

## FEAR NOT, ONLY BELIEVE

Address by Heather Johnston, Hamilton, Ontario

The theme underlying my thoughts for today are four words from the 5th chapter of MARK: *FEAR NOT, ONLY BELIEVE*. These four words were scratched on a postcard written in the fall of 1945 — the only and last words my father wrote from a prison camp in Yugoslavia. They are the words my husband and I chose as our wedding text when, 12 years later we were married at the Shrine of St. Elizabeth of Hungary in Germany. *FEAR NOT, ONLY BELIEVE*.

The Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr. Donald Coggan, said recently: "whenever I enter a pulpit, I feel as if I were a small child at the edge of a great ocean with a bucket, all that out there to be explored". That describes vividly how I felt at the 5th Assembly of the World Council of Churches held last Nov/Dec in Nairobi, Kenya. It often seemed as if I were drowning in the quick sands of stagnating theology debate, or on the other hand in a tidal wave of concern for human rights everywhere.

That tremendous tension, so necessary and yet so painful, between prayer and involvement, evangelism and social action, things temporal and things eternal was felt as never before. It is a tension every Christian today has to face honestly and squarely, as did Mary and Martha so long ago in the presence of our Lord.

The theme of the Assembly, "Jesus Christ Frees and Unites", became at once more meaningful and threatening to me in Nairobi. For, as I was walking through the worst slums I have ever seen, or riding on a local bus in the city of Nairobi, where the driver receives \$2 a day, I felt myself raising a barrier inside me to keep the misery out. The poverty challenged my riches. How can and must I confess Christ in a situation such as that? Jean Vanier, son of our former Governor General, gives us one answer: "If I truly love, if I feel concerned, my life must change. The life I have built for myself must be completely changed. The time I get up in the morning and go to bed. The friends I like to go out with, eat with in smart restaurants, the books I read, the money I have to spend. And, if I enter the world of touch, the world of tender compassion, the world of the prisoner, the handicapped, the hungry, I am in danger of entering a world of insecurity".

Many Christians are entering that world of insecurity. The chaplain who calls his years of service in a prison his 5 years in hell; the doctor who treats our brothers and sisters in the North, where Mercury poisoning is called the most brutal dehumanization; Dr. C. Winters, former Archbishop of Namibia, deported from that South African country four years ago from the country he calls home and the most exploited in the world where a black construction worker makes \$23.00 a month, while a white worker in the same job receives ten times as much.

A poem which appeared in the Assembly's newspaper "Target" moved me greatly:

"I had a vision  
 I had a vision, but not in the pulpit,  
 I had a vision, but not in the Assembly.  
 Coming down from the mountain in reflection  
 I see the suffering of the oppressed in a ferment of violent agitation . . .  
 the delegates talk and talk . . .  
 the press type and type their reports . . .  
 we will mouth the words, so long as others spill the blood.  
 In my vision, the dream becomes a nightmare.  
 BUT, there is an answer, there is an answer  
 NON-VIOLENT, costly and calling for real spiritual and physical agony.  
 Somewhere a voice is calling; 'take up your cross and follow' "

Would, that we individually and corporately were to do just that. Or, as I heard it so dramatically put by a Scottish preacher: "Change or Perish". In Nairobi on our way to worship our small bus stopped in Kibera, a section of that city where 60 thousand Kenyans live in appalling poverty, I was aghast to see a German pastor snap pictures of the tragic hovels, enticing their inhabitants to come out of the places where they were hiding, trying to hold on to their dignity, the only possession left. "And why not", he said, "our church sends these people money". What callousness. Change or Perish.

One of the subsections at the 5th Assembly dealt with the question of quality of life. What is quality of life? What is quality of life for a Russian Orthodox living in a socialist state; for a South American tortured behind prison bars; for a young, enthusiastic Ethiopian who wonders why we in the west even ask the question, when his people die daily of starvation. Does my very good friend Mrs. Nwoke in Lagos, Nigeria, have a better quality of life than I do in Hamilton, Canada, though she lives in a two-room flat and cooks the meals for her family of eight on one burner on the floor in the corridor?

How do we account for the impact of Christianity as a vital and liberating force in so many parts of Africa? Those of us who attended the Nairobi Assembly will not forget the joyous witness and worship of our Kenyan sisters and brothers with their rhythm and drums and their dedication, nor the most penetrating, moving and accusing play "Muntu". Dr. Philip Potter, the General Secretary of World Council of Churches, speaks of a theology of doing with less or a fellowship of penury. Are we here ready to become part of that fellowship? Are we prepared to live more simply, so that the poor may simply live? There is a beautiful Zulu proverb which says "if a thorn gets into the toe, the whole body stoops to pick it out". Are we, citizens of this Global Village, stooping constantly on behalf of and with all men and women everywhere? Or as the psalmist so succinctly asks "Are the needs of the world as a sword in your bonds"?

Dr. Charles Birch, a biologist from Sydney, Australia, said to us in Nairobi, "the world is a titanic on a collision course. The visible parts of the iceberg ahead are the deterioration of our environment. But the great hidden parts of the iceberg are the social, political and economic structures AND the spiritual confusion as to the goals in life. Only a change in course can avert disaster."

Our Westminster Confession of Faith states: "Man's chief end is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever". Would that this confidence and joy be the compass we use, always open to the leading of the Holy Spirit. In my own life, my first encounter with the Christian faith was in the language of Luther, in the shadow of Marburg Castle where the fathers of the Reformation hammered out their Protestant Confessions. Some of my deepest faith experiences were revealed to me in Taize, France, yet my gradual maturing and "growing in wisdom and in favour with God and men" has certainly happened in Canada and Africa, at the side of my husband.

Thus, the more I become educated for ALL of life, the theme of the very meaningful World Day of Prayer service this year, prepared by our South American sisters, the more I am aware of the very special place I hold in the sun, as a Canadian living in what many people feel is the freest country in the world. Having grown up in Nazi Germany, I was especially conscious of so very many of my brothers and sisters in Nairobi who could not freely speak for fear of reprisal for either themselves or their families. How vividly I remember as a child, when the Gestapo would come in the dead of the night, knocking on the manse door in the suburb of Marburg, searching for documents of the Confessional Church. My father was Dr. Martin Niemoeller's secretary. They were hidden under my mattress and we children pretended to be sleeping, when in reality our hearts were pounding and we were petrified.

For many churches here represented, the year just past was a year of celebration. The Roman Catholics celebrated Holy Year, the United Church marked a 50 year milestone, we Presbyterians looked back on a century of Remembrance, Renewal and Response. But what of this year of grace, 1976? Will there be one more child who begins to grow in faith because he was welcomed into a loving, caring Christian community? Will one more youth say no to drugs or alcohol because in his church youth group he is confronted with the gospel and enjoys the fun and fellowship he needs? Will there be one more adult who finds an answer because Christians were able to give a reason for the faith that is in them? Will there be one social problem solved, one management-labour dispute settled, one internal crisis avoided because Canadian Christians contributed expertise and leadership? God grant, the answer may be 'yes' for us here in Glace Bay and wherever we come from.

As a church, Holy and Catholic, we are surely at a crossroads today. We are dimly aware of the destructive powers of the iceberg ahead and the need for a new spirituality in Christianity – SHALL WE CHOOSE THE RIGHT PATH?

That path involving *confession and repentance* before God and one another. Are we as churches concerned with the TOTAL demands of *justice and love*, and with the *fulness of freedom*, humanization and life with which God himself is concerned? Or, to quote Dr. John Stott of Britain, "if love seeks to serve men's highest welfare, can we leave them alone in their spiritual lostness and still claim to love them"? Have you read Dietrich Bonhoeffer's "Letters From Prison" – that poignant confession of faith? In it he speaks of the "worldliness" of the Christian as "throwing oneself into the arms of God and sharing in his suffering and keeping watch with Christ in Gethsemane". That is the task of the church today!

In Nairobi we struggled to find ways of closing the gap between rhetoric and reality, and certainly the Fifth Assembly of the World Council of Churches will be remembered by many of us as the Assembly where suffering, both that of Christ and that of His faithful witnesses was at the centre. Yet, the uniqueness of Christ is a cross and an empty tomb made ONE. Secure in that knowledge, yet totally aware of our inadequacy, the Assembly felt that its message could not be a confident statement or a prophetic announcement, as it had been in former years, but MUST BE A PRAYER. We confessed the sins of life-style and social structure that set us against one another and alienate us from God's creation, exploiting as though dead, things to which God has given life. We asked for Christ's help in healing the wounds of poverty and oppression that destroy human dignity and freedom. And we pleaded with the Holy Spirit to empower us to witness to God in all nations, to struggle for God's justice against all principalities and powers.

The Brave and well known Russian author Alexander Solzhenitsyn, steeled in the terrible school of the concentration camps, says "How easy it is for me to live with you, Lord, how easy it is for me to believe in you. When my thoughts get stuck or my mind collapses, when the cleverest people don't see further than this evening and do not know what must be done tomorrow, You send down to me clear confidence that You exist and that you will see to it that not all the ways of goodness are blocked". FEAR NOT, ONLY BELIEVE. Surely, with Solzhenitsyn, we are all deeply aware of the bond which binds us together when we approach God in prayer.

I think back to a decade ago, while living in Nigeria, we were involved in a most serious car accident. For a time, it seemed as if I would not survive. How vitally important were the prayers of my Nigerian sisters who daily trekked for miles to Lagos Teaching Hospital to have a constant chain of prayers outside my hospital window. In Nairobi, we glimpsed this same bond of unity at the closing act of worship. We all came together, East, West, North, South, men and women, white-haired bishops and teenagers, dressed in long colourful robes and in jeans – black, white and yellow – we actually felt our oneness at that moment in Christ. Clare Aka Manning, a Shoshone Indian princess from the United States interpreted the Lord's Prayer in Indian sign language. This enactment of the Word became one of the most unifying,

compelling, moving parts of that service. Many of the previously existing walls of separation seemed to crumble as all 2500 of us left the great hall of Kenyatta Centre, moving into Africa's tropical night singing "break down the walls that separate us, and unite us in a single body."

It is my prayer that through the influence of Nairobi in my life, and hopefully in yours "Jesus Christ frees and unites" may be more than a theme of a conference but RATHER a conscious way of life for us here in Canada and for more fully witnessing to the Lordship of our risen Saviour.

### BIBLE STUDY

In order to keep a link with the Nairobi Assembly of the World Council of Churches, we have chosen for your study the last set of texts used at the Assembly:

St. John 2: 13-22

St. John 8: 30-59

St. John 15: 1-7

Bible study for this Assembly is not merely "inspirational". We will, without doubt, bring to the time set aside for Bible study some of the problems on our minds. At the same time we may reasonably hope that the recollected silence, intelligent thought and shared insight will be vehicles of God's wisdom into our sessions.

Groups and individuals however, are free to develop their study hour however they wish, remembering that by the power of our Lord the Holy Spirit, Bible Study and Council business overlap. The introductions and questions which follow are not intended to engineer or steer thoughts and ideas into predetermined paths. They are offered in the hope that they will stimulate thought, but may be used or ignored as seems appropriate.

### BIBLE STUDY I

**Text: St. John 2: 13-22**

We look at this text today through pious glasses. What would we have seen had we been there? The Son of God, or even a saintly man, purifying a temple which had become corrupt? I doubt it. We would have seen some crazy, perhaps dangerous, religious maniac creating a serious disturbance. Oh, the shock! The desecration! Even supposing we knew something about Jesus we would say, as Peter did on another occasion, "I don't know the man; don't identify me with him and *that* kind of behaviour!" We must think of what our reaction would be as we ask what this account might mean for us to-day.

*Have we the courage to own allegiance to this kind of Lord?*

The writers of the other three Gospels used this account and understood its force. (Mt. 21: 12-13; Mk. 11: 15-17; Lk. 19: 45-46). So shocking was it that it became in those gospels the immediate reason for Jesus' arrest and trial. John, however, uses the raising of Lazarus for this purpose (John 11:-12: 11) and the story of the cleansing of the Temple at the beginning of his Gospel in a programmatic way; to make an important statement about Jesus and his work as a whole.