I would... Just count them all up once -- all those sentences with ifs and woulds:

It is the language of the disillusioned.

If only Christmas would just be like it was that one time, during the war.... We all have at least one authentic reminiscence.

But we can't live off of one memory like a dromedary off his hump. We can't live with ifs and woulds. And therefore we keep ourselves going by repeated injections of truths-in-the-present-perfect-tense, which work effectively in our bloodstream for awhile, but then gradually die out until another injection is necessary.
Will you be going to Christmas celebrations just to get another injection? It's meaningless to do so if it only dissipates after a few days anyway. Then we end up sitting beside the wilting, dried out Christmas tree, as dejected as a stranded wreck. Then everything comes back again -- the encircling gloom of melancholy, the deep crater of our remorse and sadness -- then what are we to do with our tormented nerves? What are we to do when we finally have no one left to embrace?

Christians think along those lines nowadays too. They even preach along them: all the old certainties are gone; holy little homes are collapsing like decks of cards; all we are left with are ifs and coulds: if there could be a God; if I could call myself a Christian; couldn't it be like...?

And then we still sing: A light has shine upon us!? Even when we can't say: A light has shine upon me?

Does Christmas caroling just mean being out at the end of the year? Do we just go out for an evening, or is there some fulfilment and completeness to it?
If things were just left up to us, we would never get past the subjunctive mood of doubt. The present perfect time of salvation would not arise and shine in our hearts. It only descends from heaven. It has only received form in the shape of Jesus Christ. If all other certainties would collapse, He remains standing up right.

He is our demonstrative mood. He is our certainty.

But now we must be careful not to create a false picture of Jesus since we have been doing it for centuries already. According to the traditional image, Jesus has two things which radically discourage modern man: He has absolute certainty (or rather: He can do anything and knows everything) and He is dripping with love. Some one has written: "His face glows with a radiant certainty and a syrupy sweet love." And so it has been pumped into us generation after generation.

We need another iconoclasm!

As far as that goes however, we Protestants ought to remember that we have been just as guilty of chopping away too much as we have of not chopping down enough idols, so
now we need not unleash anything like the kind of bashing and smashing we used to do -- since the Holy Spirit Himself blows through many different council chambers now. Rather, now is the time for Roman Catholics and Protestants together to powder the traditional Jesus-image, in order to make room for the real Jesus.

Perhaps we ought to follow the advice of the minister who said: Let's not celebrate Christmas for ten years! The ancient Christian church never celebrated Christmas until finally sometime around 300 A.D. They really didn't have that much interest in the Child. And neither does the Bible, really -- it is more interested in the question of how Jesus stood in the world as a man. He said himself: the Son of Man has no where to lay his head. That's how he stood in the world -- poor, defenseless, without illusions -- not in the absolute certainty that we in our day and age find unbearable, but like the sculpture of Zadkine in Rotterdam.

He didn't believe in progress, in science, in technique, in evolution, or in man. He thought like the Preacher: this existence is unstable, untrustworthy, unpredictable. His life was a much poorer communion with God and man than we usually think.
His life, inside and out, was empty, hungry and thirsty, a praying life, much more vulnerable than we often suspect.

He was no super-boy prodigy that astounded the scribes with all his answers. He asked questions. And like all -- artists and scientists alike -- who ask questions he was lonely.

But He was not like all the people of today who redirect everything back to themselves: Who, because they are alone, are not sure of themselves, and who, because they are not sure of themselves, are not sure any more of anything.

Jesus was a vagabond who had no where to lay his head-full-of-questions to rest. He was always on the road, but he knew that the road was not a dead end.

There are two kinds of certainty: That of the professional evangelist which is as neat as the crease in the pants of someone who has never kneeled; the kind of certainty that looks like it came fresh out of the oven... and then there is the kind of certainty which comes -- not out of an oven -- but through a centrifuge; it is the certainty of
a new demonstrative mood -- raised up out of a sea of "how-could-it" to the rock of "thus-it-is."

We ought not to see Jesus as a man of that first, slippery smooth certainty. He walked not over slate roofs, but over the billowing waves.

There are also Christians of whom at first sight we may be tempted to say: they reflect the clean certainty of a tidy Dutch home with its sparkling windows and immaculate lace curtains. It's difficult to imagine anyone actually lives inside such an edifice. But if we let them break through our first impressions we may admit abashedly: they have already gone through the storm and are now just singing Christmas carols -- not the ones they learned at Sunday school, but those they learned anew at Golgatha.
seven

NO TRAGIC HERO
When we sing "Our heart belongs to You" on Christmas it can be a warm assurance: I may belong to someone, I am understood, I am accepted, I may love, I can be myself because I no longer have to try to be self-sufficient. I may even be a little bit of a twilight man: The longing for warmth is very much a part of the need for self-affirmation. For many people life is too slow and hope is too disappointing: they go to the office, they come home again, everything is meaningless, nothing ever happens, nothing exciting. They look into the houses of others and think: it is cozy in there! But they themselves feel like a character depicted in a certain book: "He did not look forward to the approaching holidays -- Christmas and old years -- and especially the meek face of his wife that he would sometimes have liked to skin. Naturally she was always fighting her migraine! And he could understand how exasperating things were for her. But now and then when he just couldn't stand it anymore, he would lock himself in his room and vent his feelings by pounding his fist on the dresser -- only after first placing a pillow on it in order to muffle the sound."

That is almost a ludicrous situation, of course. But isn't it really a lot like our own: pound on the dresser!
on the workbench: on the kitchen counter: on the pulpit...!? We have to put cushions everywhere, contain ourselves, watch our conduct. Indeed! But what are we to do with our longing for freedom? for passion? and for a white, unsoiled, virgin Christmas? Aren't preachers who only talk about the big lines of history and out of fear of pietism relegate all the desires for self-affirmation to mere egotism -- aren't they letting us stand out in the cold? Jesus came to restore us in relation to God and the creation, but also to ourselves.: When a white Christmas makes the world seem a little smaller it ought to remind each of us: it was also for me that He emptied himself, refusing wealth and riches.

Once when advent was celebrated with a Greek drama on television, to the question "Are you going to see Antigone?" someone gave the clear answer "Antique? Oh -- Nay!" But some feel that the modern version of an ancient tragedy really gets through to them.

Why?

Perhaps the first thing that grips us is the conflict between the original conscience of an individual and the
masses who only do what has to be done without thinking about whether it is good or evil.

The average man accepts it as a fact that to obtain even the barest of essentials men must resort to all kinds of pitiful cowardices; you have to smile, deceive people, and sell yourself.

But every now and then a personality comes along who refuses to play along with that game because only dead fishes always swim with the current.

Because we always want "a little bit of everything" we are captivated by someone who wants "all or nothing", much in the same manner, as those repressed fathers who enjoy watching boxing matches.

Antigone is a tragedy, of course, but Sophocles is not interested in the destiny of man as much as he is in the attitude of man towards it. Antigone is a wife who is completely herself; obedient to that deepest voice inside of her which admits of no doubt. Sophocles' images are both monumental and individual at the same time -- just like the Greek statutes from the same period. They can seem to lift us up above the commonplace.
There is another reason why such tragedies attract us. "The tragedy is satisfying because in the end everyone is guiltless, because men know that there is no more hope, and because men are like rats in a trap with only the stars and planets as silent witnesses." (Anouilh). That accommodates itself to our self-pity: we are the victims of an unbreakable circle in which it scarcely makes a difference who dies or is killed. Someone has written: "A man needs fifty years to become a man, and once he is a man, then he slowly begins to die.... Now you can make that something tragic, or you can say "that's the way it is, I'll just have to accept it." These almost appear to be two distinct possibilities, but making things tragic and only accepting things are really not much different. If no more guilt or hope is an attraction of the tragic, then there is no need for bending the knee, or craning the neck, since God is not the Coming One, but the Being. Yes, that's satisfying.

This satisfaction brings us to a third attraction tragedy holds for us, namely, its glorification of a beautiful catastrophe. In a comedy death can be forgotten for a while, although even then we can't avoid it completely. But a tragedy takes death seriously, and that is why we can become so intensely involved in it. In tragedy our whole
existence comes into play:. The hero fights against death, and when he pays for it with his life it is a handsome death, a manly death.

Someone in the "Antigone" of Anouilh says: "It is fitting for men to believe in ideals and to die for them, but you are only a girl!" How even more striking then, for a girl to die the death of a man!

Someone who defies public opinion, who completes the historical cycle, and who goes under in an heroic death -- at first sight it seems to fit Jesus so precisely, that just for that reason alone we imagine him to be so captivating.

We are just a little taken in by a Jesus who opposed himself to the existing order, who knew that there was no more hope, and who consciously chose to die: like a tragically sublime suicide, that ends with the image of soldiers gambling by the cross -- just as in the play of Anouilh the final scene is one of guards continuing unperturbed with their game of cards.
But Jesus is not a courageous victim of suicide, nor a tragic hero. He has not merely suppressed death as in a comedy. Neither has he submitted to death as in a tragedy. He has risen from the dead!

The whole celebration of Christmas would be completely meaningless, if Jesus were not bodily alive today.

In the end of a tragedy, the hero goes -- original conscience and all -- the way of all flesh: to the cemetery.

A dead man is just a common average man. All or nothing turns out to be nothing at all. All dead fishes always so with the current. But Jesus remains obedient to the deepest voice inside himself, that voice from above, which actually calls him away from the crowd's opinion and so also up from the jaws of death.

So after Christmas we immediately celebrate advent again. That is to say: there is someone coming and He has almost come again. There is no endlessly repeating cycle -- there is the Coming One.

And then there is still us -- the staid ones, the sticklers, roosting in our chairs in front of satisfying
tragedies: we won't go, we won't let go, we just sit tight in our status quo. And that is the guilt that wasn't in the tragedy: we won't go to meet Him.

But this is the hope that disappeared in the tragedy: He comes to meet us.

We ought to reconsider ten times over before we kneel down before Him because -- speaking of individuals over against the masses -- we are His alone. Imagine, if we would celebrate a genuine Christmas -- how alone and strange we would stand out from the surroundings in which we live and work!

We only have one more short night of sleep to go. But that we could sleep through Christmas night?!? -- how is that possible?!
GOOD FRIDAY
one

WATER DAMAGE
The secret of good humor is to emphasize certain features by exaggerating them. Someone once caricatured a fire-chief in this way: when asked the question "How did it go with the fire and the houses next door to it?" he responded by saying, "The houses next door? What do you mean? Oh, you mean the adjacent premises!? Yes, well they are still standing... but we ran into one problem there -- water damage: -- I always tell my men 'don't be stingy, douse everything thoroughly:' ... my 'greatest fire was in Kneteldike: We sprayed that place so good that nothing in the whole village was left 'just neighboring'."

Now I am sure that this particular fire-chief is being caricatured, but the kernel of this little tale still approximates the truth. There are fire brigadiers that get so caught up in spraying, squirting and dousing things that they sometimes ruin more than is strictly necessary. And yet isn't that just like all of us? In our zeal to restore or repair something we only ruin it all the more. You are probably familiar with those painful moments when someone is trying to fix something and then invariably, in one more or less clumsy move, makes it all the worse.
There is an argument in an office somewhere. The director hides his temper behind a hastily summoned up smile, but the others think that he is only making light of their problems and so they become ten times angrier than before. Somewhere a troublesome child whines for a little bunny rabbit. He gets his way -- because he always gets his way -- until finally there are more tears spilled over the whole shed full of rabbits than there were over the empty shed. Somewhere else there is a woman with a headache who swallows so many pills that she gets a stomach ache. Somewhere else again a Job is sitting on the ruins of his life while his friends come to help him by pointing out that there has to be a cause for all his suffering; but all such sympathy is just the last drop that makes everything overflow. Somewhere a safety committee meets deliberating on how to keep the peace, but every reason for keeping law and order only seems to make the unrest greater. And so it goes: All these examples can be brought under one caption: the cure is often worse than the disease.

The world is nothing but one gigantic house on fire, around which we all stand spraying as if water was going out of style. We all come running with hoses and buckets
full of our own magic solutions. Revolutions and refor-
mations vigorously surge through the masses, as one system
after the next is thrown into the sea of fire amid cheers
and shouts of glee. But the flames keep licking higher
and higher while the bulwarks of society creak and groan
louder and louder. And even though here and there the
fire is brought under control, there is still always the
water damage. It makes little difference what we do. The
medicine of our politics is often worse than the disease.
Communism makes everything communal, but then the state
becomes the boss. Even two millenia of Christendom have
hardly seemed to make the world a better place. Wouldn't
it be best to just call a halt to everything? Chesterton
has said, "Have you ever heard anyone plead 'I'm tired of
this headache, give me a good toothache:' or 'The only
cure for the spanish flu is a little English cold:' or
'After the dismal affliction of this stomach ache I am
looking forward to the radiant paradise of some rheuma-
tism:'?"

There is One who doesn't help us get out of the frying pan
so that we can fall into the fire; but He helps us get
from earth to heaven. He douses the fire of God's angry
wrath without water damage. By His stripes we are healed
and that is the only cure that heals all our diseases,
for His medicine is complete, total, and effective. It is the only cure that works... unto a complete remission of all our sins.

That is the message of all our failures: we need Another; we need Good Friday.
two

OUT FOR THE DAY
During the coal mine fire in Marcinelle, Belgium, the women and children waiting for news of the miners' safety had already been under great stress and strain for five days when Sunday -- the day of rest -- arrived. Ten thousand Belgians went to see the misery in Marcinelle that Sunday. Long rows of cars and crowded buses discharged their curious passengers by the hundreds until late in the afternoon. The onlookers craned their necks and laughed cheerfully at each other. Holding bags of potato chips and chewing on nougats, mothers and fathers waded with their children through the enormous crowd, not wanting to miss the least little bit of that horrible tragedy: a burning mine and desperate and despairing people waiting at the gates.

There sat Madame Gonet, who was stiffly pressing her fingers together while her lips, bitten and bleeding, lisped a prayer -- really just an endless cry -- to God for help; help for her husband, Anatole, and her sons, Michel, 17, and Willy, 14. The onlookers stretched their neck and observed the prayer of Madame Gonet. It was Sunday and all over the world church bells were tolling. The french-fries vendor was frying french fries non-stop while Madame Gonet sat praying non-stop.
The onlookers clambered up the piles of coal along side the mine where they could watch at their leisure. There they could see for free what others would only be able to watch on film. They took photographs so they could show people later and say, "I was at Marcinelle." They pushed inside the Salvation Army tent where a prayer service was being held. Inside in the dim light a small group of the unfortunate could be seen listening to the comforting words of Psalm 23: The Lord is my shepherd.... Prayers were being prayed, and hoarse voices of men and women trembling with emotion were saying, "O God, hold our hands tightly in these difficult hours. Be with our men in the mine, O Lord, save them Lord, save them!"

Outside the tent people could be heard laughing and a child calling, "May I have some ice cream?", while more onlookers kept coming to stand in the narrow opening of the tent. They shrugged their shoulders when a journalist warned the police, but they refused to go away.

They were just "out for the day" they said. That day was the Day of the Lord.
They observed the prayers while they licked their ice cream cones. The people in the Salvation Army prayed to God and the onlookers thought it was an interesting sight; after all, that wasn't something you could see every day!

Church bells rang in the distance and the french-fries vendor wiped her greasy fingers on her apron. Once they had discovered how much more interesting the woman by the iron fence was, the tourists didn't spend much time watching the prayers in the tent. Those staring eyes and those entwined hands -- that was really the most beautiful sight of all. "You should have seen those eyes," they would say to their colleagues at the office the next day.

They considered themselves lucky that the disaster had lasted until Sunday, otherwise all they would have been able to see was a mass grave; the living dead are more captivating than the stone dead: "O God, hold us fast and save our men!" "Two orders of french-fries please." "The Lord is my shepherd." "May I have an ice cream bar?" We shudder at the thought of such an ungodly scene on the Lord's very own day.

In church people may sing "Sun of righteousness arise, triumph o'er the shade of night. Dayspring from on high
be near, Daystar in my heart appear," but then somehow, later on the very same day something of that power of hell which was defeated and that death which was destroyed reappears.

The mouth of the burning mine is like the gateway to the realm of death, and the pale women stare motionlessly as if into the gaping black mouth of hell. The men who appear are black with soot -- as if they were in mourning. This is the day on which Christ arose, and yet on this day the tourists come to view the dead. Come, behold and see!

We shudder, but -- no matter how much we may want to vent our indignation on these tourists, we should remember how much this scene at Marcinelle resembles the one at Golgatha. We stand just like these tourists at the cross of Jesus, while next to the cross stands a pizza hut. The children ask for an ice cream cone bar while Jesus cries out, "My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?"

While church bells ring in the distance, calling men to prayer, we stand observing the prayers of Jesus. We are just out for the day. We are sight-seeing at the cross. We are tourists at Golgatha. We find the horror of death
fascinating. We don't want to miss any of this terrible drama of death, so we crane our necks to get a clearer view. We try to take in the whole scene as leisurely as possible. We take pictures so that later we can say, "I was there at the cross."

But were we really there? Wasn't it really the Jews who killed him? Christ is still being crucified every day. "And" says Luke, "the crowd stood by and looked on." We are the onlookers, staring at the Godforsakenness of Jesus.

We are still standing there right behind the Jews two thousand years later. We are still standing there looking on every day.

Can you imagine what it would have been like if one of the desperate women at the iron fence in Marcinelle would have suddenly stood up and prayed out loud for the unabashed tourists with their bags of french-fries? Yet that's what Jesus did. He prayed for the onlookers. He pleaded for the tourists. He asked forgiveness for the observers who came to stare at his prayers.
That's why every week still has a Sunday -- the Lord's Day -- the day on which His prayer is heard.

In the gaping mouth of the burning mine stands the Cross. Madame Gonet sits praying and the journalists snap photographs, while over the cross in the coal mine falls the light of the resurrection. "Sun of righteousness arise, triumph o'er the shade of night."

Sunday in Marcinelle: a day on which life dawns in the midst of death, a day of hope in the middle of despair, a day of forgiveness in the midst of unabashed impudence. Over the french-fries booth a moving voice rings out: "Father forgive them..." Therefore on that Sunday the world remained in existence.
EASTER
I AM ALREADY BURIED
Many people object to the song that goes "Take my silver and my gold, not a mite would I withhold." "Isn't it a slap in God's face" they ask "for a congregation to say things they don't really mean?" Yet it is noteworthy that no one objects to the other couplets of this song which say "Take my moments and my days..." and "take my life..." If it is not until we get to the word silver in the fourth verse that we really begin to notice how serious this song is, then that makes us a bit like the Roman soldiers who believed in the resurrection of Christ... until they heard the Jewish priests come around rattling their coins. They were believers up to the opening of their money bags -- but no further. On Easter however, we must not only sing to Jesus "give me life" but also "take my life." Easter is a season of giving and taking. "Don't hold on to me" the Lord said to Mary. Neither may we hold on to ourselves. Easter is a day for letting go of ourselves. It is a day for letting loose. "A new existence has begun" sings the Church and no one raises any objections. But when the old life is ruled out of order, we stand to lose more than just silver and gold.

Until we can celebrate Easter we just sit bound up in ourselves. We are like the sculpture of Michelangelo entitled
"The Bound Slave" in which there is a man who is still partially embedded in a piece of uncarved stone. The first thing that strikes you about it is that it looks unfinished. Of course at least one explanation is obvious: Michelangelo apparently never had time to complete this work. But it is questionable whether this sculpture remains incomplete simply for lack of time. Although the figure of the slave barely emerges from the block of stone, couldn't it have been the very intention of the sculptor to present him in precisely this manner? The bound nature of the slave is well expressed by his position in the rough stone: his head and his feet disappear into the stone that binds him. He cannot move. He cannot emerge. He can only look at freedom, and that is as close as he gets.

Behind this slave we can also see the artist himself who always remains bound to the material in such a way that he cannot do what he would like to do with it. Even some of the greatest artists have deeply felt a sense of their own powerlessness (and inadequacy perhaps?). In the incompleteness of this work Michelangelo may well be testifying to his own weakness. In modern art too, we find many similar examples of paintings, sculptures, music and poems, which leave us with the impression that they are somehow incomplete.
They seem to be hung-up somewhere; they just don't seem to "come off"; they just can't seem to let loose. Such incompleteness clings to a work of art in its very shape and pattern. If it didn't have a few rough edges it wouldn't be itself anymore. If it were perfectly complete it would therefore be incomplete. Such modern art can only be "all right" as long as it is not quite all right.

The spaces, gaps, and blank lines in the uncarved stone cry out long and loud that even the creative human creature -- man -- appears to be a bound slave.

Behind the slave stands the artist, but behind the artist stands mankind. "Miserable wretch that I am" moans the sculpture "who will deliver me from this body of death?"

That distorted figure which vainly twists and turns itself into all kinds of knots is a concrete spectacle of misery etched in stone. He cannot be himself; he doesn't come through; he remains stuck halfway. Behold the man!

But on Easter the stone loses to man. On Easter we can find release. For on Easter we meet the light of day with an aroma of freshly baked individuality. On that day the neighbors will say, "He looks like Jesus."
There is nothing old under the Easter Sun; everything is new. First we get the birth announcement about the first born from the dead: "We have a new born son. Father and Son are doing well!" But right behind him there are more and more people stepping lightly out of their graves like sightseers in Joseph's garden. Such an early rising truly promises to make men healthy, wealthy, and wise. All those newcomers see each other in a new light -- with new eyes -- and that is an Easter sunrise service.

They left behind their old selves in the grave next to their old clothes which are no longer in fashion; and all are of the same age as the young man sitting on the stone -- a white figure among the greenery -- a grownup child. Then the second Adam, youthful as the first, leads them forward "to my Father and your Father," and they all reflect something of him in their features, even in their character traits.

If Easter doesn't result in the concrete experience of a radical renewal of even our character, the promise of redemption is always left hanging in the air. Hereditary factors are something we may leave behind in the baptismal fount; the custodian will clean them up!
two

A GREEN EASTER
Although every now and then we may get a white Easter, most of the time it is a green one. And that makes Easter an especially appropriate season for us to enjoy the way the Psalmist lures fruit trees and cedars into praise in Psalm 148: Let the birds "pitch in" with jubilation and the trees sing from their toes.

In reaction against those who only hail the awakening of nature at Easter, we have too often divorced the resurrection of Christ from the restoration of the creation which began with Him. Immediately after he arose he said: I am ascending to my Father and your Father (John 20:17), and that declaration contains a hint of Genesis in it: the Son wants to restore us with our Father, grace with nature, Matthew with Adam.

There are many people who begin reading a novel at the last page to see how it all comes out in the end. With one book this has always been acceptable: the Bible. After all, the gospels were all written after Easter. Don't you think that perhaps Luke began with Caesar Augustus because he was already thinking of Pilate? And when he writes about the multitude of the heavenly
host singing about peace on earth, don't you think he probably chuckled over his stylus about the way Christ's resurrection had already set heaven and earth in motion? Even the Easter story itself anticipates the beckoning last page of the Bible, as Christ immediately directs his resurrection toward his ascension, and his ascension is unimaginable without the two heavenly railway partners who firmly announce His return.

The exit from Jesus' grave is the entrance to the universe.

Behind Emmaus lies the Cosmos.

Whoever tries to hold Christ down in that little room in Emmaus, sins against the second commandment. We are no more allowed to impede his movement toward the new earth by our suppers with old wine, than we are allowed to imprison him in a graven image. Whoever holds back the resurrection for the personal salvation of his soul, comes away from an Easter sunrise service with a pale heart that will collapse before noon like a wilted flower.

We often say that Mary mistook Jesus for the gardener, but the Lord is indeed the gardener; and for those who do not see the living greenness of Easter, it will never be a refreshing day of golden glory either.
Whoever associates Easter with eggs, should keep in mind the farmer who pondered to himself: "If I just put this egg under the hen, and raise the chick to be a good layer, I could sell all the new chicks and buy myself a cow, and then..." But while he stood there calculating, he squeezed the egg too hard and it broke in his hand! The moment we start ringing up the profits the Easter holiday is going to provide us with, we fracture its potential into a thousand pieces. God has indeed promised us mountains of gold, but Easter has very much to do with a green earth.

J. P. Charles writes that he would rather see a rooster on a steeple than a cross, since the fact that Jesus died was not nearly as special as His resurrection. With the rooster on the church steeple, the creation crows over the resurrection, and the recreation certainly gives the creation something to crow about! We must never forget that the Easter story begins with a very natural event: "When the sun arose..."

Whoever is merely satisfied with a new heart and thinks that a new heaven is just superfluous, has still not discovered a new life. So often we celebrate such a pale, lily-livered Easter! Put Easter is either green or it is
nothing at all; a colorless holiday is nothing to crow about.

Nel Noordzij has given us this portrayal of ourselves: "We dash around with bodies that are as empty and run down as those of exhausted hares. As far as our emotional life is concerned, we become more and more like blackened and warped pans that have boiled dry. I feel often like I am just another dirty square lying at the intersection of several squalid alleyways." But that is what Easter changes (at the stroke of a clock): our bodies become supple again; God gives us the feet of a deer, and renews our youth as that of an eagle. Our emotional life perks up, our shrivelled senses get a new chance. Christ is food for our eyes, and "green is good for you" he says on Easter.

On Easter we can begin to feel like a broad plaza at the end of streets that are paved with gold. In the garden of a vacant grave begins a big holiday. The women who returned from that garden already felt a little younger than when they went. On Easter we can revel in the recovery of our breath as breathing becomes a feast of joy instead of just a necessary function.
Someone once complained: "I lay awake the whole night with a toothache, thinking about toothaches and sleeplessness." It doesn't take much imagination to realize that thinking about it is often the afterbirth of grief. Sometimes we feel we are obliged to sadly reflect on our sorrowfulness. "We were just thinking........" said the travellers to Emmaus. (Applicable to them is what Adriaan Vander Veen wrote in another context: "It was just like the listener in the audience who, in a peak of emotion had already lifted his hands to start the salutary roar of applause when he heard the singer, who was just reaching the end of his heaven storming aria, miserably bungle it.")

They were thinking how Jesus had almost become the King, and how they had almost been delivered; but "almost" is worse than not at all. They lay awake thinking about sleeplessness. They were scarcely even walking to Emmaus: they were walking in circles. There was only spring and then autumn, it was just morning and then suddenly night, and behold everything was very weary. It had all gone with Jesus just like it goes with nature: his short-lived life was just like that of the green grass which flourishes today and is gone tomorrow.
But when He joined them on the road of life he opened the Scriptures, "beginning with Moses", i.e. with Genesis, and with "the earth brought forth vegetation." Suddenly they once again took notice of the trees along the way. Surely they must have known who he was as soon as he began at the beginning, because there has only ever been one who begins at the beginning, and then draws the line on through..., a line, not a circle! The circle of their thoughts had no beginning and no end, until that stranger began again with Moses! Then they saw that Jesus' life was not like the grass, but that the grass would become like Jesus life. Then they were suddenly travelling to the new earth! And then they saw how green their pastures really were!

It is understandable that the author N. W. Clark showed some irritation over the sturdy, jovial laborer who entered the church cemetery one summer morning with hoe and watering-can in hand, while over his shoulder he shouted to his friends: "See you later, I have to pay mother a little visit now" as he shut the gate behind him. All the man intended to do was pull some weeds around her grave, water the flowers, and tidy up the plot a bit.
"But isn't that sort of church yard conversation blatantly repugnant?" we may ask. Can a three by six foot flower bed replace mother? Can taking care of a grave replace his care for mother? Yet it makes sense to care for green graves, for they make prime spots to represent a green Easter. While watering the shrubs we can sing along with John: "and I saw a new earth, and death will be no more." If the first thing Jesus saw when he arose was a fresh green garden, doesn't mother deserve as much? Shouldn't we wish at least as much for mother?

When the stone was rolled away, Jesus' grave wasn't the only thing that was opened up. Everything else was opened up as well. Things are no longer just what they appear to be. Faith sees everywhere new possibilities and open opportunities. Faith should never stare something to death -- but see through everything into the heart of God.

That's how the painter Stanley Spencer looked at the churchyard of his home town: he saw the resurrection taking place there in full bloom even though that churchyard was as ugly as most grave yards in Holland, with monuments devoid of any style, and monstrous fences criss-crossing
through each other. We often complain about the lack of a Christian life-style, but we are also woefully lacking a Christian style of death and burial.

That we should ever see a church yard which fully reflects a faith in the resurrection, an Easter hymn etched in stone, a work of art that mocks the devil with the ring of "O death where is your sting!?" -- that remains for the time being at least a deeply pious desire.

But on judgment day even the ugliest church yard will receive a bit of paradise. Spencer successfully brought to expression that sense of glory in the comical concreteness, with which he depicted the people coming out of their tombs. The dead were slowly waking up as if to ask "now what on earth is happening?!" Some leaned on the sides of their tombstones for support and clung like surprised children to the firm reality of the cold stones. One mother was carrying her child in her arms, and someone had uprooted a rose bush as they arose. It was thoroughly a picture of resurrection in the flesh. (If the word resurrection sounds like something supernatural, the word flesh is close and direct!)
Such a painting shows how artists can teach us to be especially concrete in our faith. Too often it is just another vague dream to us—far removed from the ordinary fences of the church yard around the corner. We say: "you just can't imagine it" and we revert back to our old routine on Easter. But an artist says: "you just can't imagine it" and then he imagines it anyway, as undaunted as a child that claims he saw Adam and Eve walking through the botanical gardens:

Spencer saw that the new earth is a down-to-earth earth, and we too don't claim to believe in the existence of ghostly, misty spirits, but in the resurrection of hands, and feet, and faces.

If anyone calls such a painter "profane" of "sacriligious", he has no idea what is in store for us. Seeing such a remarkable work of art is enough to stop us in our tracks: how foolish do we have to be, to believe something so unbelievable—- we must be like little children whose imagination knows no bounds! But the foolishness of God is wiser than men.

We must begin to see the resurrection happening already in the greenery of our graveyards.
In Athens there was a temple, dedicated to the elderly, to which people brought their children. Now some people may think this was truly a Christian gesture: teach the children early in life that life is nothing but a march towards death. But the temple in Jerusalem was dedicated to youth. It was the place where old Anna had taken root and bloomed: like a living palm branch for Jesus. When she entered the temple she first had to turn her face to the West where the sun went down: she too had to submit to death. To go to God is to meet one's death. But death is now no more than the threshold to the temple, beyond which true life begins. Flanked by fruit trees and flowers she became like the plant of Psalm 92. From out of the temple she could see the rising sun every morning; and that kept her fresh and green. Being near to God is to discover that living is worth the trouble of death.
three

DEATH IS RED
In front of the main post office in Keulen stand three mailboxes: two yellow ones and one blue one. They are intended for local, regional, and airmail respectively, but when it is time to empty them a mailman comes along with one large bag -- and everything goes into it.

On the world stands a long ladder. One person stands on the lower rung and someone else stands one rung higher. The higher person looks down on the lower one. But later Death comes along with one big bag -- and everyone goes into it.

A Boeganda woman in Kampala is 141 years old. She cannot remember what year she was born, but she can describe the ascension to the throne of Kabakasoena in 1836, and says that she was 22 at the time. That means she was born in the same year as the battle of Waterloo. Meanwhile the 72-year old Englishman Harry Jubb took his 70-year old wife Nellie on a bicycle trip in order to "keep her in good condition." So there are old people everywhere who distinguish themselves by keeping very spry and lively. But sooner or later Death comes along with one big bag and everyone goes into it.
We love distinctions. We distinguish ourselves from sunrise to sunset.

All of us have feelings of self-esteem, and many things that we do are done simply to maintain that feeling.

Even the most superficial glance at society reveals people using all sorts of little trifles in order to protect themselves against becoming lost in the background of the commonplace.

We are always busy introducing ourselves and putting our best foot forward.

The blue mailbox sticks out its chest a little because it is the blue mailbox, but when the mailman comes along all the mailboxes stand meekly in one line.

A doctor likes to pour a glass of expensive wine with the half-squint of a connoisseur, and his patients like to talk about their kidney stones, the way his wife likes to discuss her jewels.

Everyone needs something to distinguish themselves from everyone else. One has caught a few carp, while another.
has been to Norway. One acts studiously indifferent while another studies astrology in order to be able to predict the unexpected.

Take a good look at our society and you will notice how everyone is always trying to save face. But while such face-saving may be good for cigar sales it's murder on the kids.

What sense is there in being the blue mailbox anyway—if the mailman only has one big bag?

A corpse no longer has to save face, and the dead can no longer maintain their social standing. There comes a time when everybody sinks to the same level, and the five star general lies as flat on his back as the unknown soldier.

Does that mean that death is red? Is death just the supreme socialist who wins all class struggles? Or is there something likeable about that postman who gives all mailboxes the same indiscriminate treatment regardless of their color or position on the block? And (speaking of recognition) doesn't Death deserve at least all the recognition ahead of life, since men finally give their neighbors
some rightful acknowledgement just when they are dead?

Death is ever an enemy. For although it is necessary for people to be brought closer to each other, Death can only bring dead people together. But the miracle we keep hoping for is that the living will begin to discover each other.

When Death comes, it knocks the expensive glass of wine out of the hand of the doctor, and the doctor loses face. He is no more on the rise, but he is in demise, and all his clients are of no earthly value to him any more. Death also makes the jewels of his wife a ludicrous superfluity, and she herself becomes just as superfluous. In the end she too must be buried in order to get her out of everyone's way.

But that is no solution if everyone finally becomes brothers again only in the church cemetery. At the very moment they achieve real solidarity, a real brotherhood, they can no longer do anything for each other. At the very moment people realize what it is like to be in another person's shoes each steps separately into their own grave. At the very moment that Death brings his great revolution to its consumption, all his loyal subjects are discharged from service.
But that doesn't happen only in the cemetery, it happens wherever people try to "set it all together" without Christ. If Christ can't do it, death can -- and will!

But then people are united only at the very instant that they cease to be people; then they achieve the perfect synchronization -- of corpses; then they constitute the "living" community of dead statistics and a comradeship in dead arms.

Only Christ can form a community of men who still remain themselves, because only Christ can simultaneously conquer the common death of uniform homogeneity along with the proud death of individualism. Only He can take people down off the ladder without first overthrowing the ladder. He enables each person to see his own worthfulness, and at the same time not lose sight of the worth of others.

He conquers the capitalist death and the red death alike. He defeats every death.

"Mary, go to your brothers..." said Jesus. For only now people can truly become brothers -- by the open grave.

Later God will come with one big City, and everything will go into it -- except for that which is in league with Death.
CELEBRATING EASTER WHILE CLEANING BEANS
It's incredible how tenacious we human beings can be! We can survive two world wars and still hang on to life like a mussel sticks to its shell. We can get so old that we can't even walk anymore and we will still cling on to our easy chair with our bony hands as if it held the secret of life. We refuse to let go of life. We are just like someone who hangs on the brink of death clinging to life just for the sake of the couple of puffs on his pipe he is allowed to have each day.

We have difficulty in believing that somewhere there is a boundary, a final horizon, with an unknown distance lurking behind it. But perhaps that is something we should reflect on.

As someone has written "Even though a person has become a peaceful old-fashioned epicurean, simply content to live within the limits of his tidy little pension and equally tidy little garden, isn't he still prone to brood at times -- perhaps in the evening while he is cleaning beans -- over death and the unknown distance behind his horizon?"
Eventually there comes a time in which we will be completely alone, even though now there are always people around us. Even those fugitives who have been driven out of the safe and trusted atmosphere of their home still remember the safety of the herd-instinct, and they huddle tightly together like sheep who are being pursued.

But there comes a moment in which we have to break all bonds: with our husband, our wife, our children, our friends. And then all that is left is the great loneliness.

A scholar once wrote that the first indication of the problem of death in the experience of a very young child must be sought in the fearful situation that occurs when its mother leaves the room for a while. Then the small infant begins to feel for the first time the horror of death: the breaking of all bonds, the feeling of loneliness, of being loose and helpless in the world. In earlier times primitive people often buried their dead in a large mass-grave; they wanted to keep them together; they couldn't bear the loneliness of death.
We have discovered an even stranger method of escaping the fear of death. We conquer death by depriving life of all of its richness. We make living such a miserable and paltry matter that by comparison death looks like a welcome relief.

There are people who think this is a godly attitude. They always remind their children as well as themselves of the lovelessness, the powerlessness, the fragility and perishability of human life. They preach again and again about how it should really be and how terrible it is that we do not measure up to that ideal. They beat each other with the whip of the law, depriving each other of their childlike joy in life and look upon this life as only a tiresome walk through a valley of tears. They are always pointing to what comes later -- up there, above the stars -- that's where all will become light someday.

In this manner death is transformed into a friend, and death is no longer fearful because life is so terribly frightful. Although it can often seem quite pious to place so much emphasis on the misery of our earthly life, Christ never intended it to be that way! He didn't conquer death at the expense of the richness of life. He did not merely
make death an entrance to eternal life. The doorway to real living is not just the gate to the church cemetery, but it is where ever a church stands. That doorway stands right in front of you in the room wherever you hear God's good news. It is a doorway you may enter in the full strength of your earthly life.

We may hang on to life -- as long as it is real life. The pseudo-life of an egotist is no life at all. Real living rhymes with giving.

A couple of puffs on our pipe -- that can be a gift from God. While we are cleaning beans we may think not only about the horizon, but also about the miracle that we may still clean beans. While we drop the beans into the pot, one by one, we may count our blessings too -- one by one.

Then we are truly celebrating Easter. For Easter is a feast for the dying and a feast for the living who tenaciously hang on to life because they are glad to be able to live in the midst of mortality like an erect token of the resurrection of the Lord.

Under the stars, that's where it is already becoming lighter.
AN EASTER CHRISTIAN SAYS "HAH!" TO LIFE
Oemark, the minister of Uddarbo, is a remarkable man because he is such an ordinary person.

When he was still a student he suddenly heard a professor say in the middle of his lecture that Origen had himself emasculated in mistaken obedience to the words of Jesus in Matthew 19:12. Oemark looked up, and while the students continued writing in their notebooks, Oemark's pen came to a sudden stop. "The fool!" he exclaimed. Abruptly the pens of all the other students scratched to a halt while every head turned to look at Oemark who was sitting in the last row. Even the professor looked up! And being under the impression that someone had asked a question, he kindly inquired "What did you say?" "I said, 'the fool!" replied Oemark, "not you, professor! Origen!"

Later, during his examination, when he was asked "What do you know about Origen?" Oemark responded: "A man who ventures to tamper with God's handiwork, doesn't deserve to have a place in church history." The professor therefore had to try another subject, so he asked, "Have you heard of the Neo-platonic philosophers?"
"I only know what platonic love is" answered Oemark, "it is the only kind of love I have known up to now."

The professor bit his lip and inquired once more, "Is everything the Bible says true?"

"Yes", said Oemark, "everything!"

"Then you also believe that it is true when it says 'Your nose is like the towers of Lebanon pointing toward Damascus'?"

"What?" asked Oemark with interest, "is that in the Bible? Where?"

"In the Song of Solomon... do you believe it's true?" came the reply.

"Of course it's true! That guy must have really had quite a schnozzol on his face!"

"The guy?! But that was said to a woman!" exclaimed the professor.

"Poor thing!" responded Oemark, "She must have really had a rough time finding a husband!"
That's the minister from Uddarbo as portrayed in a book by Hambraeus. He is just himself. He is not the kind of person who is afraid to give his joy free reign. "Joy" according to Oemark "is the most important of God's gifts. And..." he added as coffee was being served, "coffee is the next most important."

It is a gift to accept coffee precisely at the moment in which it arrives, as one of the greatest gifts of God. Pastor Oemark understands the art of enjoying life. God doesn't only say "thou shalt not", but also "enjoy my life."

God loves people who use the opportunity of life to live. We often live so constrictively that we don't do justice to life. We sit encased in the armour of our posture. We continuously carry on as if we are under examination and we dare not be ourselves at our exams. But Oemark sat looking at his professors with a face that was alternately happy and surprised, without the least ripple of tension. Such an outlook upon life is avowedly Christian. Christians may look like flowers and birds who are calmly themselves. They may so live day by day that just at coffee time there is nothing more they would rather do than drink coffee, and (that) just during an exam they
want nothing else more than to be thoroughly examined.

Only day-by-day living is real living.

Living day by day is not a superficial, easy-going, happy-go-lucky withdrawal into the refuge of the present, out of remorse or regret about the past or in fear of the future. Rather, it is being unconcernedly happy with what just this moment has to offer -- come rain or shine. For rain is a gift from God and sunshine is His happy "hello". During dinner we ought to be "starving" to eat, for we should be people who have a zest for life, and for whom everything appeals to our taste.

Whenever a chinaman has sipped a mouthful of good soup he smacks his lips heartily. We westerners think such behavior is just poor manners. But our table manners appear to have been invented in order to suppress our enjoyment. A Chinese teacher once asked, "Why do westerners always speak so softly and why do they always look so mournful, decent, and respectful when they sit at the table? Most Americans don't even seem to have enough sense to use their fingers to pick up a chicken leg and gnaw it clean. They act as if they are constantly playing with it with their knife and fork, all the while they are feeling most unfortunate and fearful to say one thing or another about it. That is
a crime, at least if the chicken is actually very tasty." I am convinced that the first acquaintance that a child makes with the affliction of this life is whenever his mother forbids him to smack his lips while nursing. The nature of the soul is such that if we do not express our joy we soon cease to feel it and then all that follows is the indigestion, nervousness, melancholia, and other various ailments of adulthood. People should do like the Frenchmen who greet each veal cutlet they are served with a hearty "hahhh!" and let their "mmmmm" ring loud and clear as soon as they have had the first bite.

On Easter we should be able to discuss the questions "Do we have too many manners? Do we enjoy the simple things of the day enough? Are we perhaps too proper, formal, and decent to be spontaneous anymore? Is the Christian faith something like table manners that forbid us to enjoy a lip-smacking good life? Can faith teach us to greet all things with a "hahhh" and to taste them with a "mmmmm!"? Or does the church teach us to live "with knife and fork", ruefully, decently, and respectably?

You could say that today it really isn't necessary anymore to make people aware of the possibility that they may enjoy life, for that possibility has already been more than
discovered for a long time now by the young people. And why does it seem that the labor shortage within many nursing homes today is greeted with just another one of those "smacking sounds" of Christians saying "hahhh!" to life and "baahh" to a labor of love?

The question is an understandable one, but the suggestion here is not that we remind each other of the possibility that fortunately something else may once again be permissible. Nor is the suggestion that the "off limits" sign has been moved back a little farther. Instead it must be made clear that such a line of thought ("how far may we go?") can never be the background for stimulating a greater enjoyment of life, since we have the calling to emancipate the whole of life, and not just an "off limits" or "restricted" area. For a whole life means a real life and not a sham-life of various little pleasures which are all so egotistically "experienced" and "enjoyed" that they really have nothing to do with real experience and enjoyment.

It is not a matter of being allowed to enjoy a piece of life, but of being commanded to enjoy all of life. Is it possible then, that this is just what young people have already known for such a long time? If it were only true:
We haven't even discovered yet the possibility, let alone the calling to accept everything we meet as a gift from God.

Why do people time and again so dreadfully mistake the command to "enjoy!" for a reminder of the possibility that "we may enjoy"?

But -- you may object -- isn't there an emphatic reserve demanded of us? Don't people run the danger of placing too much emphasis on one particular aspect of the Christian life? But there it is again: that split between enjoyment and all the other aspects. The Bible, we must remember looked at life as a single whole in which every corner must be filled with the echo of the clocks that Paul is ringing with all his might: "Rejoice in the Lord always! Again, I say: Rejoice!"

Professor R. van Dijk has written that "the cultural mandate includes enjoyment of the fruit of our labor just as much as the labor itself" and "the use of leisure time is not one wit less worthwhile than laboring at one's vocation." We must concede with him too that "the idea of the divine cultural mandate is completely distorted, denatured, diminished, impoverished and dominated by an essentially
We can even be economistic about our work in God's kingdom. There are many who see an antithesis between the coffee time of pastor Oemark and the Kingdom of God. But such an antithesis is just as dangerous for those who choose the Kingdom as it is for those who choose the coffee.

The Christian life cannot be typified by the military slogan that "the recruit may enjoy himself only as long as he realizes that afterwards he must march." That "as long as" is too much. We may not make an antithesis between the enjoyment of life and working in God's kingdom. Everything would be so easy, if God would just give us a timetable on which it was precisely laid out exactly how many hours we must spend on each of the various facets of our work. But God wants no jove-boys who bind themselves to a contract. He wants children who give themselves in a Covenant. We can enjoy life at the very same time as we are working in God's kingdom because we are children who would rather do nothing else than work with Father. A slave divides life up into pieces, so that he is happy when work is "over" again and he can "proceed" to enjoyment. But a child already enjoys it, when he can give father a nail out of his own pocket. We are children of whom it can
be said "their learning is play." It is our "food". It is a "treat" to do God's will. Our total devotion to God's kingdom must be out of pure gratitude. Our toil is our hymn of praise. Our battle is a feast. Even suffering for the Kingdom of God may be borne with gratitude, for it is no more of an achievement than being loved is an achievement.

The moment of play must break out in all of our work. Saying "haahh!" and "yeaahh!" to life may never mean that the time has come for something completely different, for that means something foreign is being allowed to intrude into the seamless fabric of our living.

Whenever we take such an attitude as our starting point we no longer yearn for a timetable, a scheme, a casuistry in which this childlike playfulness, freedom, and spontaneity is cut short. We may relax and intensely exert ourselves with the same feeling of gratitude. We cannot precisely parcel out a time for this and a time for that, with the measuring line of the Pharisees. We do whatever is at hand. We do what our heart prompts us to do.

We aren't clock-watchers, for that is slavery. Happy children always forget how late it is, and pleasure knows
no measure. That is christian liberty.

But many are afraid that we are going to talk about christian liberty before we know what being christian is all about. Such fear is not superfluous, but what we are now concerned about is another fear -- the fear that we may talk so long about what being a "christian" means that we never get around to being free. It takes a child to sail safely between these two treacherous schools -- on a ship of love. When there is a personal bond between Jesus and us, then we meet his Kingdom everywhere. Whoever is in love, sees everywhere something of the person that they love. Whoever is in love, sees everything in relation to their beloved. Whoever loves, lives but one life.

Whoever lives different lives -- an "ordinary" life and a higher "spiritual" life, may not sing "a new existence has begun,"

Whoever plays around with a double-decked life deals in death,
six

WORLD RECORD LOVE
From time to time various **conditions** in the world are improved; but everyday someone improves upon an old world record. Up until just recently, for example, the world championship backwards race took 3 hours and 40 minutes. But this unusual feat was convincingly improved upon by an Italian student who covered the distance of nearly 20 kilometers in just 2 hours and 36 minutes -- at a backwards trot.

That makes him a fitting symbol for all of us, for if there is one thing which we progressively excel in, it is in travelling backwards. It is remarkable that we take so much pride in moving backwards that we think running backwards is an improvement. There is almost nothing we can(not) improve -- except the world record for running backwards.

This form of competition began already in paradise. When mankind for the first time in his life forgot God, he began -- without realizing it himself -- to travel backwards. At first it was only step by step, then it became a jog-trot, until today where we are beginning to approach the speed of an express train. And to all of this we shout "hooray!"
because we are going faster and faster. But we aren't paying attention to the direction in which mankind is running. We are our own most loyal supporters and vociferous fan club. We are always cheering "Go, me, go!" In church that would be called "sin", since every sin is in essence nothing more than "Go, me, go!" We applaud whenever "I" takes the lead. We've been running backwards for so long now that we don't even notice it anymore ourselves. We've been running backwards ever since Adam and Eve. We don't know any better.

That's why Christ had to come. He came to tell us that we were running backwards. He came because we didn't know any better. He came to show us that mankind could also run in a different direction than the one we were going in. He was the only one who ran straight forwardly in a world in which everyone else ran backwards.

That's why people first stared at him in speechless amazement. He didn't want to go along with them. He didn't let Himself be carried along down the river of history. He didn't play according to the rules of the game. He kept stepping out of line, and running away with the game.
His own father and mother couldn't understand it all. They looked at him with eyes as big as saucers. They lost track of him and called out "Where have you been!?" And Jesus said, "Didn't you know that I must be about my father's business?" No, they didn't know that.

People finally became angry with Him, in fact downright indignant: Who does he think he is -- running forward when every decent and well-brought up person always runs backwards? They ran him out of the world because they didn't understand that he had come to help them get out of their world -- the world of champion backward racers.

We can only celebrate Easter if we make a complete turnabout.

There is a book about Yugoslavia which bears the title "The Land Behind God's Back". But we all live in the land behind God's back. Therefore Easter is the feast of reversal: we suddenly turn around and face God again. All progress begins in the garden of Arimathea. Perhaps the speed of the Church is still too slow, but at least the direction is good. The Man of Easter doesn't come to better a world record, He comes to better the existing conditions. He turns world championship backward-racers into
runners in the race of faith -- those who "stretch out for what lies ahead of them."

Two students from Harvard slapped each other on the ears for 40 hours and 10 seconds. They kept themselves in shape during that time with coffee, fruit juice, and bananas. In total they dealt each other 17,281 blows, thereby breaking an old Russian record. But Jesus broke all world records when He said: "If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn him the left one too."

The world record for crying was recently achieved by a young dressmaker from Philadelphia, who cried for 2 hours and 49 minutes non-stop, outlasting 72 female and 19 male competitors. Even when it comes down to crying a person can easily go too far: along with all the tears being shed today there are always a few big crocodile tears as well. But Jesus broke all world records when he said, "Weep not over me, but weep for yourself and for your children!"

At the open grave we no longer talk about a "record". The love of Jesus surpasses everything. He knew that He wouldn't be welcome with his "new direction." When he
descended to earth He knew that He would have to descend into the earth; but He made that death-leap from heaven, anyway.

We ought not to stand admiring the scars on his hands, even though we are then at least standing with our face toward God. For at the open grave we can run straight-forward again -- right into the outstretched arms of the Father who for centuries has stood waiting in the doorway of the "Welcome" House.

He holds the all time world record for endurance -- He endured the world.
seven

A NEW WORLD
When we hear the word "revolution" we usually think of the one we learned about in school with date and all -- the French Revolution of 1789 or the American Revolution of 1776.

But our children will probably think of something else when they hear the word "revolution", for teachers in the future will probably pay at least as much attention to the Asian revolution as they will to the French or American ones. For in Asia one of the biggest revolutions in history is taking place.

If you look at photographs of prominent Asians, you can see written on their faces their belief in a new world. Those of us in Europe will never be able to imagine what went on in the hearts of all Asians when at the beginning of our century, after the conquering of Japan, the slogan "Asia for the Asians" first arose. A feeling of triumph overcame people who for centuries had never known such feeling. Asia, with its 1400 million inhabitants (more than half of the world's population), became conscious that it would be playing a decisive role in world politics.
Instead of "the age of youth" we would probably be wiser to refer to "the age of Asia."

There are young Asians who walk to meet the future with a quick step and radiant eyes, convinced that it contains a new world which will blossom like a rose on the ruins of the West -- under the rising sun of the East.

The longing for a new Order has lived deep in the heart of mankind for centuries; but how often haven't the high ideals of young nations come to naught? There is indeed nothing new under the rising sun. Whenever men get into their heads an unswerving faith in human reason, countless numbers of those heads containing that precious reason will fall under the guillotine.

Will it be any different with the new world in which Asia believes? In any case we ought to feel ashamed whenever we see the flush of expectation reflected in the dark eyes of Asian people.

Just as we find it difficult to imagine from out of our europa-centric perspective on the world what the conquering of Japan meant for Asia, so too from out of our ego-centric view of life we are unable to sympathize with the experience
of the disciples and angels at the victory of Christ. It did not merely mean that the disciples were no longer alone, nor was it first of all a matter of their personal meeting with Jesus. That he revealed to Mary Magdalene in no uncertain terms: Neither was it the most exciting thing that now they could once again cast all their cares on Jesus, but the most excitingly significant thing about that event was that He was on His way to His Father -- for the sake of the new world!

When we talk about "revolution" we must first of all think about Easter. The action of the angel who rolled away the stone, was a political action. The power with which he seized that stone was that of a coup d'etat. In the garden of Arimathea began "the age of Christ." His resurrection was the most important turning point in world history.

The empty grave doesn't belong only in a children's picture book, but also on the television newsreel. Easter is world news.

If you look at Christians, you should be able to see written on their face the belief in a new world; otherwise Asia may put more trust in itself than Christians do in their Lord. On Easter a feeling of triumph overcomes
people who have never known such a feeling before; for now Christ is going to play the decisive role in world politics!

That is the good side of the custom of relating Easter to springtime flowers, rabbits, and eggs: for it enables us to see that it is not only a matter of our own preservation, but also of the re-creation in which God wants to involve the whole of nature. "Early in the morning, at the break of day" are words which ring with an echo of those earlier words: "let there be light."

Asia marches under the flag of the rising sun; but the (rising) sun of that first Sunday arose like it had never before arisen since the creation, for as it arose over those first Sunday's children, the whole earth trembled because it felt the new earth arriving.

Nature springs to life once more As voice after voice breaks through And with her now arisen Lord Earth awakens fresh and new, The cosmos dons her multi-colored clothing To greet at His returning, the One who wove them for her first appearing, Later cleaning the soiled and torn, he remended old like new.
A golden fire flows high aloft
But wakens streams to thaw and flow,
Spring breezes' breath is warm and soft
And gently wakens fields to grow,
As life returns to shrivelled boughs,
Brooks and lakes from sleep arouse,
While death's cold fetters melt like snow,

It is a pity that such an Easter hymn is so unknown: For it was made to go with sun, wind, and water. Let's not forget the King of Easter Sunday on the Sunday after, nor forget to look for him while travelling home: look at the blue sky above the green earth and recall his words, "I am going to my Father and your Father." When He returns -- that will really be some summer!
eight

Child's Play
In the conclusion of The Brother's Karamazov by Dostoyevsky, the Easter Gospel sneaks in as a surprise in the description of the burial of a dead friend of a group of children. Before the various boys and girls at the graveside, Alyosha eulogizes that Christ's resurrection guarantees that they will see their companion again, and so he heartily invites them to eat some blintzes because the festival of the resurrection has swallowed up the fear of death. To this exhortation the children respond with a loud shout: "Hooray Karamazov!" Someone has written that "This 'hooray' bursting from the mouths of children is more powerful than the most profound theological reflection on the fact of the resurrection. Besides, for the modern man who is unfamiliar with the gospel, it is also a fascinating piece of action."

Such is the meaning of Easter: children shouting "hooray!" by the grave of a friend. And let no one (rebukingly) say: "Oh, they're only children, after all..., and that's children for you!"

A couple of boys were romping along the street one day when one of them gave the other a quick shove that almost made him fall over. Suddenly a third boy stepped indignantly
in between them and said to the first: "Don't shove him like that 'cuz his grandfather is dead now!" There is something peculiarly humorous about this sort of childish respect for the dead. It is as if Johnny acquires a little unassailability because there is something of the mysterious aura of death surrounding him.

Death -- is something you shouldn't avoid: Don't play tag in the cemetery: for death likes to play tag himself. When he taps you on the shoulder and says "you're it" you suddenly turn into one of those silent stones standing in long rows. And those stones are a frozen testimony to the earnest seriousness with which death plays his game. In the company of such stones only straight faces are appropriate.

But when children nevertheless shout "hooray!" over blintzes next to a freshly opened grave, then a miracle has taken place.

When Jesus lay in the grave, a heavy stone was rolled in front of the entrance. That stone was death standing at full height. It was the evil desire of all men to be free from God. A seal was placed on the stone to insure that it remained closed, and that seal was our human law. It
was placed there in the name of public safety, order, and tranquility, and it wasn't child's play.

But on Easter morning, when the angels became like children, a big angel came to perform a daring deed. He conquered the power of nature and with one finger flicked the stone aside as if it were merely a pebble. He cancelled the human ordinance, and broke the seal as if it were merely a piece of scrap paper.

In that one gesture he shouted to all people everywhere: you have no power, and you have no legal rights. And then he sat down -- right on the stone. And the stone became a stool. Death had nothing more to say. And when the angel later spoke to the women who still only dared to believe in the hard, cold facts of immovable stones, the stone itself turned into a pulpit. And where did that angel get such courage? His boldness issued from the empty grave behind him.

On Easter we receive new eyes -- the eyes of a child -- hip, hip, hooray! That talk about "becoming like a child" and cheering and saying "haahh!" to life can all be quite irritating though... as if a Christian can only be radiantly fortunate, always walking with God and never wrestling with
him, like more and more Dutchmen are contending, who, in reaction to the Dutch "suit and tie" mentality, are changing into an American "unbuttoned-shirt" theology.

It is certainly not true that whoever celebrates Easter has no cares. On the contrary, with Easter we receive many "cares" as well. But genuine concern is possible only because we are freed from all our cares.

The Easter celebration is not first of all because we have been divested of all our cares. It is concerned with the loss of all our superfluous cares and their replacement with genuine caring.

We should not just tell each other to be careful, Period. Nor should we encourage each other to be care-free, Period.

It is superficial to divide people into optimists and pessimists because the important thing is what we are concerned about.... And it is important too, in what circumstances we throw our cares and concerns overboard. The question is not "Do you care or not?" but "For what do you care?" and For what don't you care?" Someone said once that modern man has ceased to care about his sins, with the
result that he cares about practically everything else.

That's a pretty accurate x-ray of our hearts and souls, wouldn't you say?

But we should no more encourage each other with an American grin to forget about all our cares and troubles (keep on smiling, everything's going to be alright, just keep up the old confidence...) than we should shake our finger at each other about outbursts of joy (watch out: things will get broken...) Neither should we send our cares packing, or just let them weigh us down, but we should let them move on.

The problem is not that we have various cares; but that our concern is misplaced. The fear we have of the passion in our own heart we project on the Communists, so that the Iron Curtain has become the world's largest theatre screen.

Carefulness is the mother of the china cabinet but we carefully sit concernedly by it -- not because we are afraid that we might break a piece of china with one little move -- but because we are afraid that we might cut our fingers on the fragments. We are more concerned with what
might happen to us, than with what we might do. But as soon as we become concerned with our sin, other concerns disappear. Once we have recognized that we can only fail in our lives, that another must take over our business, then we know at once too that nothing can go wrong anymore.

If we concentrate all our cares on one point, they will never get any farther than that one point.

Accidents hide in small corners, but then in any case they should at least be in the right corner.

Our future laughs at us from behind our superfluous cares. Our past calls out after us from behind our forgotten sins.

We can eat blintzes because it has become Easter; but we should not forget what the Jews say when they raise the matze: this is the bread of oppression which our fathers ate in Egypt.
nine

ONE-TWO-THREE AND THANK-YOU-VERY-MUCH
One evening two strange events were reported in the newspaper: in one report a cattle dealer had tied a cow to a wagon and dragged it to its death over the road, claiming, "I'll do what I want with my own property." While someone else somewhere was reported to have bitten the head off of a dove, brutally sinking his teeth into the symbol of peace, innocence and the Holy Spirit.

Even if it was 1900 years before Christ, people would have called that a scandal. One day the Greek philosopher Pythagorus, for example, was passing some fishermen who had just made a good catch. Before the net was even out of the water he bought all the fish, and when the deal was closed, he let them all go. He gave their freedom back to them.

I know of a writer who took malicious pleasure in digging up all sorts of contrasts between Jesus and other "big figures" in history. He seized on this legend about Pythagorus in order to say that there is a characteristic difference between the gospel story of the miraculous catch of fish and the deed of the great pagan Pythagorus, who ransomed the fishes. You know the Easter story that he is referring to: One morning after his resurrection Jesus
commanded his disciples who had just spent a fruitless night on the sea -- to cast their nets out one more time; they did and when they hauled it up it was so full that it almost tore apart. The writer who compared this event with the story about Pythagorus, posited the question, "Who of these two has more of a right to be called the Son of God?" His own preference is clear. He sympathizes more with Pythagorus who could well be elected as honorary president of the humane society.

At first sight it seems a rather clever comparison: a man who only cares about full nets and full pocket books over against a man who sympathizes with the poor fish and even gives up his own money for them. But if we read the gospel carefully, it becomes quite clear that there is more depth to the words of Jesus than to the gesture of Pythagorus. Pythagorus wanted to be human; he had "respect for life." He was like the man who wouldn't hurt a fly, but would probably grumble loudly to his wife if a fly fell in his tea. His gesture completely demonstrated the generosity that we as people have to offer. He signed with a solid stroke the "rights of man" as if he desired to save the world: even with democracy for the fish! Glory to man and peace on the sea! He chose freedom. He
stood by the water's edge like a pioneer of the west. He laid the cornerstone of the palace of peace. He stood there like the statue of liberty. He rose as the morning sun in the East and let the white dove of peace loose to fly from his hand. He wanted to make the fish as free as the birds. In that one noble gesture he spoke across the sea: men, if we cannot feel sympathy for the fish, then we will end up feeding ourselves to the sharks, but if we show each other a little respect, and just give each other a little room, if we look for the sunshine in the water and just sail ahead on the straight and true then we won't be like a fish out of water, but we will be in our true environment.

That is the kind of worship service we can easily be sold on: "respect all that lives," "don't take anymore than you've got coming," "the soft power is sure to win out," "everyone is equal now that Eichmann is dead," "we have a right to a comfortable existence," "improve the world by beginning with yourself." And then we invent some sacrifice in order to demonstrate our dedication -- we eat no fish, or we model our life after the little song that children used to sing fifty years ago: "you can enjoy creation in the screech of an owl, but not in the smell
of a roasting fowl," -- as if God wouldn't allow us to eat anything tasty. We fancy ourselves prophets who wouldn't eat a grasshopper. We play the martyr for worthy causes, we bait our hooks with the minnow of a preparatory sacrifice in the hope of catching a whale of a redemption. That kind of religion is what we humans have only half-copied from God: Pythagorus had to pay in order for the fish to go free, so we have to sacrifice for our posterity in order to reap its benefits. We are gentle with animals too -- gentle, that is, like the German soldiers who were petting a dog near the Warsaw ghetto. When someone asked a Jewish girl "what would you like to be?" she said, "a dog, because the guards love dogs."

That is typical of how we try to make the world a better place to live in.

But when Jesus stood on the beach with the wind in his hair, he didn't just cup his hands around his mouth and call out: "just do your best, things will turn out all-right!" He didn't just stand there in order to contribute a last little push to what men had already begun themselves -- like a slap on the back delivered at arms length, or like "take heart, don't lose courage" -- but he began to
speak just when his disciples had nothing more to contribute. They had interrupted the work at hand, leaving it behind like a fruitless cause... and then Jesus came on the scene. Jesus didn't come to crown the religion we invented, but He came in at the very point where we had given up in hopeless defeat. Jesus doesn't make moralists and activists out of us by passing on various little bits of well-intentioned advice about being kind to animals and loving our fellow man, but he shows us that God intended something better for us than to be moralistic laborers who struggle to cope with their jobs.

The miraculous catch of fish is not just another fish story about what a good day the disciples had, nor does it have anything to do with the kind of day we call "good" when we have had the utterly ordinary windfall of an extra dollar. It is a story which is concerned to teach us what faith is. Faith is throwing out our net, not because we think there are a lot of fish swimming down there somewhere, but because someone standing on the shore commands it; it is doing what seems foolish in the eyes of men who judge things according to their own wisdom. It is listening to a pilot who is standing on the shore. Faith is saying "At your word I will cast my net." When the disciples returned to shore, breakfast
was already prepared -- just as if Jesus wanted to say to them, "I don't need you, but you need me." He served them delicious fried fish and gladly lingered while basking in the morning sun because on Easter his whole body had been revived, and not just some spirit -- like that of democracy, or of western values. The disciples kept busy counting the fish "one-two-three..." and they took the bread he offered them with a "thank-you-very-much" and that was how they believed.

We can easily make a problem of believing, but it is easy as "one-two-three" and "thank-you-very-much."

A minister in England wanted to make clear to the children in his catechism class what faith was, so he took a watch out of his pocket and showed it to them saying "who wants to have this?" The boy who sat closest to him said, "Oh no, you don't pastor! You can't fool me!" And the next one said, "I'm not going to fall for it." And a third exclaimed, "He's joking!" Finally a small boy in the back called out "I'll take it sir!" and so the pastor walked over to him, and gave him the watch. "Thank-you," "You're welcome," Then the other boys' eyes suddenly widened and they asked, "Can he really have it?" "Does he really get
to keep it?!” And the minister replied, “Yes, of course, that's what I said, didn't I? Now remember for the rest of your life what faith is: it is accepting from God what He offers to you.”

On Easter God says: here is forgiveness and eternal life, here is the possibility of really living and if we only say “yes, I'll take that gladly,” then we are believers and we may sit with the disciples by the shore: it tastes good, this life on earth, Father. It whets my appetite for more..., Thank-you-very-much, Lord.
ASCENSION DAY CELEBRATION
THE SUN RISES
Why is it that we celebrate Christmas, New Years, and Easter, all so festively, while we rarely celebrate Ascension Day? Could it be because it is so difficult to understand why Jesus' departure is an occasion for joy and happiness? After all, when we take leave of someone we love very much, we are rarely in a festive mood. On Ascension Day we loudly sing, "God has gone on high, with a joyful cry" (Psalm 47), but something doesn't ring true.

The disciples didn't really shout with joy when Jesus left for heaven, did they? Is there anyway such parting can be reason for sweet celebration and not for sad sorrow?

You must think then a little about the sun, and then perhaps things will become a bit clearer. As soon as the sun rises, it hangs low over the horizon. It looks as if you can almost reach up and grab it. As the day goes on though, the sun begins to climb. It seems as if the higher it goes the farther away it gets from us down here. But all the while the sun is climbing, more and more light and warmth falls on the earth, so that by the time the sun reaches its zenith, the point of greatest distance from us that it can get, only then are its rays able to penetrate into the deepest clefts of the earth.
That is also how it works with the Son of Righteousness, with Jesus. He began low on our horizon. He was close by. We could even touch him if we wanted to. With his ascension however, he began to climb high above us. We could say "it's a pity that he keeps getting farther away from us down here," but only now that he stands at the apex of his glory is he able to send his warming rays down into the darkest chasms of our hearts.

Only now that he is farther away can he come closer to us.

Only now that he has left Palestine, can he bless the earth.

Only now that the glow of his love has risen so high can it make the earth lighter and warmer.

That is why his parting is good reason for a party.

With his ascension Jesus stretched out his almighty arm so far that we -- small and insignificant people -- can reach that arm even when we kneel down to pray. And as long as we keep in touch with that almighty arm, we are flooded with something of his power. And then there is no other way, then it must flow through us on to others. For his last will was: "Go forth...."
The celebration of Ascension Day sets us in motion. The General has climbed to the top of the mountain to review his whole army. At his ascension Jesus commands "Forward" and on Pentecost he follows it up with "March!"

That sets the great army of his church in motion, with his love leading the way like a pillar of fire.

The sun rises and the sun sets, but the love of Jesus stands forever.
two

THE FINISHER WINS
I once saw a film about the life of a salmon.

This wonderful creature of God has irresistible impulse built into it to return to its birthplace at a particular time in its life -- despite all hindrances along the way. That means this fish must face the greatest of difficulties: it must swim against the stream, jump waterfalls from bottom to top, leap over hard rocks, pass safely through locks, and manoeuvre round anglers and experienced fishermen, before it finally completes its course, and reaches its goal.

It is so tempting to get caught up in such a trip when it is displayed on the movie screen that the audience often finds itself shouting encouragement or warnings: "up you go!" or "watch out there!"

Whoever eats salmon is eating courage, prudence and persistence.

Such an animal also puts us to shame.

Sometimes we may be brave enough that we dare to swim upstream, but as soon as we reach the first waterfall we
already begin to think "it would still be easier to turn back now." Perhaps there is an individual among us who succeeds in overcoming this obstacle, but when he finds himself greeted on the other side of the waterfall by wide nets and the vicious boats of fishermen, he too sees only one solution: to turn back.

The encouraging refrain "take heart" is often stretched like a rubberband to its breaking point, but it too reaches its limit. Our powers of endurance are inversely proportional to the dangers which we so proudly and bravely face.

But whoever has seen the life history of a salmon must involuntarily think of the career of Jesus Christ. He too chose to go against the stream. When the whole world said "no" his forceful reply was "Yes." He conquered the waterfall: even when everything ran against him he still set out on his ascending journey. He did not avoid the anglers, but let his own holy spirit lead him into the wilderness where he was baited and tempted by the devil.

Yet he is the only one who has really finished his course.
He returned to the place from which he had come. He picked his way over the face of the earth, all the way from heaven and back again. Could we say that before he came to Bethlehem he sat next to God but probably at his left hand? In any case we do know that God crowned his ordeal of hinderances through Palestine, with a place at His right hand. His present position at the right hand of God is inseparable from his struggles among us. God said to Him: That is the way I want it to be, this is the way of all flesh."

So what do you think God must think of us when we keep on giving up? God says: "There is one who has run the course to the very end; now all is in order: I have seen to it that man persevered." And God acts as if we and Christ are completely one and the same. Therefore we are more than salmon -- we are more than conquerors!
PENTECOST
one

BURSTING AT THE SEAMS
The crew of "The Starling" must certainly have stared at the sudden but marvelous leak their ship sprung when wine and sherry suddenly started pouring out of its scuppers. They probably pinched themselves and wondered "is this real or are we just dreaming?" It must have seemed like a fairy tale from Hansel and Gretel, for it just isn't everyday that a ship starts disgorging wine! That only happens in the land of plenty..., but in this case it was true none the less. An investigation revealed later that a couple of wine vats had broken, thus causing the ship to literally start bursting (out) at the seams.

When Jesus began His round trip through Palestine, His first miracle was turning water into wine. Water is a necessity for the sustenance of life; but wine is an extra benefit for celebration. Water is a necessity, wine is a luxury. Water is life, wine is abundance. So Jesus made it clear where He began. He promised us "I will give you life... in full abundance."

That becomes very clear on Pentecost. Then God opens the sluice gates of heaven. Then come the showers of
blessing -- which descend like a cloudburst! -- as the storerooms of heaven empty themselves onto the earth.

On Easter Jesus gave us life... "Since Christ the victory has won, a new existence has begun." On Pentecost comes the abundance:

It is no wonder that people thought the disciples were drunk. They were drunk -- with joy. Pentecost is the celebration of Divine excess. Now our joy knows no bounds.

If you would ask me "what does Pentecost mean?" then I would say Pentecost means: "bursting at the seams!"

God is as generous as he can be.

God no longer holds anything back after this last and highest Christian feast day. Would He, Who gave us his Son on Christmas day and did not spare that Son (on Good Friday), not freely give us with Him all things (on Pentecost)? The Son had already come to earth. Now the Holy Spirit comes to earth as well. Now God has nothing more to give away! Now He has done all he can. Now we must no
longer wait as if we are going to get a letter or telegram from heaven. God can no longer go any further.

Therefore Pentecost is a serious feast: if we don't listen now, then it is too late. And we must listen well: don't you hear those showers of blessing cascading down like one powerful song about the superabundant goodness of God? It just keeps on flowing -- non-stop -- without end!

Praise God from whom all blessings flow...
Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost!
two

A CAT AND A RAT
According to a newspaper report during the great flood of February 1953, a bundle of straw was sighted floating along somewhere in the disaster area. Sitting together or it were a cat and a rat -- just as if cats and rats have been the best of friends for centuries. One journalist tried to imagine what took place when these two animals found each other occupying the same life boat: the rat waited, shivering on the edge of the bundle of straw for the cat to discover him, and as soon as the cat did spot the rat, his fur immediately stood on end. But he quickly realized that it was not the most opportune time to invite the rat over for supper while the island of straw kept bobbing under the waves. Cat and rat both understood: in such a situation you shouldn't rock the boat. According to our reporter on the scene the rat was the first to speak, "So..." he squeaked philosophically, "after much strife, concord has been born at last." "Y'all squeek the truth" meowed the cat in response.

But at the end of the story, the cat and the rat finally got ashore. Frightened by the crowd of people who were on the dike where their life raft finally floated to a stop, the rat promptly tried to escape. Then the cat's old instincts also suddenly sprang to life: two or three
lightning-fast bites in the neck and the rat soon lay dying in the wet grass. The cat licked the blood from her whiskers while allowing herself to be petted by the son of her owner. He too reached down to scratch her under the chin: "Nice work there Mimi, well done, old girl!" he said. Then the boy took the dying rat by the end of its tail and flung it back into the water where it quickly drifted away with the current while the cat contentedly rubbed her head against the pantleg of her young master.

This story contains a deep meaning: as we have noticed, in times of national disaster an unexpected unity often arises.

I could not help but think then of a picture I once saw when I was still in school: a portrayal of the flood that showed a rock still standing above the water. On it were lions, and sheep, bears and people, who were all sitting together without attacking or devouring one another. They had been brought together by the flood. But the unity which is born of necessity is always a temporary one. When the water subsided lions once again fell to attacking people and as soon as the cat and the rat stepped ashore the cat jumped on the rat.
That was something we noticed about people after the flood of '53 too: people who were friends in their boots and rain coats, were once again enemies as soon as they put on their Sunday suits. In February everyone said "This unity really should continue." But there is no lasting unity possible... unless it comes through the Spirit of Pentecost.

The Holy Spirit brings "cats" and "rats" together. One of the Old Testament prophets of Israel has even anticipated that cows and bears will graze side by side on the new earth. If cows and bears can get along so remarkably well then there will also be plenty of good will between Americans and Russians. The creed of the Christian Church first says: "I believe in the Holy Spirit." Then it adds: "I believe in a Holy Catholic Church, and the communion of saints."

Pentecost is the feast of the only oneness, the unique unity, the sole community.
three

THE FIRST AND LAST WORLD FEAST
God's angels surely must think it is an incredible drama which has been performed over the ages on this globe. Among all amazing scenes which they see some of the most impressive must be those which take place when time and time again little lights are lit and small lanterns are hung up in the middle of the thick darkness which surrounds our world; when pallid faces, upon which every passing day etches more deeply its skeletal-like contours, are suddenly hidden behind masks of laughter; when tightly clamped mouths suddenly burst forth in salvos of thundering laughter, or tear-filled eyes suddenly twinkle with a comical glitter of light, or hands that were tightly clenched into fists suddenly reappear manicured and well-groomed; when after the banal curse of daily routines people suddenly throw themselves into the stream of pleasure as if there were no tomorrow or another tedious workday waiting to greet them on the other bank; when living corpses -- with worms virtually gnawing at their heart -- show up in shirt and tie; or when thousands for whom life is a living hell, skip around through the flames, jumping, dancing, drinking, and singing with hoarse throats, flushed faces, and... empty hearts.
This world -- which is like an airplane screaming down in a steep dive with its engines burning -- time and time again dresses up like a happy bridegroom, and -- in media res -- tries to drown out the thunder-heads rumbling on the horizon with the raucous din of its parties. The effect is similar to when you are walking alone at night on your way to a party and just about the time you feel the pointlessness of your bitter existence catching up to you, you suddenly find yourself at the open door of your host. Then in the light and life that comes bounding and beaming around you, you pull off your wet coat with a shiver and alone with it shake off all your fears and lonely feelings. There is a party today. There is a party every day. There are turbulent parties in sultry pubs, and very formal parties in expensive hotels with nodding waiters and rustling silks. There are also very simple parties on the birthdays of respectable middle class people, on the anniversaries of sewing circles and coffee klatsch, as well as parties at the neighborhood park on the birthday of the country or in honor of V-day or the Queen. If there is only one old woman in the region that is really very old, if there is only one racer who has run the race a fraction of a second faster than anyone else, if there is only one set of triplets in a village, if there is only one typist who has typed in the same place for ten
years, then immediately a full-blown party seems to arise out of nowhere to instantly grace the occasion.

The world always observes its feast days -- even at Christmastime. As candles burn people kneel next to the crib and sigh a little over the malice of those who so callously turned their backs on the spotless innocence of this little child. It is not possible to live one's whole life in the bright electric lights of public attention. A person also needs a bit of feeling and domestic intimacy, so people sing "Silent Night" with their children, and compassionately say to themselves: "such a pity... in that cramped little stable." Then sadly shaking their heads, they proceed to take a big bite of roast rabbit.

When Eastertime comes, hot tears roll from under painted brows down over powdered cheeks at the funeral-like sounds of St. Matthew's Passion -- as some people listen to what they think is the edifying tragedy of a pale man of sorrows with his beautiful ideals. Angel's eyes must certainly open wide as they observe all the anonymous human suffering that exists side by side with all those feasts! Trumpets sound over the rubble, flags wave out of the bunkers, while the big four leave their unsuccessful conference for
home... in order to celebrate Christmas, and raise their brim-full glasses in a toast to a happy new year. A Christian factory manager delivers a thunderous table speech at his 25th anniversary, fervently acknowledged by his secretary, and his pastor... while in India a couple more children starve to death.

Can nothing disturb the world's merry-making? No: only one thing. Once all the giggling and jingling of a sumptuous banquet fell into complete silence when a strange hand wrote on the wall, between the banners and decorations: "weighed, and found wanting." One thing stands in the way of all our festivals: the Word of God, which states the truth in opposition to every poor pretense of fresh party clothes over dark hearts, which tears off your masks, strips the paint off your face, and blows the powder from your cheeks, and which sets you down, in the middle of all the well-dressed guests around the table or on the dance floor, with nothing but your real birthday suit on. It is no wonder then that the world can scarcely celebrate festively until that Word... is silenced. For when it gets to the point where that Church (which grew -- from a handful of fishermen and an unknown village in a distant land -- into a mighty army marching with its banners
high from land to land and carrying the cross of Christ from pole to pole) begins to dwindle until it is once again only a handful of people scattered here and there among the masses; when it gets to the point where the Church can scarcely complete her task anymore, when the Evangelism committees all go home, and the missionaries all retire, when the Sunday schools close down, and when God says: "Now my patience is exhausted, now I am going to have it out, now (that) the world has thrown away my Gospel for good" only then will the celebration of the last great world feast be able to begin with great splendour in honor of the universal disassembling of all churches and defrocking of all the preachers.

God has already given us notice of this feast in Revelation 11:10. Many centuries before any investigation committee could be commissioned, God had published his report on it. He speaks of two witnesses who will be killed. Their death symbolizes the collapse of all ecclesiastical life: church buildings will be refurbished as school classrooms or theatres; communion tables will be put to good use for the world's feast, and the third world can always use the extra cups and goblets. With a Bible that contains such "predictions" the whole Christian Church now sits Sunday after Sunday singing about a "happy
outlook on life" in the conviction that if necessary baptismal founts and preachers can be liquidated.

But God -- who fortunately does not let His Bible end with this text about a celebration over the silencing of tormenting preaching -- does not want us to read right over this text either in our haste to reach the happy ending. It is good to already start thinking about those days today. Now we go to church frequently,... you know how it goes: you eat a little and you drink a little, you (even) sleep a little and you pray a little, and you read the paper and the Bible a little too. If reading the Bible carries with it the threat of capital punishment and you go ahead and read it anyway then for once that reading is no longer just an extension of your daily life with its ordinary run of the mill course of events, but it is an exceptional event, a real occurrence.

It does (still) make a difference (after all) whether you can walk to church primly dressed in a dark Sunday suit with a gilded hymnbook held tightly under your arm, or whether you must cautiously sneak through the darkness towards a distant farmhouse with death lurking behind every tree.
Sometimes you can even long for those attractive days when faith is once again so utterly important that you don't just neatly hang it up with your Sunday suit on a hanger in the closet, but that it controls your life because death is involved; when you greet each other on the street differently than now, and it makes no difference whether you are a window washer or chairman of the board; and when we once again listen to God like we did to the BBC during the hunger winter of 45. We, who only begin to appreciate our health after we are already in the hospital or our freedom after we are already in jail, we should make use of today: "Oh yes, there is my Bible still lying open and conspicuous on my desk, and there's the stone finger of the church steeple quietly pointing above the city traffic."

As soon as the church disintegrates into a heap of ruins, "the inhabitants of the earth" will happily warm themselves over the wood of pulpits and pews, and plan the last feast: a world-feast. The Zulus will enthusiastically join in with the Eskimos, people will at last join hands in long-awaited concord and dance around the prostrate cross, "Freedom!" shouts America, "Equality!" cries Russia, "Brotherhood!" cheers Asia. As devils and angels
look on, that wondrously rejuvenated globe spins off spurts of its wild, childlike joy into the universe on every side. People congratulate each other on the street, send each other presents as if it were Christmas, and greet each other as if it were New Years Day. The world buzzes with dinner speeches, while above cartoons of pulpits thrown on the dung heap, bold newspaper headlines inform all the inhabitants of the earth of the joyful fact that the great obstacle to true joy and prosperity has been thrown out and that today, by proclamation of the Anti-christ, all worship services are outlawed and the eternal, ideal state of the world has dawned.

Russians and Americans warmly embrace, the U.N. security Council goes home and all battleships are sunk. Because for the first time in history the same song will be sung the whole world over. And we will stand in amazement as "the inhabitants of the earth" become "object" of the same "expression."

Who among us isn't reminded of Amsterdam in 1948: one song being sung in 135 churches, and yet a common communion was not possible? Already when Jesus first instituted it there was one who rose from the table -- and now the whole world sits around one festive table and the cup is
passed from a brown hand to a white hand: "To the
Death of Christ: Prosit!"

How is this great outburst of joy over the whole world
to be explained? Was the Church really so oppressive?
Was it really such a pain? The church -- a pain?:
Most people go galloping right past it with their grocery
bags and attache cases: Sometimes they do go in to have
a look around, but only because it was always such a bar-
gain attraction at 50 cents per person (between 10 and 5
o'clock):

God let John explain the world feast this way: "... because
these two prophets had been a torment to those who dwell
on the earth," (Rev. 11:10).

Is that so? Have preachers really tortured people? Is
Christ an obstacle? Look once at that precious little
Child in the crib -- is that a stone that would crush us
if it fell on us? Does that baby swaddled in diapers
really make such a shattering impression? Can you understand
how a prophet of His coming could speak of the great and
terrible day of the Lord?
Have you ever heard anyone say "yeeuchch!" by a cradle? Simeon, how could you even think to hold that pink baby in your wrinkled brown hands and then still speak about a sword? Was that growing youth of Nazareth -- the perfect model of obedience -- ever a little terror? He wandered over the face of this earth; he didn't charge all over it. He walked calmly between the poor peasantry and the rich pedantry alike. So how can anyone now say of that friendly carpenter of Nazareth "His haters, haughty though they be, shall at His august presence flee in utter desolation?" He gave children friendly winks and took them on his lap -- how can it be that at his gaze someday people will look like "wax that is molten by the fire?" People forgot it was time to eat when they listened to him speak and when they suddenly realized that there was no food, he calmly said, "Everyone just go and sit peacefully on the grass now!" After that miraculous feast who would have ever thought of singing "He shall consume both far and near...as smoke before his dreadful ire...?" He wasn't raised for crime and punishment or death and destruction, but somehow that's where he ended up anyway. Is that... is that... really a king up there? Look! See? Behold the man!
Can he really be the world's biggest party crasher, the
great Mr. Kill-Joy? Oh, come on now! Let the cross stand
outside in the cold and darkness! Inside everything is
warm and cheery!

But this Christ indeed cuts across the grain of the
world, and wrecks havoc with its plans. Once you have
seen his cross, you can no longer really celebrate until
you have bowed down before it. Every church steeple
must be a prick in your conscience.

The cross still causes its passers-by pain. Pain -- per-
haps because one agrees with a certain professor that the
cross symbolizes the irredeemability of our generation.
Pain -- perhaps because it is so super-offensive to res-
pectable people, and such a slap in the face of civiliza-
tion. Pain -- because now and then you wonder: what is
it -- really -- that so visibly moves people to kneel be-
fore it even though it is really all so crazy: a God of
the gallows! Yeeuccch!

We often try to stow that cross away in a parsonage or
old people's home, or nicely decorate it with roses and
ribbons. Sometimes we can even avoid it by hanging it
on the wall of our room, like people who can stop praying
with prayer; but it persistently keeps turning up — vast, ominous, and in the full horror of its ugliness. Yet the world forever stands stamping its feet at the starting line as if the race can only begin after the Church and the Cross have been pushed aside.

Is the Church really such an obstacle? Even John the Baptist, when he was in jail thought "Maybe that Jesus really isn't the Messiah after all since it is so easy for people to just walk right by him. I prophesied that the ax was near to the root of the tree, but I haven't seen Jesus chopping down any trees or throwing them into the fire yet! He isn't exactly charging through the trembling countryside like a raving Roland. And the ground isn't exactly shuddering under his divine footsteps. Is there a winnowing fork in his hand? Hardly! All He carries in his hand is an open Bible. He isn't exactly burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire either! He only talks and talks... as if His words are supposed to turn into fire!"

"Are you really that mighty Messiah?" he inquired of Jesus, and Jesus answered "Yes, look: the poor have good news preached to them!" (Mt. 11:2-6; Lk. 7:8-23). With
that John had to be content: The proclamation of the Word is obviously something awful, something powerful, a storm, an axe, a pile driver, a fire, a hurricane.

The Bible is obviously a tool of martyrdom, a rack, a volcano. The Bible puts the thumbscrews on you, it sticks like a thorn in your flesh, and it pinches you in your heart. The Bible strikes like lightning and explodes on contact like a direct hit. When Paul wrote about our armour he only put one offensive weapon in our hands: the Word, the sword of the Spirit. The stroke of a sword causes pain, it cuts holes and inflicts wounds. Such is the Bible: it is a sword, a sharp sword, but even more, it is a two-edged sharp sword: And when this terrible Bible in the clammy hands of a few Christians begins to look more and more like a dull pocket knife which can only inflict a few superficial scratches, then it is certainly not the Bible itself. The witnesses must torment the world:

Hold on now: Just a minute: someone may shout, that's going too far! You're making too much of that Word "torment". Don't exaggerate its meaning. Put it between a couple of quotation marks. Wrap it in a little cotton batting. But that's what it means: the Old Testament calls
Christ the "rock of offense" and the New Testament does the same; yes, of course people often think differently about him -- even many "Christians".

"Christ is encircled", someone once wrote, "by an atmosphere of boredom; the claws of the Lion of Judah have been systematically clipped. People have given Him a certificate of meekness and humility and have sold Him as a pet for pale preachers and pious old ladies."

But what about us -- we who call ourselves Christians? Oh, it really isn't all that difficult to treat everyone like a friend, and it helps a minister keep his congregation happy. But..., "watch out when all people speak good of you, because so did your fathers about the false prophets!"

And "blessed are you when men revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account." A Christian must be a nuisance to people.

If you tell your neighbor that despite all those nice texts and platitudes on his wall he is neglecting his children, then he won't lend you his garden hose anymore.
If you tell the school master that he told the story of the good samaritan very nicely, but that he prefers the sight of roguish faces to the wooden stick, then your son will get lower marks. If you are walking with a lawyer and you tip your hat to the mailman, the lawyer will find that he is too busy to even walk with you again. If you ask your guests, "Is it really true that James did what you say he did?" your company will want to leave early. In short, when you serve the Word (which you can do just by taking your hat off to someone) then enemies will suddenly pop out of the ground at your feet. And if I take offense at the Church and church people, couldn't it possibly be because I am resisting Christ? It seems obvious that we can really only find him through scandal. A good sermon should make us feel uneasy. The "amen" to a good sermon only comes long after coffee time is over. So we come once again face to face with that awful cross and we have to make a choice. Either accept this "miserable" salvation or feast right along with it towards the eleventh chapter of the Book of Revelation.

But even this world feast will be interrupted: Christ himself will come -- in between the opening remarks and the last toast -- and he will have the last Word himself; one that will burst into flame; and before the bewildered eyes
of dancing couples and musicians His dead congregation
will come alive and rise to meet him in the air!

Then Christ will no longer be a stumbling block or a rock
of offense, but the cornerstone which supports His whole
redeemed community and the renewed creation. Then His
Word will no longer be a cutting sword, since all pain
will disappear and all wounds will be healed. Then jacks-
t and top hats will be replaced by pure white festi-
ves robes and golden diadems. Then candles will be extin-
quished and lamps lowered for God Himself will give us
ight. Then we won't feast in order to hide the facts,
but we will feast on the facts. Then we will celebrate the
feast, while now the feast all too often consumes us.
Then Christmas, Easter and Pentecost will all come on
one day, and then, as new people, we will celebrate the
new feast in a new world: the real feast, the true World
feast, which will be opened by God and enjoy a program that
will never end.