

FRUITS OF CAPTIVITY

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Both under the Old Dispensation and under the New, God has often used the scourge of war, exile and captivity to summon his people to a renewal of faith, to call them to repentance and conversion. Christians have had to undergo this experience in our own times in Europe and Asia, and accounts of their witness to their faith are reaching us from many quarters. What grace and profit may accrue to the Church from their fidelity and their sufferings we cannot tell: that is in God's hands. But might it not be, also, that in his providential plan for us there is a place for the published records of such experiences, many of them by our separated brethren, which we have not yet learnt to appreciate sufficiently? Perhaps, in one sense, it is too easy to be impressed by the courageous stand of a Faulhaber or a Niemöller; perhaps we are too readily moved by the joy and serenity in the letters of a von Moltke, written from prison, awaiting execution, condemned for the sole reason that he had confessed to placing loyalty to God above that to his Führer. Perhaps, even, we may be tempted to turn their testimony into ammunition for anti-Nazi or anti-Communist propaganda. The experiences recounted in two books newly published (in English) by the S.C.M. Press—one by Dietrich von Bonhoeffer¹ (already known to English readers by his *Cost of Discipleship*) in captivity under Hitler and eventually hanged at Flossenbürg, the other by Helmut Gollwitzer,² as a P.o.W. in Russia—are valuable, if for no other reason, at any rate for the self-questioning to which they cannot fail to prompt their readers.

What both these books reveal, behind the straightforward narrative of events and their authors' reflections upon them—very different though the courses of events concerned are from each other—is something of which it is good to be reminded: that captivity may set free and enlarge a man's heart, that the unwilling journey through the Waste Land may be a pilgrimage by which man reaches wholeness. Let us not use this word lightly. What is this wholeness or integrity which we have in mind when we speak of it as something slowly and painfully conquered, and perhaps always only precariously possessed?

The man who allows himself to be torn into fragments by events and problems has not passed the test for the present and the future. . . . It is a question of the *anthropos teleios* (the primary meaning of *teleios* is 'whole', 'complete')—'Ye therefore shall be perfect (*teleios*) as your

¹ *Letters and Papers from Prison*, pp. 190. 12s. 6d.

² *Unwilling Journey—A Diary from Russia*, pp. 316. 16s.

heavenly Father is perfect' (Matthew 5, 48), in contrast to the *aner dipsychos*, the 'double-minded man' of James 1, 8.

—so writes Bonhoeffer in one of the letters in the present volume; and the collection as a whole could not be more aptly described than as telling us of a man who refuses, or is learning to refuse, to be torn into fragments by events and problems. Sometimes, particularly in the earlier letters to his parents, we may find him hovering uneasily on the brink of self-pity; sometimes he is perilously close to the 'merely sentimental'. And yet, beyond question, the man we meet in these letters and papers (though not, perhaps, in the poems—it is a pity the publishers have not printed the German originals alongside the translations) has overcome these weaknesses. He has used captivity to deepen his faith, his carefree trust in God: 'Much as I long to be out of here, I don't believe a single day has been wasted. What will come out of my time here it is too early to say. But something is bound to come out of it. . . .' 'I have never regretted my decision in the summer of 1939' (to return from the U.S.A. to Germany). Bonhoeffer carries his hard-won wisdom lightly; his voice speaks in the accents of *hilaritas* (the word is his own) which resists all self-dramatisation: 'Perhaps we have tended to exaggerate the whole question of suffering, and have been too solemn about it. . . . Frankly speaking, I sometimes feel almost ashamed to think how much we have talked about our own sufferings. . . .'

A sober and realistic expression of love in the life of faith permeates this book. Resolved to live 'in the present moment' ('There is a wholeness about the fully grown man which makes him concentrate on the present moment', he writes), Bonhoeffer is perpetually open to the demands made on him by the situation and by others. Anxiety has lost its hold on him; courage and trust secure him against the need to snatch shelter behind improvised defences from the impact of whatever might threaten the composure of a man lacking his strength. The measure of this strength is the depth of understanding and compassion in his concern for others. It is this that made people turn to him spontaneously for support at moments of trial and crisis, for instance, during the Allied raids on Berlin. It is worth quoting at length:

Gradually one acquires an inner detachment from the dangers that beset us. Detachment however seems too negative, artificial and stoic a word to use. Rather, we assimilate these dangers into the wholeness of our life. I have repeatedly observed how few there are who can make room for conflicting emotions at the same time. When the bombers come, they are all fear; when there is something good to eat, they are all greed; when they are disappointed they are all despair; when they are successful, they can think of nothing else. They miss the fullness of life and the wholeness of an independent existence. By contrast, Christianity plunges us into many different dimensions of life simultaneously. We can

make room in our hearts, to some extent at least, for God and the whole world. . . . Life is not compressed into a single dimension, but is kept multi-dimensional and polyphonous. . . . When people tremble at an impending air-raid, I have almost made it a rule to tell them how much worse it would be for a small town. We have to keep men out of their one-track minds. That is a sort of preparation for faith, although it is only faith itself that can make possible a multi-dimensional life, and enable us to keep even this Whitsun despite the alarms.

This book is a personal testimony, and if, reading it, we fail to meet its author, we come away empty-handed. True, there are, occasionally, theological reflections and comments. But the theology doesn't matter; or, rather, it matters immensely; but only when we see it both as born of, and as shaping response to experience of this sort. Bonhoeffer had been a pastor and theologian of the Confessional Church, much under the influence of Barth's theological teaching, and engaged, under this banner, in the German Church struggle, rejecting all compromise with the forces of evil, with the 'world' of the Hitler regime. Père Congar once remarked that the Confessional Church (and the same might be said of the theology standing behind it) almost *needs* a world of idolatry and heresy in the midst of which to emerge into being, by exercising its function of 'confessing'. And indeed we need not fight shy of paying tribute to Barth's influence in 'extricating the Christian faith from the idolatries of our day' (as Reinhold Niebuhr put it, in the course of the controversy, after the Amsterdam Assembly of the World Council of Churches in 1948, following Barth's refusal to take a stand against Communism), even while recognising its inadequacy to guide Christians in the day-to-day decisions involved in their social existence, its failure to offer them standards whereby to judge the temporal forms of this existence.

Bonhoeffer's recognition of this failure—in sharp contrast, for instance, with Brunner's, perhaps even Niebuhr's—springs directly from a need felt in daily facing the demands of the moment. For Barth, he writes, 'the world is made to depend upon itself and left to its own devices, and that is all wrong'. His own concern for the world around him is too deep and too concrete to lump it all together as 'over against Christ', or 'over against the Church'. What we are concerned with, to use his own words, is 'this world as created and preserved and set subject to laws and atoned for and made new'. Are we not entitled to see in language like this the beginnings of a radically un-Barthian 'theology of the Church'?

Perhaps, though, we should not too readily speak of a 'theology' here. Certainly, there is far too little sense of the Church's *tradition*: a 'tradition' in the ancient sense which includes the whole richness of the Church's life at any moment, received in historical continuity with the apostolic community from Christ, whose Body she is. But at any rate, we are shown

a picture of the Christian life as neither, on the one hand, set 'over against' the world, nor, on the other, submerged in it, fitted neatly into some compartment of it, or relegated to its periphery; but, instead, as permeating the life of the world from within, transforming it into new life in Christ by the power of faith and love. The Church, in this picture, is the point where the new life enters the world; the world is the place where faith is put to the test. Death, prison, exile: such are the means at the world's disposal to remind the Christian that he is not of the world; redemptive love and compassion working in its midst, seeking to transform and renew it, are the Christian's only effective answer to remind the world that it, too, is Christ's.

An answer, to be sure, which it is easier to ask for than to give. To give it, in deed and in truth, a man must be prepared to expose himself unreservedly, to venture on an unwilling journey in ignorance of where it may lead, knowing only that it is, all the time, a pilgrimage; and at the end of it all, to seek to forget and disown nothing of what he has gone through. That, surely, is the wholeness to which the man of integrity, the *anthropos teleios* or the *vir catholicus*, can aspire, and perhaps, in part and as a precarious possession, hold; though in its fullness we can expect to find it only in the humanity of Christ, and in the catholicity of the Church by which it is perpetuated in history. Something of this integrity addresses us in these pages of Bonhoeffer's letters; something like this, too, is behind the fearless launching forth of Gollwitzer, behind his sympathy and understanding for his Russian captors, behind the vital need he feels to penetrate through the shell of cruelty and tyranny which he encounters to the core there may perhaps be of human value hidden behind it. It is the integrity, too, which forced both men, in the end to say 'No', and finally, to seek to keep memory alive by gratitude. For, as Bonhoeffer puts it, 'nothing is lost, everything is taken up in Christ, . . . Christ brings it all again, as God intended it to be, without the distortion which results from human sin'. Or, in Gollwitzer's words—whose book opens for us a range of insight into Marxist theory and Soviet practice which this is not the place to assess—

Only the man who is thankful can be humble, and only the man who is thankful will never forget. But a man is thankful only when there is someone to whom he can express his thanks. To the man who was aware of it from the beginning, or who had learnt to become aware of it there, those years of captivity were not years which gave him the sense of being abandoned; but rather, they were a time when he felt the presence of a guiding hand. . . . Because we are given personal guidance and are cared for by the Eternal Lord, who loves us and suffers for our sakes, therefore we have someone to whom we can offer our thanks.

Do we not, in reading these words, catch a glimpse of what Mr Middleton Murry had in mind when he once spoke of the great lack of our time: 'a relevant pattern of holiness'?