The Problem of Fear

Who hasn't been afraid at one time or another? Why fear? What can we do about it? Before Second World War there was a passionate debate going on about whether or not Christian missions should be allowed to operate in the island of Bali. Some anthropologists and artists were opposed to any kind of Christian work in the island. They believed that the precious and unique culture of the population should be protected from "Western influence."

Bali was considered the "last" paradise by newspapers and tourist agencies. Was it the last Eden to be protected from Christianity? Mr. H. Janben, assistant resident for South Bali of the Netherlands Indies government, who had made a deep study of Indonesian culture and who had a deep affection for the Balinese, called Bali "the island of demons." He mentioned that "there was much fear and much black magic. And there were many signs of disintegration of the traditional culture." "The Balinese," he said, "deserved to know Christianity. But it was essential to show imagination in making the Christian approach."

Mr. Jansen said that there "was much fear" in Bali. But people today are also confronted with fear. People's fears are not necessarily caused by black magic or demons. We live in apocalyptic times, full of threats and uncertainties. The political world map is constantly changing. We seem to become numb to revolutions. There are so many. There is every reason to ask the question whether or not we are facing impending worldwide catastrophe. Modern technology has brought its blessings: X-rays, kidney machines and other beneficial medical technology equipment, but it has also brought despair via new weapons. We are worried about the arms race. The thought about all the weapons of destruction that are available in our world raises the question whether our life and our work, yes the whole existence of this world, has any meaning at all. How do we cope with fear? We can't stop the world and get off. Is there a word of hope and, if there is, what is it? Near the end of Second World War, Germany was constantly raided by allied bombers. Air raids and bombings are terrifying experiences. Bonhoeffer wrote in his Letters about an incident concerning an air raid in which he dealt with the fears of one of his fellow prisoners. The prisoners were all lying on the floor and one of them muttered "O God, O God." And Bonhoeffer wrote, "I couldn't bring myself to offer him any Christian encouragement or comfort ... perhaps I had a feeling that it was wrong to force religion down his throat just then." Bonhoeffer didn't mention any further conversation with his fellow prisoner when his sense of need had passed. The only remark Bonhoeffer, who himself died so courageously and Christianly, made to him was, "it won't last any more than ten minutes now." It is not my intent to discuss at this time the theology of Bonhoeffer, but I do think that the gospel has more hope to offer than "It won't last any more than ten minutes now."

Isn't the God of the scriptures also the God of comfort? When we know Him through Jesus Christ His Son, we can face the cold realities of this life. Long ago, the apostle Paul wrote,

"Blessed be God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies, and the God of all comfort; who comforts us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort them which are in any trouble, by the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God. (2 Cor. 1: 3-4).

Then in chapter seven we discover how Paul received comfort. Comfort came by a human hand and voice; it came at the most appropriate time, for his trials were severe. But Paul still pointed to God as the source of comfort. He said: "I am filled with comfort, I am exceeding joyful in all our tribulation. For, when we were come into Macedonia, our flesh had no rest, but we were troubled on every side; without were fightings, within were fears. Nevertheless God, that comforts those that are cast down, comforted us by the coming of Titus." (2 Cor. 7: 4-6)

God is still in control over man and events. We can look to Him for comfort and strength to face life's situations. And we can give comfort, in the name of the Lord, to the fearful and troubled.

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