

saints and spiritual writers to some separate establishment where God grants special and out of the ordinary knowledge and graces. All is included in the infused virtue of faith—the living virtue which implies also hope and charity.

For this reason Mother Julian is writing for all of us and not for a clique.

For notwithstanding our simple living and our blindness here, yet endlessly our courteous Lord beholdeth us in this working, rejoicing; and of all things we may please best wisely and truly to believe, and to enjoy with him and in him. . . . And when the Doom is given and we be all brought up above, then shall we clearly see in God the secret things which be now hidden to us. (c. 85, p. 201).



## OF THE HOMELESSNESS OF GOD<sup>1</sup>

BY

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THAT we are having to go through during these years, so full of war's unprecedented waste, drives us to seek ever more closely for the meaning of such happenings. However many and varied the answers which are given, one thing stands out clearly, that there is discernible in these events not only a world-wide

call to reflection and repentance but a special message from God. Bearing upon the present, lighting up the past and foreshadowing the future, this message lays bare the causes of what is happening and so points out the way to victory, just as the keen-eyed doctor looks at the symptoms of sickness in order to come upon the cause of the evil and the means of healing at the same time.

It might appear to many, then, as they gaze upon the sufferings and trials of our time, that humanity is actually decomposing from a dread disease which is shaking us in its last, horrid convulsions. They look at the sickness which has seized the whole earth and ask whether these are nothing but the external signs of an evil lodged in the very pith and tissue of human existence. The very pith of this existence lies in relationship with God, for our ties with God are even closer than those of the unborn child with its mother; in him it is that we live and move and have our being; we are created in his image and likeness to sound in unison with him from

<sup>1</sup> A translation of an article which appeared in *Wort und Wahrheit*.

the depths of our nature; in eternal union with him consists our happiness and dignity, the ultimate completion and fulfilment of our lives.

Need we be surprised, therefore, at the fearful and significant recoil upon humanity whenever this most fundamental of relationships is neglected, cast aside and offended? This inter-traffic with God and ourselves is both real and effective—at first only in invisible things, but at the given time the invisible issues forth and embodies itself, visibly and most concretely, in earthly forms.

Though only in symbols and patchwork, in shadows and in mirrors, we can still work out truly and certainly from our experiences what has passed between God and man: the destiny of God with man. 'The light shone in darkness and the darkness comprehendeth it not. He came into his own and his own received him not.' So begins the Gospel of St John. The accounts of our Lord's life on earth merely expand this theme. The very first chapters of his life make plain this double image: at once the friendship of the joyous and happy Christmas season with the songs of angels, the music of the shepherds and the glistening display of the kings, yet at the same time the poverty-stricken arrival at the inn, the misery, yes, the misery of the stall and the crib (which we have all too easily rendered into art and poetry) and then the coming of the wise men with their news of danger and death, of flight and of exile.

For the Christmas story is both the happiest and the saddest of all the world's stories. This story is as sad as the Passion itself because the whole Passion is already found in it and begins with it as the fruit with the flower. Our forebears knew this well in their wistful piety when they represented the Christchild with a crown of thorns and laid upon the Cross, as he is still to be seen on old-fashioned and forgotten prayer-cards.

The parents standing before the locked doors after the vain search for shelter, the birth in the cavern amongst the animals—'for there was no room for them in the inn'—the pursuit of the blameless child, the long years in foreign lands—have we ever considered how the Holy Family in Egypt are the patrons of refugees?—we know little enough of those years, but devout legends tell us that they were long and hard, but all this was only a prefiguring of that life which our Lord summed up later in the words: 'The foxes have holes and the birds nests but the Son of Man has not whereon to lay his head'. Then the end comes, with shattering logic, in the rejection onto the Cross between earth and heaven and, last of all, the descent into the borrowed grave.

The story of Jesus is the story of God's homelessness on earth.

Was this beginning to serve for ever as the original and exemplar of the fate of God amongst men? Or were there not other hidden words and promises which should be fulfilled not only perhaps in eternity, in the new heaven and the new earth, but even here and now if men, if only men would open themselves up to the message? Words concerning the sojourn of God amongst men, concerning wisdom, who has built for herself a house in which it is rapture to be with the sons of men—concerning God who chooses to dwell with his people instead of passing them over for ever in search of a dwelling? And have not these words been truly fulfilled in the course of centuries despite all the storms and stresses of history and all the guilt and sin of mankind? The Lord, therefore, has secretly continued in his Church, founding his intimate habitation amongst men in the symbol of Bread, in which no people had as yet sought its Godhead—and men have been his companions, eating at his table. And it was a fundamental maxim with them never to search for an escape from the strain of the world even if they did blaspheme and act the wanton and traitor since it was also fundamental for them to believe that the City of God, deep-rooted and firmly set within us, is necessarily the earthly copy and model of God's city in heaven.

But for several generations now we have been witnessing a process of horrible consequence and terrible significance: the expulsion of God from the realm of mankind.

We cannot deny it: God has once more become a stranger to us. Step by step the rights of the hearth have been denied him, in cold calculation taken away from him. He stays alongside us, it is true, but what a stranger! No longer now a guest, he is forced upon us, an unwelcome, burdensome, scarcely-tolerated stranger, whom one expects to hold his peace, to make no demands and to get in the way as little as possible. Is it not a fact that there is no room for God and his Word, his Truth? How much selfish, vigilant and anxious care the mistrustful world exercises to exclude God from his place—in the hearts of children, in the thoughts of the young and in the deeds of their elders? To see that neither too much time nor money nor energy is given over to him? To prevent the days being a remembrance of him and to hide his image and his cross from sight? To provide against his business influencing something anything which men find so much more important than himself? Which of us, when gazing on some mighty old cathedral or monastery, has not been painfully aware that it would nowadays be inconceivable for such wealth, such energy and such spirit to co-operate in the building of a great memorial to the reality of God in the

world? Such a notion has become so foreign to Western man that he looks at a monastery with the same amazement that he would stare at an Indian Reservation or at the animals in a game-preserve, as if to say: 'Do these things still happen?', learning from guides or from handbooks about these places of divine service which are either derelict or have but recently been secularised through force, marvelling that here there did in fact live a number of men who considered a life of prayer and contemplation to be worth while.

And even those of us who call ourselves the faithful—how little place or consideration has God really had in our lives—how little precedence above other things—and what scrupulous care we have taken to see that he does not overstep the boundaries and areas allotted to him by the world's consent. Have not many of us thought it exaggeration and ostentation and altogether too much of a good thing when someone in a restaurant has dared to make the sign of the Cross before eating his meal—making the world remember for ten seconds that there is a God?

Yes, truly, God has become a stranger to us. He is the unwelcome one, to whom one refuses the very meanest of places, dependent upon our good will or even our good humour, the object of our condescension and favour: he has no rights but is always at our disposition, bound and enslaved under the single, everlasting duty of keeping his distance, of leaving the established order undisturbed, of not interfering with those whose right it is to be there—'He came unto his own and his own received him not'. And those who did receive him have driven him away again. We have brought God to such a pass that we exact from God that which from men would be a shameful and humiliating attack upon their fundamental rights and their dignity as men—and we have expected him to be grateful for it.

Thus homelessness has descended upon mankind as never before since the beginning of the world. Those of us who are enduring it in our own persons in one way or another have every reason to watch and wait for its meaning.

Millions of men have been taken from their native soil and driven like loose sand over the face of the earth, refugees from every class and of every kind, defenceless strangers meeting with strangers, having a good reception from good men and a harsh one from hard men. How many new words our language has produced which would have been incomprehensible to anyone ten years ago, and all intended to describe the one thing, that men are without homes any more—evacuees, deportees, bombed-out, D.P.s, rehabilitates, prisoners, missing and displaced. In every street in the world, down to

our last out-of-the-way village, one can hear strange tongues and see strange faces belonging to foreign peoples and to different stocks but all betokening an encounter with the same cruel fate, both men and women, young and old. No, never since the dawn of history has the like been known. Is this not in truth a sign, a pattern and a likeness of what we have ourselves done to God? And is this not punishment and expiation for it? Perhaps another cause is yet to be discerned. He, whom we have made into a stranger, came to bring us nothing which we have spurned—yes, spurned—so much as the message and promise of our eternal home. There is no phrase so hateful to our contemporaries as that of 'the next world'. 'You men of the next world'—it is used as a term of scorn which has all possible meanings from 'You fools, you blockheads, you hypocritical cheats' to 'You shiftless people, you deserters, you traitors to the present'.

And ourselves, the faithful, have we not taken the phrase as an insult and twisted and turned in false shame and with bad consciences in order to soften the reproach, when all the time we are meant to announce ourselves gladly and joyfully as wanderers between two worlds, for we are none other than fellow-citizens and companions of God, co-heirs with Christ and pilgrims with him on the road to the glory that is to be? Have we not suppressed and denied our fairest hopes, quickly and slavishly assuring people that we too only regarded the hope of heaven as a story for children and old people and for those fallen upon bad times; that it was in order for those who had the opportunity to seek after earthly goods, as other decent men do, instead of 'reaching for the heavens'.

And now we are learning as never before in the world what it means to be denied a home, to lose it, or to find it locked for ever—what it means for one's home to be destroyed and wiped off the face of the earth. The family homestead, the city of one's birth, whole tracts of land went down in flames and rubble; the property and the memories of generations perished without trace as bombs tore up cherished spots until no one could any longer say: 'My house was here once'. The very houses of God upon earth, churches and cathedrals, both ancient and new, the mighty and the lowly, all came down in dust and ashes. Buildings, which had weathered the storms of war and rebellion and hostile assaults for more than a thousand years and seemed built for eternity, vanished in a single night.

We are now beginning to realise many things: that man must belong somewhere, must have roots somewhere, must have some place to which he can go back: what it means to him when he is

given it and has it guaranteed, and what it means for him to scorn and despise it: that it is not a cause for shame and mockery if a man puts all that he has into getting back to his own hearth, to find his home once again, to rebuild it for himself, to strengthen it and insure it and never more to lose it. We now see in monstrous burning images how man through his inconceivable pride and haughtiness has flung a refusal against the eternal home prepared for him in heaven, how this refusal has robbed him of his own earthly home and destroyed it. The invisible things come first and out of them rises the visible.

Yet a third point: the original, the primeval sharing is that between God and man. All profound Christians, indeed all profound men, have always been aware that not only the Churches but also the workaday asylums and homes for the aged are models, images and symbols of our dwelling with God and our taking root in him; and that the love which draws us to them points through them and beyond them into our everlasting home. Similarly all intimacy and union of men with each other is primarily and finally a model, an image and a symbol of the original bond in God's love for men, just as the ultimate and deepest motive of every marriage is to shew forth the union of Christ with his Church and of God with the soul: all fatherhood is a most powerful image of him who gives a name to each earthly fatherhood, all motherhood bodies forth our God, in whom we live and move and have our being, who fashioned us with his hands and numbered the hairs of our head. All love, all friendship is both witness and mirror of the eternal love which called us and drew us to it.

We have even forgotten these realities, we have denied them, thrust them away from us and despised them. Nor is it only those who think they have done more than enough if they condescend to acknowledge God's existence who are guilty, for how seldom have we, the faithful, allowed the love of God and his friendship to mean more than 'fulfilling our duties'? How much more important every worldly union has been than that from which it should have been derived? The invisible comes first and then the visible comes after.

Such a rupture of human ties has come upon the world as never before. This scattering to the four winds brings with it at the same time the shattering of all human communities. It is a horror-stricken thought that the war has torn apart men and their wives, parents and children, brothers, sisters and friends over almost the whole face of the known and inhabited earth. Who shall count the millions sharing in these wounds, and, leaving aside the living, who shall number the dead, the missing and the forgotten?

It is as if every remaining cherished bond which man had snatched away from God has now been destroyed, and we can only say that it is both just and necessary, since the union of the creation with God is the ultimate reality. We must go further and say, 'Our homelessness and the pain of our exile and separation are both witness and tribute to the justice and majesty of God and hereafter we shall accept our destiny, acknowledging and revering every foreigner as an encounter with the homelessness of God, and so serving him as best we may'.

But is this a Christian meditation in which all the talk is of guilt and punishment, as if God were the avenger of his offended majesty? Assuredly that is not our only theme. The story of the redemption, the story of Jesus Christ, the story of his homelessness tells us above all things that God does not deal with us according to the terms of a harsh and overbearing judgment.

'God has left His Throne—

And comes wandering through our streets—

Great, great, such Love is too great!'

So goes the old Christmas carol. So soon as he took upon himself our flesh and our fate, so were all things made new; both our bodily nature and our destiny are sanctified and changed. Suffering is no longer sheer misfortune, but is illumined with a mysterious light; suffering is no longer simply the curse against sin and the punishment for it, but is the means of purging away guilt, no longer the mere expression of the pain and destruction of life and its dearest possessions, a foreboding of descent into death, but rather the guarantee of its redemption and the new seed for the victory of resurrection. Every particle of human suffering which touches him and is willingly accepted as coming from him, and confidently cries out to him, is swept into his cleansing Passion to partake of the boundless sources of his blessing and healing.

The world often seems to us in these days like some monstrous pair of balances. On one of the scales the weight of guilt piles up higher and higher until it calls down yet more anger, more punishment and more destruction; on the other scale there collects the inexpressible suffering of the world, drop by drop, as God's reparation. We do not know, nor could we know, the weight of suffering yet to be borne before the scale of atonement comes down, the balance is redressed, judgment done and the compassion of God let loose. We only know that in this fearful movement of the world to its death, our solitary hope, after God's grace, lies in the power of innocent suffering—and along with it the obedient acceptance of suffering by the guilty. And each single tear, every single drop

of blood brings the longed-for day of forgiveness nearer.

Can we then see how Christian joy streams forth because of the very distress of our day and in the midst of it and not in spite of it? To be a Christian is very far indeed from taking flight before the nightmare of the present in a self-deceptive concern with a will-o'-the-wisp from one's lost childhood. We have no need to labour the point because the world's suffering, as well as our own, abides and is renewed daily. But there is now something in it which will never be extinguished: the very God and his dwelling amongst us. 'But to as many as received Him, to them gave He power to be made the sons of God'. And can we still do the same now as then? Can we receive God and give God a home on our earth? Let us take him up into our poor, naked, wasted hearts—whether awfully clothed in his holy Almighty Will or in the persons of foreigners, with whom, as the homeless One, he is now journeying through the world. Let us wear ourselves out in striving and believing and hoping for that hidden treasure, our promised home: let us learn to love it and long for it, to wait for it and take our joy in it.

First comes the invisible happening which then embodies itself in the visible. And so may it happen that we shall once again have him living with us as our Lord and the focus of our lives, founding and raising a home for him once more as a pledge and anticipation of the eternal mansions. Let us return to him, the Stranger, his own right to our love, in the way that we used to sing before the Crib as children:

'I will give you my heart and all I possess'.

It may so happen that we shall once more be able to manifest the oneness of his love in countless happy reunions.

This meditation raises one urgent and almost violent question for the Christian: What is demanded of him personally in order to direct the masses into the paths of the Gospel? What then? The story and tradition of the Church have insisted from the beginning that the only way of life is the way of utter surrender, and that its essential notes are poverty, chastity and obedience freely chosen.

Here we must pay the closest attention. From our Lord's words to certain men in certain situations, and even more, perhaps, from the tireless and devout meditation of its whole existence, Christianity has long since come to the conclusion that certain things which in the world's eyes seem evils and misfortunes, must in fact have another meaning which is veiled in mystery. 'The way of the world is seduction, lust and pride', says the Apostle, meaning that the world seeks above all things for possession, pleasure and independence and goes in fear and dread of the least lessening of these



goods, so that whoever has either lost them or has never reached them is condemned as a miserable weakling.

For centuries this 'autonomous' judgment has had to stand up to the fact that thousands of men have looked for their well-being and happiness—even the earthly and human fulfilment of their lives—in a willing renunciation of just these goods and all that goes with them, whilst an endless chorus of praise and thanksgiving announces that they have found the desire of their hearts, and found it rich beyond measure. And now we are growing aware that what we were accustomed to regard as singular, strange and exceptional, as a rare call for the chosen few, is the equal fate of every man which none can escape in one form or another: poverty, loneliness—perhaps even isolation itself—subjection.

Is this not enough to make Christians thoughtful? Certainly we are responsible for showing that the events of today are a terrible punishment of God, intended to crush to pieces the three worldly idols of our time and that it is just this guilt, heaped up by the worship of idols, which needs our expiation. Is there something else? Is there something else? Would that we had eyes to see our treasures shining through the black, blood-soaked clods of the earth—that treasure for which we must perchance abandon all else as the condition of winning it. Let us say this in all modesty and prudence lest we are led away by our imagination or by the temptation to avoid what we cannot bear through flight into untruths, for none of the gloomy reality of the times can be twisted or questioned or varnished, cheapened or changed into words: Things are as they are for our benefit; the loss and destruction of valuable, precious and indispensable goods, the sickening complication and blackness of living amidst poverty, distress and uncertainty; the heart-breaking sorrow through the complete surrender of our loved ones that makes us into waifs; the wearying burden of compulsory service and the end of all that is dearest under this burden. All this is true. Nevertheless we are Christian men listening reverently to the voice of the Church, telling us through countless martyrs whom we cannot ignore, of another fact (a fact never to be denied even when our hearts and brains are in turmoil): that above and beyond the mere probation of universal suffering there is, at the very least, the possibility of something else coming to birth out of the present situation. The possibility is there, in the same way that healing powers are found in the most poisonous and bitter of herbs or that there is gold in the fatal fall of rock, and it can be fruitful.

Nor should we try to hedge by saying that God's servants in the past never dreamed of developments on such a scale as we are

experiencing them, or that all this only applies to those who have chosen them freely. What? When God himself has made the choice for us, and shown to us, through the pressure of our destinies, his simple and unmistakable design? If he has pointed the way, why not also the goal? If he affords the possibility, why not the fulfilment as well?

And so, in his unspeakable and incalculable mercy and even at the very height of the punishment, might he not change the judgment into mercy, the rejection into promise, the destruction into a new beginning? And may not our defeat itself, which we still feel in every fibre and feverishly regret, may not that also be a symbol and harbinger of a blessed future? That is the road upon which he has set our feet, the road followed by the Church at all times, the road not for an individual but for a people. They are not meant to be bandied about and twisted in violent pros and cons, but they are meant to be pondered upon for a long time and in silence. Much prayer will be necessary before we are able to grasp what we are experiencing. Goethe spoke very truly when he said how gross a mistake it was to think that men immediately understand their experience. It is only slowly that knowledge can grow, but through patience and hardships it will ripen even now.

Perhaps—but again perhaps—the days of trial will continue still longer so that we will learn something that many of us have already experienced and that he always taught: that for us the light shines in darkness, that the special privilege of a Christian is to find his joy, his Christian joy, in the place of trial, like the Christmas rose under the snow, like the moon in the unplumbed darkness of night. And just as the trustful winter blossom speaks of the approaching spring, just as the moon bespeaks the day-time sun, whose light she reflects, even so does this joy give warrant of the eternal and imperishable.

The Son of Man came for us to know once more and never forget that we were born for happiness and not for sorrow, that all pain belongs to the fading countenance of this world, that all joys are a type of the coming kingdom. Thus did the light of the world shine forth, even the light of unending joy, so that it should never again be torn away from the earth, nor rooted out nor shrouded in silence—a deeper, stronger, richer and brighter joy than any previously known to the world: an inalienable heritage and possession even for the bereaved and homeless, for those in loneliness and those in separation:

Fear and pain are fleeting  
Eternal joy remains.