

The Great Incarnate Words

Howard Thurman

The hours lay heavily upon the heart of the old man.
Years of waiting and longing had dimmed his eyes;
Before him there was stretched the long interminable hours
With no fulfillment.

“How long, O Jehovah, before the Hope takes flesh,
Before the sons of Israel may shout aloud

A new song:

‘Behold, He is here!

The Deliverer has come at last!’”

In a quiet manger, full of the animal sweat,
The healthy sounds of tired beasts,
The Virgin womb of Israel’s Daughter
Opened wide its flood gates into a waiting moment
The expected child!

When the old man saw what God had wrought,

His heart flung off the weight of years

To give wide sweep to urgent words:

“Now, Lord, let your servant depart in peace

For mine eyes have seen...

This child is the sign of man’s attack.”

I.

The family was poor!

The Day of Consecration came;

But the price for the Lamb of Sacrifice could not be found:

Only the doves of the poor to use.

Poverty, the watchword of the mass of men,

Marked him early as Son of Man.

The child was a Jew;

The challenge to all the funded hate of men

Who through centuries struggled against the imperious demand

Of an ultimate ethic:

Men must be brothers achieved

As they are brothers in blood and seed.

Blessed Israel, guardian of the One God Dream--

The eternal sufferer whose agony is the anguished cry of all mankind,

In hectic, patient, turbulent search for

The Great Fulfillment.

II.

He was a word made flesh!
 But the word, what was it?
 Not for the proud, not for the mighty,
 The dominant aggressive cornerers of the groans and struggles
 Of the sweating masses.
 [There is no future for the proud--
 Only a past.
 The gaze of the powerful
 Must always focus on yesterday!]
 The word, what was it?
 It was for men whose backs are against the wall;
 Whose hope feeds eternally on itself, always consuming but never consumed.
Fear not, that was the word.
 Fear, the great companion of the poor;
 The creeping slinking Hound ever on the trail of the
 Bedeviled seekers for surcease from oppression and wrong.
 The poor know fear:
 Fear of a special breed.
 [If a woman fears a mouse that runs across her path
 There is a scream, a leap, a release.
 The tension breaks and calm is restored.]
 But the fear of the weak is a special breed.
 For them fear is a climate closing in;
 It is breathless humidity!
 It clings like dampness in the air
 When long hours of steady rain
 Crush the days and nights with wetness.
 There is no fear of death.
 All men soon or later make calm their minds
 And quiet their anxious spirits before the sure
 Relentless fact of Death.
 This is the fear of being finally outraged by life--
 Cast upon by violent hands,
 Unrestrained by order of the mind or heart,
 Caught in the terrible grapple of blind or
 Calculating brutality with no defense of public will or
 Private conscience to avail.
 To die without benefit of Cause--
 No great end served!
 No trumpet blasts!
 No banners wave--
 Not even the bright transcendent glow of martyrs' fire!

Only the sordid overflow of passions,
 Catching in their swirling churn the hopeless victims
 Of a brother's scorn.
 This is the final degradation,
 The ultimate shame.
 The weak, the poor, the dispossessed are schooled in fear.
 It presides over decisions,
 Weighs all choices of the simplest kind.
 It reaches into the quiet places of the fireside
 And conditions the behavior of young and old alike,
 It causes the body to learn by rote
 Complex behavior patterns, to check
 Some mindless slip--
 Some thoughtless move;
 That will send crashing down on innocent heads
 A terrible judgment!
 Fear becomes the great Assurance
 Against floating violence!
 Jesus knew all this.
 His days were nurtured in great hostilities
 Focused upon His kind, the sons of Israel.
 There was no moment in all His years
 When He was free;
 Sometimes
 In lonely places, beneath burning stars
 Wrapt in the silence of the hills...
 He felt Eternal stirrings at His roots
 And knew that always
 Beneath Him, above, beyond, within,
 The God of life kept watch.
 This was the truth he felt;
 To make it clear, to announce
 Its clarion meaning--what greater
 Boon to man?
 Strange, to know all this:
 To be thus assured:
 Then bow before some great arrogance.
 "Fear not them who kill the body
 And after that there is nothing more
 That they can do. But fear God."
 That is it--the fear of God!
 the fear of man!
 Which shall it be?
 The one lays bare the heart of reverence;

Pours wave after wave of healing balm
 Upon the broken and forlorn--
 Makes strong the failing spirit;
 Renews the mind and affirms the craven will.
 It frees the self of carking care,
 Nourishing the life in strange new courage.
 It is what the birds know as their wings
 Lift them high above the plains.
 It is the quiet trust glimpsed in the eyes of carefree children.
 It is the brushless blossoming of roadside flowers,
 Or the gliding confidence of fish through quiet or troubled waters.
 It is what burns in the prophet's eyes or
 Glows in the tranquil spirit of those
 Who have come through great tribulations!
 The fear of God, the beginning of Wisdom!
 Before the altars of its searching fire
 The fear of man is rank and vile!
 The great Blasphemy,
 The supreme Sacrilege,
 The final Corrosion.
 "Fear not," says Jesus,
 And all the Sons of men
 Echo in their hearts,
 The triumphant word.

III.

The word--*Be genuine!*
 Let your words be yea, yea; nay, nay!
 All else obscures truth
 Tempting man to betray the Eternal.
 What a hard word for the weak!
 It brings crashing down around their heads
 The great fortress of defense
 Against embattled power.
 Somewhere in a past forgot
 In the first moments of internecine strife.
 The weak took refuge behind deception's web
 Stretching their brickle threads of guarded life
 Against odds too great to meet on equal terms.
 The will to live made all else dim.
 By circuitous route, by devious means,
 Weaving a pattern of false leads and feinting starts,
 Life kept itself intact
 And did not die.

The little birds know this:
 Feeding in meadows under sun-drenched skies
 The shadow of the Hawk appears.
 Time stops! all else forgot--
 Conditioned feet gather dead brown grass;
 A quick somersault and all is changed.
 High above, the Hawk clears his eyes,
 Shifts his course, and seeks his meal
 In other fields.
 One with grass and root they live
 For yet another day.
 Little children know this:
 When parental will looms threatening
 To deter or interfere.
 Defiance is not wise
 By route direct and unabashed!
 A steely web of chaste deception
 Trips and holds in firm embrace
 The parental power...
 Until at last it yields to the little will
 As if it were its own.
 The weak know this:
 All victims of the strong
 Draw from this churning source.
 By the waters of Babylon they mingled tears
 With flowing streams.
 Into their midst Ezekiel came
 To comfort, soothe, make unafraid.
 Words like liquid fire gushed forth at eventide.
 Flaming words but hidden in a vibrant code--
 Crystal clear to all with ears to hear.
 Distant Tyre and far off Egypt named he them;
 But all the biting anger of prophetic ire
 Bespoke in deftest phrase of Babylon.
 The Exiles knew and were consoled,
 While Babylon kept watch unconscious of the work the prophet wrought.
 Who said: I am God?
 Poor old Hiram of struggling Tyre?
 It was the mighty King of Babylon.
 Hardly.
 The captives knew and found fresh strength.
 It is an age old way the weak have found;
 To fight the strong with hidden tools.

The African slave had learned this lesson well:
 The master's priest with fervid tones
 Splashed in a canvas broad and high,
 The glories of another world where God would add
 New comforts to the blest of earth.
 The slave listened well and deep within his soul
 A melody stirred:
 "Everybody talkin' 'bout Heaven ain' going' there."
 There must be two heavens--he queried.
 No, for there is only one God.
 Ah! the old man said.
 I'm having my hell now,
 When death calls me, I go to heaven.
 He is having his heaven now,
 When death calls him, he goes to hell.
 Next day 'neath withering sun deep in the rows of blossoming cotton,
 The old man cries: "Ah got shoes,
 All God's chillun got shoes--"
 His eyes fell on all his fellows acres 'round.
 "But everybody talkin' 'bout Heaven"--
 His eyes held the big house for one elastic minute--
 "'Ain goin' there."
 But the word would not be stilled:
 Let your motive be simple,
 Your words, yea, yea; nay, nay.
 Hypocrisy for self-defense--
 Is that the sinless sin?
 Does it degrade the soul at least
 And sweep the raft against the hidden rocks?
 Deceive and live for yet another day;
 Declare and run the risk of sure destruction.
 But why?
 The *Word* knew:
 There is a point beyond which man cannot go
 Without yielding his right to try again.
 To play God false to save one's skin
 May jeopardize all there is that makes man, man.
 "What would man give in exchange for his soul?"
 This is the great Decision!
 Even death becomes a little thing.
 To survive with inner cleanness:
 To compromise where ground forsook can be retrieved:
 To stand unyielding when the moment comes:
 This is the meaning of the word.

IV.

The Word was *Love*.

Hate is the last great fortress of the weak.

The deadly moving current of resentment sweeps through the channels of the mind

When overarching wrong inflicts its bitter lash.

But this may pass and leave no trace save the quivering aftermath of fading pain.

The subtle thrust of implied scorn may trip the mind,

To send the spirit hurtling down crazy stairs

To land at last where clever thoughts

May find retreat.

“Who is my neighbor?”

“Is it lawful to do this or that today?”

“Why do your followers eat with hands unwashed?”

“The tribute, is it lawful to pay it?”

But Hate is something more.

A time does come when the dregs of all the piled up scorn

Of men’s contempt

Mount high to overrun the cup of great endurance;

When like a flash of light that blinds,

There bursts upon the soul, the stark alarm:

The last substance of self-respect

Is spilled.

Alone and desperate;

Desperate and alone,

Pitiless and scarred

The weak stand crushed.

Something stirs--the strength of bitterness.

The iron fiber of great revenge melts

The shattered feelings into one great block--

And hate is born.

Hate becomes the validation;

The ground of courage.

New power surges--a vast fresh cunning goads the ind,

Blind to good and evil, reckless of all consequence,

The weak strike out!

Even a fresh resourcefulness moves dead plans

Into new hopes.

Now, there is no need of fellowman.

Out of the depths of his new arousal

The cry goes forth:

I, I am autonomous!

I, I am independent!

I, I am God!

The world grows dark--there is no light now anywhere.

[The green grass fades, the flowers die.

The music of the birds is still.

There is nothing anywhere but death and ashes.]

The power that saved, destroys.

All this Jesus knew,

The Word was *Love*.

Down through the ages the deathless words ring out--

Hear, O Israel, the Lord thy God is one.

And thou shalt love the Lord thy God

With all thy heart, mind, soul, and strength

And thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.

And thy neighbor? Any man whose need of thee lays claim:

Friend and foe alike. Thou must not make divisions.

Thy mind, heart, soul and strength must ever search

To find the way by which the road

To all men's need of thee must go

This is the Highway of the Lord.