



THE WISDOM OF COMMUNITY with Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945)

Fairy tales and legends from the oldest times tell of the days when God walked among human beings. Those were splendid times, when one met a wanderer on the road who asked for lodging, then at home one recognized in this simple man the Lord God and was richly rewarded.... The beginning of our own Bible also relates how the Lord God walked about in the garden of paradise in the evening and lived and conversed with human beings...when God and human beings were still close. How quickly things changed. Our Bible recounts the story of the fall as the turning point in history. Human beings were driven from the garden in which they lived with God; now they lived separated from God in guilt and unhappiness that increased from generation to generation.

And as long as human beings can remember, they know only the night and many look longingly back to the primal age of the fairy tale, to paradise, as if to a lost home they themselves never even knew. Or people of powerful hope speak and spoke about coming days, when God would once more dwell among human beings, when the kingdom of God would be established on earth. God and human beings somehow belong together, and God will return and be their guest.

There was one day in human history when this hope had to be radically demolished, a day on which people had to become aware of the eternal distance between human beings and God—the day humanity raised its hand against the God dwelling among them and nailed Jesus Christ to the cross—Good Friday. But there was also a day of divine response to human action, a day when God took up dwelling among human beings anew and for all eternity, the day when the outstretched but unholy hand of humanity was filled, against all hope, with divine grace, the day when Jesus Christ was raised, Easter. Remember, I am with you . . . that is the Easter message, not the distant, but the nearby God, that is Easter.

A searching, an anxious groping and questioning for divine things permeates our own age. A great loneliness has come upon our age, the kind of loneliness found only in a godforsaken age. The enormous distress of isolation and homelessness has come upon the colossal, wild activity of countless masses of people in the midst of our big cities. Yet the yearning grows for the time when once again God might abide among human beings, when God might be found. A thirst for contact with divine things has come upon people, a burning thirst demanding to be quenched. Currently a great many remedies are being offered for sale that promise to quench this thirst in a radical fashion and for which hundreds of thousands of hands greedily reach out—in the midst of this wild activity and marketing frenzy with new means and ways, we find the One Word of Jesus Christ: Remember, I am here. . . .

You don't need to search very far at all, nor to question or engage in all sorts of mysterious activity. I am here; that is, Jesus does not promise his coming, does not prescribe paths that might take a person to him, but simply says: I am here; whether we see Jesus or not, feel him or not, want him or not—none of this makes any difference over against the fact that Jesus is here with us, that he is simply wherever we are, and that we can do absolutely nothing. I am with you always . . . But if all this is indeed true, if Jesus really is with us, then God is also with us wherever we are, and we are no longer abandoned, homeless, lonely, then—let us follow this line of thinking to its conclusion—then the age of the legends has become reality again, and God is living among us. The only important thing now is to keep our eyes open to see where we find God—as was true for those people in the legend who had to recognize the Lord God in the foreign wanderer. God wants to be among us—do we want to make a liar of God by not believing? God is still with human beings despite Good Friday—Remember, I am with you always. . . .

But before we all start rejoicing too quickly, one serious reflection. What does it really mean to say that Jesus or God is with us? That God is in the world? Where and how are we aware of that? God lives, lives for the world, the world is filled with God, is transfigured, is meaningful, *sub specie aeternitatis* [from the viewpoint of the Eternal]—that was the Easter message. But now we ask further: **Where can I sense something of this divine fullness in the world and in my own life?** And we answer that today, too, God is still walking among us; today, too, we can speak with God; we are together with God, walk down the street with God, encounter God in the foreigner on the road, the beggar at the door. The world is God's world; wherever we go, we encounter God, and Jesus, the Resurrected, is with us. Remember, I am with you. . . .

One profound element in the fairy tale we mentioned earlier is that it has God move about among human beings as a human being. This promise, too, has become a reality. Jesus Christ is not only with us in lonely hours; Jesus Christ also encounters us in every step we take, in every person we meet. Remember, I am with you . . . **Jesus Christ, God himself, speaks to us from every human being; the other person, this enigmatic, impenetrable You, is God's claim on us; indeed, it is the holy God in person whom we encounter.** God's claim is made on us in the wanderer on the street, the beggar at the door, the sick person at the door of the church, though certainly no less in every person near to us, in every person with whom we are together daily. "Just as you did it to one of the least of these, you did it to me," Jesus says [Matt. 25:4].

I am for you, and you are for me is God's claim, God's very self; in this recognition, our gaze opens to the fullness of divine life in the world. Now life in the human community acquires its divine meaning. This community itself is one of the forms of God's revelation. God is with us as long as there is community. The most profound meaning of our ties to social life is that through it we are tied all the more securely to God. Remember, I am with you always, to the end of the world. Again we hear about the last things. "I am the first and the last" [Isaiah 41:4; Revelation 1:17], "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever" [Hebrews 13:8]; such are the words we hear. Jesus is Lord of the ages and is always with his own, even when things are difficult, and will abide with us; that is our comfort. If tribulation and anxiety come upon us, Jesus is with us and leads us over into God's eternal kingdom. Jesus Christ is the breadth of our life and of our community. Jesus Christ is with us to the end of the world... (Sermon, 1928)

The first service that one owes to others in the fellowship consists in listening to them. Just as love to God begins with listening to His Word, so the beginning of love for the brethren is learning to listen to them. It is God's love for us that He not only gives us His Word but also lends us His ear. So it is His work that we do for our brother when we learn to listen to him. Christians, especially ministers, so often think they must always contribute something when they are in the company of others, that this is the one service they have to render. They forget that listening can be a greater service than speaking. Many people are looking for an ear that will listen. They do not find it among Christians, because these Christians are talking where they should be listening. But he who can no longer listen to his brother will soon be no longer listening to God either; he will be doing nothing but prattle in the presence of God too. This is the beginning of the death of the spiritual life, and in the end there is nothing left but spiritual chatter and clerical condescension arrayed in pious words. One who cannot listen long and patiently will presently be talking beside the point and be never really speaking to others, albeit he be not conscious of it. Anyone who thinks that his time is too valuable to spend keeping quiet will eventually have no time for God and his brother, but only for himself and for his own follies. (From *Life Together*)

Morning Prayer For Fellow-Prisoners

O God, early in the morning I cry to you.
Help me to pray
And to concentrate my thoughts on you;
I can't do this alone.
In me there's darkness,
But with you there's light;
I'm lonely, but you don't leave me;
I'm feeble in heart, but with you there's help;
I'm restless, but with you there's peace.
In me there's bitterness, but with you there's
patience;
I don't understand your ways,
But you know the way for me.
O Heavenly Father,
I praise and thank you
For rest in the night;
I praise and thank you for this new day;
I praise and thank you for all your goodness
and faithfulness throughout my life.
You have granted me many blessings;

Now let me also accept what's hard from your hand.
You will lay on me no more than I can bear.
You make all things work together for good for your
children.
Lord Jesus Christ,
You were poor and in distress, a captive and
forsaken as I am.
You know all man's troubles;
You abide with me when all men fail me;
You remember and seek me;
It's your will that I should know you and turn to you.
Lord, I hear your call and follow;
Help me.
O Holy Spirit,
Give me faith that will protect me
from despair, from passions, and from vice;
Give me such love for God and men
as will blot out all hatred and bitterness;
Give me the hope that will deliver me
from fear and faint-heartedness.
Amen.