

## Perseverance in Trial

Because thou didst keep the word of my patience, I also will keep thee from the hour of trial, that hour which is to come upon the whole world, to try them that dwell upon the earth. I come quickly: hold fast that which thou hast, that no one take thy crown. He that overcometh, I will make him a pillar in the temple of my God, and he shall go out thence no more: and I will write upon him the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which cometh down out of heaven from my God, and mine own new name. He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith to the Churches.

*Rev.3: 10-13*

In these days of terrible events many are seizing upon the Book of Revelation in order, as they hope, to find there information about the otherwise unknown future. They have the feeling that we are fast approaching those days of final crisis with which the Book of Revelation, like other books and chapters of Holy Scripture, is concerned. They would like to lift a little the curtain which conceals the future from us and to know what is coming to pass. Is not the last book of the Bible written for this very purpose? The Revelation of St. John the Divine is a powerful work but also one that is strange and difficult to understand. It not only speaks of a book with seven seals but it is itself such a book. Just think of all the prophecies which have been deduced from this book and which yet have not come to fulfilment—prophecies of judgment on other Churches or sects and on the colossal figures of world history. In this sense it is a dangerous book because it seems to nourish man's unhealthy curiosity—that same curiosity which drives him to foretell or to busy himself with horoscopes.

The Creator knows very well why He hides the future from us and makes it impossible for us to know it in advance. Whoever wishes to overstep the limit which the Lord has ordained is attempting something which is contrary to the Will of the Creator. He is, as it were, assimilating the future to the past. The past can be surveyed. We can know it precisely, it is finished, consumed, so to speak, and hence we can gain a complete picture of it. It is as it were dead, however alive and present it may be in our memory. But it is forever unchangeable and irrevocable. What lies behind us is inevitably as it has been and not all our piety and wit can modify it at all. Were we to know the future in advance, that too would be just as unchangeable. In that case everything would necessarily have to come to pass as predetermined and we could neither add nor subtract one iota of it. The future as well as our own individual lives would also be a completed whole, unalterably fixed, just as in the calendar the eclipses of the sun and moon up to the year 2000 are already known because they can be calculated in advance to the very minute. Were the whole future thus preordained, then the freedom of decision and adventure would be excluded. Everything would have already been decided in advance. As in the case of our attitude to the past, it would only remain to us to look on at a scene which we could do nothing to change. Life would be a mechanical unwinding process. And it is just that which God does not will. He wills us to be and He has created us as men who are to decide for themselves and dare in uttermost freedom. Just because of that we are not to wish to know the future. The Book of Revelation has not been given to us to provide us with information about the future. Its purpose is rather to equip and strengthen us for times of testing and searching.

Holy Scripture does indeed tell us something about the future, viz. about the plan of God for the world and for ourselves. It tells us indeed something about the future course of events—but no more than we already know—that we must be watchful so as not to be surprised and crumple up like an army which has set no sentry posts or whose sentries have fallen asleep. Hence the ever-repeated warning: watch and pray.

It is in this way that we should understand this extract from the beginning of the Book of Revelation—the sixth of the messages to the Churches of Asia Minor.

It speaks about the hour of temptation—it would be better to say the hour of trial and the testing time which is to come upon the whole earth. The pictures of the future which we find in the

prophetic writings of the Bible have this in common, that they speak of times of judgment, of times of severe testing, but not as does our own age in terms of progress. We men of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have grown up with the illusion that the history of humanity displays continuous improvement. For this reason the outbreak of the first world war was such a shock. It did not at all fit into our view of the world understood to be getting better and better. And what has happened since the emergence of the totalitarian state and the second world war fitted even less into the picture. Men are so made that they project their wishes into the future. They suppose that the future must be according to their heart's desire—hence better than the present, more in accordance with peace, justice, and humanity. All this is of course understandable, but it makes the disillusionment so much the more painful. At the end of the war in 1945 I wrote in a Christmastide article that peace on earth, on which at that moment the hopes of so many were set, was not at all realizable in the immediate future and hardly to be expected. For this unforgivable pessimism protests rained down upon me and many of my own friends were very discontented with me. So great is the power of desire that it blinds us to the real state of affairs.

But the Bible is through and through realistic. It sees things as they are and never blurs our vision by a blue haze. It never tells us things are getting better and better but warns us in advance: terrible times are coming, times of trial which every one would like to avoid if possible. And the Johannine Revelation above all does not spare to paint these times of crisis in the darkest and most frighteningly gruesome colours—not to scare us but to make us prepared. If we know that evil times are coming we can be prepared beforehand. Just as we store food supplies for the times when our country, cut off from the outer world, will be in want, so also the soul can, so to speak, make emergency preparations for dark days ahead. For this reason alone the seer John or rather the Lord Himself speaks about what is to come.

He speaks of an hour of crisis and testing which is to come upon the whole earth. He means by that a time when it will be difficult to believe and dangerous to confess one's belief: when therefore there will be every temptation to lapse and deny one's faith or indeed to become a traitor and renegade. Many have already experienced times of this character: Christians in Germany under Hitler and even more Christians in Russia under communism. The fact is that just at present our memories are very short. We have already forgotten that in Russia several millions of men have already perished, many

after frightful tortures, simply because they were Christians. We are here faced by a real and terrible persecution of Christians as in the time of Nero. Nor is this epoch past in Russia. Since the war there have arisen again and again waves of Christian persecution to which thousands fall victims. We had always supposed that this kind of thing happened only in antiquity. When I was young hardly any one thought that a time would again come when for the sake of religious belief a man could be tortured and killed as was the case with the martyrs in the days of the Roman empire. And now—at least from a distance—we have again experienced that very thing and are still experiencing it. Of course Russia is very remote from us and so we are not nearly so concerned about what is happening there as about the far milder type of persecution under Hitler in the Germany which is our neighbour. But most of us still live in the false security of supposing that such things cannot happen with us.

Friends, I do not wish to alarm you. That is not my duty. But I feel obliged to call your attention to the word of the Johan-nine Revelation about the hour of trial which is to come upon the whole earth. I do not say it will surely come very soon; but I feel it my duty to declare that it may well be imminent. No one can prove that it will not come. In recent decades we Swiss have been so wonderfully and mercifully spared that we have become accustomed to think no harm can touch us. The evil will halt at our borders. As though we had a right to immunity among all the peoples of the earth, as though somewhere it were written—no harm can be allowed to touch Switzerland. We might indeed to some extent believe as much, were international agreements unchallengeable. Then our neutrality and therewith our security would be guaranteed. But we know of what worth such agreements are and how far a state which has made unscrupulousness its very principle of action will bother about our beautiful neutrality. Thus it is very possible—I do not say more but I do not say less—that quite shortly we shall experience a severe crisis of testing and trial just as much as Christians in Russia or Korea.

How shall we stand this test? The Church of Philadelphia receives a wonderfully comforting message: “Because you have endured and kept faith with me therefore I will preserve you in the hour of trial.” Fidelity in return for fidelity. The Philadelphians proved themselves faithful, therefore the Lord wishes to be faithful to them. Is that message, my friends, addressed to us, to the Christian community of the town of Zurich, to the Christian churches of Switzerland? Because you have kept faith with me and have held fast to my word I wish to preserve you also?

Incidentally allow me to point out that the word preserve is equivalent to the Latin *conservare*, and that one who preserves or secures something may therefore be called a conservative. I only mention this point because many think to-day that conservatism necessarily implies something bad and retrogressive, for the simple reason that we are all smitten by the illusion of the idea of progress. But here at least the divine word plainly alludes to the idea of holding fast and preserving. Hold to what you have so that no one robs you of your crown. What is meant by this idea of holding fast? Is it something to do with saving or bank balances? Does it mean the maintenance of use and wont and traditional views? Certainly not. The meaning is clear from the context: the gospel of Jesus Christ, faith in Him, and the waiting for His coming.

Let me illustrate what I mean by reference to an experience which came to me recently. I was attending a conference of Christian workers from all countries, from Australia to Finland, from South Africa to Norway. Among those taking part there was a young Russian who as an officer of the Russian army was taken prisoner and for five years now has been doing Christian work among his fellow-prisoners. He was born and brought up in Communist Russia and was educated at communist schools and universities—as you know there are no others in Russia. His father, who was once a diplomat and later turned to the priesthood, was so persecuted by the communist authorities that his wife, the mother of the young man, collapsed and died from terror. It was his experience that one night his father was taken away and disappeared in the mines of Siberia. He has had no further news of him. He told me much about what is going on behind the iron curtain, about the persecution of Christians and their bravery. On one occasion—it was in the year 1940, hence shortly before Russia was attacked by Hitler's Germany—he was present at an Easter service in the region of Odessa. It took place in an isolated church, the only church in a vast area of hundreds of kilometres. But no less than 40,000 Christians came to this Eastertide celebration in order to worship at what was for them the greatest of all Christian festivals. The communists had organized a counterblast assembly and attempted to disturb the Christian worship in every possible way. Thus they later compelled these 40,000 people to listen to their godless communist propaganda for four hours. Then one of the Christians got up and announced his desire to speak. He was at first refused, but when he promised to say only four words they allowed him to come on to the platform. In unbroken tense silence the following words were heard:

“Brothers and sisters, Christ is risen”—and the whole 40,000 responded with the Easter antiphon: “Yes, He is risen indeed.” For 23 years amid bitter sorrows and dangers these men had safeguarded the word of Jesus and had held fast to what they had. It was a great comfort to me to learn that nearly half of the Russian people are still Christians after 30 years of godless propaganda and persecution, and that this percentage includes very many young people. My informant was himself an example and in him I became acquainted with a sincere and convincing Christian. Those men preserved and held fast the word of the gospel. They have stood the test. Would we endure with equal success?

Would we have the steadfastness to confess our faith in times of mortal danger? Would we refuse to deny it if by denial we could escape and by confession we might lose our life or our freedom, if the choice lay between the mines of Siberia and the denial of Christianity?

“I come quickly” says the Lord. But what does that mean? Already 1900 years have elapsed. How often have believers supposed that the end was now coming and it did not come! How many a time have the prophecies of Holy Scripture been used to calculate now this year, now that, with complete confidence and nothing happened; the course of world history went on its way. Hence many have come to the conclusion that it will continue to go on as a never-ending process without finality and with continuous amelioration. That in fact is the average opinion of contemporary humanity. But Scripture says otherwise. The historical process is moving towards an end and a decision. It is not for us to calculate when that will be. Nor can we picture to ourselves how it will come to pass. We know only two things. It will be preceded by a terrible time of sifting and testing and then finally the perfect Lordship of Jesus Christ will be realized. The time of persecution and trial and sifting may soon dawn. And then one thing above all will be required: the preservation of the faith intact and the proving of our loyalty in steadfast endurance. Everything will depend on this proving of ourselves, this unyielding steadfastness. On that will depend whether we receive the victor’s crown and laurels or lose them eternally: whether we shall share in the ultimate victory of Jesus Christ or be separated from Him for ever. Not only does our present text confront us with the urgency of this decision but so does also the preaching of Jesus and of the apostles as a whole.

What can we do in order to prepare ourselves for abiding loyalty so that we may overcome and not be defeated? Much could be said on this point, and indeed all that we do as a Christian community is

addressed to this end. But I will content myself here with singling out a few points of special importance. The first is that we should not fail to gather together on Sundays for divine worship and the hearing of the Word of God. But that is not sufficient. When the time of testing comes, as, for example, it has come everywhere in communistic countries, it is often no longer possible to hold regular services of worship. Churches in their thousands are being closed, priests and ministers killed or sent into exile. Thus it is necessary for us to be independent of the normal type of church worship and to find some means of hearing the Word as a result of which we need no longer rely on the public and official services. Of course it is said that we can read the Bible by ourselves in solitariness and that is true, thank God. Also we can and must pray alone in the privacy and silence of our chambers, as the Lord says. That too is true and important. But not in vain does the Lord say: "Where two or three are gathered together in my Name there am I in the midst of them." We must learn to read the Bible together and to pray together even without a minister or a church. Communion and fellowship in the hearing of the Word of God and in prayer is almost indispensable if the divine Word is to be a living reality to us. Most of us are unpractised in this, in fact we often feel averse to it. We suppose that all such things are trumpery and childish piety, unfit for the staid and sober Swiss. In the coming times of distress we might bitterly regret the fact that we have thought thus and have not taken care to furnish ourselves more adequately for those days when church doors will be closed and churches pulled down. And on the other hand, people who have already begun to practise this communal reading of the Bible and prayer have experienced the blessing which flows from it, and how often by this means the word of Scripture becomes so much more vital than when one reads it alone, and prayer so much more strengthening than the prayers of our solitude. Let us then not fail to seize the opportunities which our churches to-day offer us. Let us use them and practise this kind of fellowship. Let us practise the reading of the Word of God together in small groups and, as the apostle says, causing it to dwell richly among us.

In those parts of the world where Christians are persecuted it is not seldom the case that Bibles are no longer to be had. They are not printed, are not on sale; on the contrary, their circulation is forbidden. What is to be done in such circumstances? One thing can never be forbidden: namely, what goes on in the depths of the heart. We may be forbidden to go to church, the Bible may be taken away

from us, but the divine Word can never be torn out of our hearts. For this reason it is important to assimilate the word of Scripture so inwardly that we have a source of nourishment when outwardly the Bible is missing. Many of those who went through the suffering of concentration camp or imprisonment were deprived of their Bible but wrote out whole parts of it from memory for themselves or for others. Friends, how much would you be able to do under similar circumstances? How much could you repeat of the parables of the Lord, of the stories of the gospel, of the letters of the apostles, of the psalms and the prophets? The much criticized learning of the Bible by heart takes on at once quite another aspect and gains new importance in view of these times of trial.

A whole treasury of Christian theology and experience is preserved in our excellent hymn-books. You like to sing these hymns, you feel their power and the wealth of experience behind them. How much of them could you sing if you had no hymn-book? And one thing more—among many possible points—what a good thing it is when we are beset by personal difficulties and trials to discuss these hymns with a few friends, to note the Christian experience which they reflect and to take to heart their advice and the encouragement which they give us. How stupid we are not to make more use of such things! We bewail our weakness and yet neglect to tap this wonderful source of strength. I urge that we should now begin to practise these things according to the word of Scripture: “Work while it is day, for the night cometh wherein no man can work.” Some time ago the government invited the people of Switzerland to store up food supplies against the time of need. Similarly I wish to advise you and all of us to store up spiritual supplies for times of trial.

Naturally, when we have done all this, it is not enough and in the last resort everything depends on one factor alone: that in our inmost hearts we should be faithful to God, that we should live in communion with Him, that we should love and trust in Him and in the One whom He has given us as Mediator, Jesus Christ. To overcome means to cleave to Him when assailed by temptation and not to yield to the enemy, to cling to Him and not to doubt or despair.

And now in conclusion let us hear the promise which is given to all who endure and overcome. “Whosoever overcometh, I will make him a pillar in the temple of my God.” That is a metaphor. The temple of God is the people of God in eternity when God shall be all in all. He who overcomes will enter the kingdom where there will be no more strife, no more doubt, no more assaults of temptation, where