

TAKING STOCK OF OURSELVES

by Lester J. Start
December 1979

The holiday season is rapidly coming to an end. Christmas is passed, but not its spirit I trust. The end of the old year, and the beginning of a new one is near at hand. This is the time for looking backward and looking forward, as is well symbolized by Janus, the god with two faces, one looking forward and one looking backward, the god who gives his name to the first month of the year.

This is a time of celebration, too. There is not the same religious reverence as in the celebration of Christmas. It is a time of revelry, and it is almost as if excesses in behavior are to be expected and condoned. Welcoming the new year seems to be an occasion for celebration in every culture - but especially where the change of seasons is well marked. One can see the reason for rejoicing when the winter solstice is passed, so that in spite of continuing cold, the evidence of a sun rising higher and higher every day gives the promise of spring and the return of life to the earth. The impulse for wild and frenetic celebration, however, is not so readily explained. It is not clear whether people are celebrating the end of a year they are happy to see go, or if they are really welcoming a new one with its possibilities of peace and prosperity.

At any rate, it is a time to stop and take notice. And this year, we are saying goodbye to an entire era, the decade of the seventies, and are welcoming the unknown eighties. If it is not a time for wild celebration; it is a time to stop and think and see where we are. It is a time when businesses take inventory and plan for the future. It is a time when individuals might well stop and take stock of themselves, to see who they are, where they are and plan on who or where or what they'd like to be. The New Year's resolution is a symbol of this. This is a good time to turn over a new leaf, as the saying goes. The problem is that our resolve isn't as strong as the resolution we propose, and in a short time the new leaf looks just like the old one. So many of us resolve not to make any New Year's resolutions. There is one I am making, though. And that is to learn to proofread or take time to proofread the bulletin. For example, the offertory should read Wachet Auf, ruft uns die Stimme - German for awaken, the voice calls us. (Now this isn't as funny as the Easter bulletin that reported the congregation following the Easter bunny instead of the Easter banner - that slipped by both Dick and Al). As written, it doesn't make sense. Anyway, so much for my resolutions.

I don't intend to take detailed stock of the past decade - magazines, radio, newspapers, and television are taking special notice of its ups and downs, mostly inflationary ups and political downs. Nor do I want to try to predict the mood of the eighties. I've already predicted a mild winter.

Seriously, I am more interested in analyzing the way in which we take stock of ourselves, the mood in which we do it. I have often thought that the reckless revelry with which many celebrate the coming of the New Year hides a kind of despair about the old one and feeling that the New Year won't be any different. Yet some really seem to think that the New Year all by itself signals

something wonderful and new. Our mood will obviously affect how we evaluate what is passed and what does to come.

The scripture lessons for today show a marvelous contrast in moods. The first is from Ecclesiastes - called Koheleth in the Hebrew - usually translated as the Preacher. (The word is odd, though, because it is feminine in form - so perhaps it means the wisdom of what is proclaimed.) The book is part of the Old Testament's wisdom literature, along with Proverbs, and it is famous or notorious for not having any obvious or dramatic doctrine of redemption or picture of God's saving power or grace. Its raises questions rather than giving answers.

This first chapter in particular seems a message of gloom. Vanity of vanities, says the preacher, vanity of vanities - all is vanity. Or as the new English Bible puts it - "emptiness, emptiness, says the speaker, emptiness, all is empty." The world turns, the years go by, the sun rises and sets, and it is all a weariness. There is no meaning, no purpose, no direction to it all. What has happened will happen again - what has been done will be done again, and there is nothing new under the sun. Nothingness, emptiness, meaninglessness surround our existence. This is the pessimistic, existential voice of the preacher. Life is as Shakespeare said, a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury and signifying nothing. Such a mood can never find anything of promise in the new year - there is no new thing under the sun - and as it has found no meaning in the past year, except meaningless toil, it can expect nothing different in the new year to come. As the preacher said all men's deeds that are done under the sun are all emptiness and chasing the wind. What is crooked cannot become straight and you cannot count what isn't there.

With such an attitude one cannot look forward with a sense of optimism or promise. People with such a mood and attitude expect the future to be as bad as the past, or perhaps worse. And perhaps these are the people who are at the noisiest revelers - because they cannot believe in a better world, a better self, a better situation.

The New Testament reading is quite the opposite in spirit. If the preacher can see no redemption anywhere, no chance of a new leaf, a new and happier year, a new world possibilities; the writer of Revelation sees a brand new world coming, one in which all the sorrows and evils of the old are overcome, and the godly are redeemed and saved in a new order under God. "I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had vanished, and there was no longer any sea." No more sea! The sea always symbolized for the Jewish people evils and terrors and suffering - it was the mysterious unknown which held all kinds of horrors in its depths. So the new age will be completely free from suffering and terror. God himself will dwell with men. He shall wipe away every tear - there shall be an end to death, even - to all mourning and crying and pain. All things will be new. Would that the new year might be like that!

Scholars tell us that Revelation or the Apocalypse was written at a time when Christians were being severely persecuted by Rome and it was intended to strengthen their hope in the ultimate triumph of God and the godly over Rome and the godless. It called attention to the promise of Christ's second coming - the absolute end of the present evil age and its world - and the creation literally of a new heaven and a new earth.

Now this attitude of Revelation looks forward to something completely new and entirely good - quite the opposite of Ecclesiastes' pessimistic view of the emptiness of all change. And in the context of Christian history this promise may well have kept the new faith from faltering. But apocalyptic hope unqualified carries with it a danger. It suggests that the future is inevitably to appear in all its perfection out of the blue, directly by God, without any act or aid of human intervention except faithful expectation and endurance. In the primary sense, of course, it is God who redeems us and the world. But unqualified conviction of this saving power can suggest and has suggested to many Christians that there is nothing they can or need to do but have faith and wait for the end of the world and God's promise of a new heaven and a new earth. In every age there have been such Christians. We call them millennialists. They have a sense that the kingdom of God is at hand, that the second coming is near, that things are so bad the new Jerusalem is about to appear, and Christ's new kingdom will begin. Sometimes, they predict a specific date, as the Millerites did in the last century. But it is devastating to such a group when the predicted date comes and the end of the world doesn't.

Paul had his problems with such people in his churches. The end of the age was expected to imminently. Paul shared the conviction. But he made it clear that no one could know the time of the Lord's coming and no one should use the hope of His imminent return as an excuse or reason for not fulfilling one's duties in this life and this world until that day He arrives. So he warned, those who don't work don't eat.

As Christians have pondered this question over the centuries, more and more have come to believe that whenever and if ever this final day appears, it is clear that in some sense Christ already has returned in the spirit of the risen Christ, who lives in the hearts of all faithful followers, all fellow Christians. Consequently, one need not be pessimistic about the future and echo the sentiment that everything is vain, everything an emptiness and so look bleakly at the prospect of a new year of more of the same. Nor should one blindly and optimistically leave it up to the Lord to come and redeem the age if the time is ripe. Nor should one blindly and optimistically assume that the new year is bound to be good because it is new.

It seems to me that the constructive Christian view is that God does have a purpose for us and for this world. But that His purpose must work through us. Thus, we are agents of His will and work for the redemption of His world insofar as the Spirit of Christ dwells in us and we reflect His law of creative love. With this conviction, with this faith, one is inspired to look to the new year with calm confidence and expectant hope, believing that God wills good for His world, His creation, His people, and that the power of good, the forces for good, can work in us and through us to help make a better world in the areas that our lives must touch.

As we think back and look forward in terms of our individual lives, we can each see forces of good we can develop and enhance to make, with the help of God, a brighter, happier, better New Year. The Preacher was right - the world and its busy affairs seem empty and vain; and indeed they are, without God. But with a sense of God's purpose and meaning, all is transformed. And as we look forward with a sense of God's spirit guiding and strengthening us, the new Jerusalem need to not be a far-off apocalyptic hope, but progress in God's purpose for our world and our lives becomes a real possibility with our labors of love.

It is good to look backward and forward to see what has been good and bad - what can be improved, to have hope for the new year. I don't propose to do this in terms of the history of our decade. Each must plan the projection of his or her own life alone - in the light of God. One must evaluate himself prospects for the future, though, always in the light of the best we have achieved, not the worst. I advise students that it is not the best time to have an agonizing self-evaluation of one's situation and prospects when one has just received back a paper or exam mark D minus. Don't rate yourself when you are down.

This is a good time to take stock of ourselves as a church, too. [Annual meeting].

I cannot by myself do a good job of taking stock of ourselves as a church, looking backward and looking forward. Each of us as a part of that church, must do it by ourselves. But from my vantage point, I do want to say just this. The church has gone through a difficult period and is clearly alive and well. We are finishing the year well in the black. Thanks to our Provide Now drive the church buildings are in excellent repair. The new roof went on over the Church House corridor on Friday - and contrary to what some pessimists have said - now it will not leak and we can proceed to repair the ceiling - now to repair the organ motor. I am very proud of this church. I am proud of the talented people on the boards, the assurance of continuing able leadership. I am proud of the way we all pull together when the chips are down. I am proud of the genuine spirit of Christian concern and love for one another. More and more as I get around in the parish, I have become aware of the many ways many of you help others. And I am proud and pleased to have been able to serve as interim minister. Now for the future.

As a matter of fact, I have been so gratified by this experience that I am making arrangements with Kalamazoo College to teach part-time this next quarter so I can continue with you at least on a part-time basis. I will need some help - in addition to all the splendid help I am sure all of you will continue to give - but with this, and with God's providential concern, I know we can move into the new year with a sense of confidence, in the conviction that God is working through us in this church to bring about that which will be good indeed.

Prayers.

Eternal God, on the threshold of a new year, we lift our hearts to Thee to thank Thee for Thy guidance and mercies in the past and to pray for Thy continued guidance and blessing for the future. The events of tomorrow are hidden from us - through Thy wisdom and mercy. But we would trust in Thee for the future and fear not. Open to us the gates of opportunity in this new year, that we may grow in wisdom, faith and love. We pray in Jesus' name.

O God, Thou who art from everlasting to everlasting, ancient of days, yet ever new in the birth of new beginnings, unto Thee we lift up our spirits in prayer. All things wax old as garments, but we give thanks that Thou art the same yesterday, today and tomorrow in Thy steadfast love and sustaining power.

We pray, O God, for an enhanced sense of a Thy creative goodness as we look backward over a year past and look forward to the year ahead, so that we may have a proper sense of what is truly

good and worthwhile and what is of lesser or little worth. Make us sensitive to the quiet acts of creative goodness at work in the world, help us to hearken to the quiet voices of moderation and understanding, when powerful destructive forces of terror or military power and strident voices of dissident and fanatic protest seem to dominate our days. Help us to know that Thy rule of love is sensed in all religions, felt among all people. May we believe in the power of love, the gentler forces of goodness, to direct the world in the year ahead, rather than the forces of hate, dissent, and terror.

As we face the uncertainties of another year, help us to prepare for the duties and the opportunities the year will bring. May Thy spirit enlighten our ignorance and strengthen our weakness. Help us to forget the sins and the sorrows of the past, but help us to remember the chastened humility and the cherished memories they have brought to us. Inspire us with new purposes; fill us with new hope, deepen our love of truth and goodness. Make us instruments of Thy will.

We pray Thou wilt in the year ahead bless this land we love. Counsel its leaders in wisdom and moderation. Bless Thou its peoples, and befriend those still in captivity. Lead us, Lord; lead us in Thy righteousness, that we may calmly walk forward, whatever light may shine or shadow fall in the fellowship of those who trust in Thee, and so may we live in the love and service of Christ our Lord.