

This is the eighteenth in an occasional pamphlet series of theological reflections on timely challenges facing churches of the Lutheran communion. It is produced by the LWF Department for Theology and Studies, but does not represent official positions of the Lutheran World Federation. You are encouraged to duplicate, translate and use this in local settings. To subscribe to this series, please contact Ursula Liesch at Liesch@lutheranworld.org

A LENTEN REFLECTION ON NEED AND NOURISHMENT¹

Lent is a time to focus body and mind on that which really matters in our lives and our faith. Consider this poem by Dietrich Bonhoeffer:

People turn to God when they're in need,
plead for help, contentment, and for bread,
for rescue from their sickness, guilt, and death.
They all do so, both Christian and pagan.

People turn to God in God's own need,
and find God poor, degraded, without roof or bread,
see God devoured by sin, weakness, and death.
Christians stand with God to share God's pain.

God turns to all people in their need,
nourishes body and soul with God's own bread,
takes up the cross for Christians and pagans, both,
and in forgiving both, is slain.²

This poem, written by Dietrich Bonhoeffer in July 1944, is entitled “Christians and Pagans.” One translator remarked that the poem should in fact be called “Christians and Others,” since for Bonhoeffer the real contrast is the one between the “true” Christian disciple and those of “normal” religiosity who maintain their traditional expectations of how God should act to assuage their pain and grief.

This poem succinctly sheds light on three fundamental questions: What does it mean to be human? What does it mean to be Christian? Who is God? Three different encounters between people and God are interrelated and yet distinct.

PEOPLE IN NEED

“People turn to God when they’re in need.” Individually or as a community, we turn to God, ask for help and plead for change. In a few words, Bonhoeffer describes the human condition, the urgent need for people to turn to someone who can change their desperate situation. These moments of prayer, these situations of addressing one’s cry to God are existential moments. We want God to react and to intervene. This is not something specifically Christian, it is something that we share with many others. Material and spiritual needs make us turn to God, we plead for bread and for rescue from sickness, guilt and death.

GOD IN NEED

We want to see a powerful and mighty God but, as the second part of the poem says, we find a poor and degraded God, without a roof over God’s head or bread to eat. We see God devoured by sin, weakness and death. The story goes as follows: There once was a young man who left his job and home and opted for no longer leading a well-ordered life. He wanders around, constantly on the move, surrounded by strange friends and people of dubious repute. He has no money. He spends his days talking, discussing, eating and drinking. This man does not grow very old. He provokes enmity, endures hardship and ends on the cross.

God is not a hero. God is in need. Through the passion events, Jesus’ disciples gradually recognize that Jesus is different from the redeemer they had expected. The traditional idea of the almighty God is challenged and we are forced to rethink how we talk about God’s power and might.

This section of the poem concludes with “Christians stand with God to share God’s pain.” This is a rather unusual definition of what it means to be Christian. As a Lutheran I have often heard reference being made to the sentence, “Here I stand; I can do no other.” This attitude of standing against, being a true Protestant, is familiar to me. But now, Bonhoeffer talks about “standing with,” of being in solidarity. It is very clear that this is not merely a social attitude, a certain political stance, or a sudden feeling of pity, but a deeply spiritual attitude. “Christians stand with God to share God’s pain.”

Where does this happen? How do we experience this? We might be drawn into God’s story by listening to the biblical accounts of Jesus’ life, passion and death during the time of Lent, by breaking bread at the Lord’s Table on Sundays, by standing on all days with those

who are hungry and thirsty, who are foreign or naked. “Christians stand with God to share God’s pain.” This important sentence still needs further meditation and spiritual exploration. Sometimes the self-critical question, Do we Christians actually do that? simply needs to be asked.

GOD’S NOURISHMENT FOR ALL

The poem goes beyond the question of Christian identity by drawing our attention to who God is and how God acts. It becomes evident that God is not merely the antidote to our sinfulness and suffering, but that God involves Godself in our suffering. In Protestant theology, we often find this polarized image of the sinful human being on the one hand and the merciful and gracious God on the other. This poem reminds us that there is a much more intimate dynamic: God existentially shares our existence. God’s incarnation involves Godself in our suffering and in return also calls us to participate in God’s suffering.

The theocentric focus of the third part widens the horizon and sheds a new light on the relationship between Christians, pagans and God. “God turns to all people in their need.” As Paul argues in Romans 5: God takes the initiative and responds to human need. In Christ’s death, God reconciles the ungodly with Godself. “God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us” (Rom 5:8). Jesus has taken up the cross for Christians and pagans. Looking toward the cross makes us realize that we do not only share human need with others, but also God’s grace.

“God turns to all people in their need.” Jesus went up to the Samaritan woman and drew her into a conversation about her life. The woman actively engages in reflecting on that which really matters in life. She realizes that Jesus gives living water which is a “spring of water gushing up to eternal life” (Jn 4:14). In that story, water becomes the symbol that communicates that God nourishes body and soul of all those in need. The Samaritan woman has become the person embodying the experience of Jesus crossing traditional borders of ethnicity, religious belonging and gender.

In Bonhoeffer’s poem, the element that symbolizes God’s transforming engagement in our reality is bread. Bread appears in all three parts of the poem: as our human need, as a need that Jesus shared with us and finally as God’s gift that God shares with all.

In July 2010, the Lutheran World Federation will convene its next Assembly in Stuttgart, Germany, under the theme “Give us today our daily bread.” In preparing for the Assembly we might meditate on Bonhoeffer’s poem and reflect on the unexpected ways in which God responds to our need. Realizing that God deeply shared our human need and existence, we come to experience that God nourishes all with God’s own bread.

SIMONE SINN

***You are encouraged to share your perspectives on this topic with
Rev. Simone Sinn at ssi@lutheranworld.org***

NOTES

¹ Adapted from a meditation given at the Ecumenical Centre Chapel in Geneva, 25 February 2008, based on Romans 5:1–11 and John 4:5–15.

² In Geoffrey B. Kelly & F. Burton Nelson (eds), *A Testament to Freedom: The Essential Writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1990), p. 549.

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