

William Penn Lecture 1956

**The Joy That Is
Set Before Us**

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by
ELISE BOULDING

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Joy is a frighteningly difficult subject to speak about, and I did not choose it willingly. It came, and would not be put aside. Christian joy is usually considered the province of saints and mystics. In our world the average Christian contents himself with a more temporal happiness. For the real difference between happiness and joy is that one is grounded in this world, the other in eternity. Happiness cannot encompass suffering and evil. Joy can. Happiness depends on the present. Joy leaps into the future and triumphantly creates a new present out of it. It is a fruit of the spirit, a gift of God – no man can own it. His Kingdom is Joy, said Paul. Joy is the ultimate liberation of the human spirit. It enables man to travel to the very gates of heaven and to the depths of hell, and never cease rejoicing. Jesus probably never knew happiness, for the shadows lay upon him early, but he knew the joy of the Lord. “For the joy that was set before him, (he) endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God.” Part of the very essence of joy is a vision of the Kingdom of God, which is, was, and ever shall be. The temporal fruit of this joy is the leap into the future, to wrest this vision from its position on the horizon and pull it into the present, to make it a reality for this world. This is exactly what Jesus did, but people were afraid, and quickly pushed the vision back to the horizon. We have kept it safely chained there ever since, but the memory of what Jesus did, and the knowledge that it could happen again, has ennobled all mankind.

There have been men who have succeeded in breaking the chains and snatching the vision back into the present

for a brief moment. St. Francis, the little minstrel of God, the most joyous saint of them all, was one of these. Here was a man so full of the joy of God that he was constantly bursting into song wherever he went. He took his joy with him into the darkest places he could find, in a century that was very dark indeed, so that lepers and outcasts saw the Kingdom in all its glory. Sister Pain cast no shadows on that joy, and his last hymn of praise was to Sister Death.

Where in the world today do we see such joy, or even faint reflections of the joy such as lesser men than St. Francis might experience? I think the reason this topic has forced itself upon me with such urgency is that I feel so keenly the absence of joy in our day, not only among the "world's people," but among Christians as well - Quakers not excepted. That large parts of the world are blanketed in suffering and fear is nothing new in history. Suffering is not in itself the enemy, but rather the *condition* of joy. The suffering that is a condition of joy is not, of course, the sophisticated self-torture of an excessively introverted spirit, but participation in what Tom Kelly called "the inexorable residue" of the world's suffering, "awful, unremovable in a lifetime, withering all souls not genuinely rooted in Eternity itself."

What *is* new in our century is that for the first time in history the way is open, from a strictly scientific point of view, to end those sufferings of man due to want and illness. Standing within sight of what ought to be a golden age, people are finally realizing that there is indeed an inexorable residue of suffering, and that it stems from man's spiritual incapacities, not his physical ones. For two hundred years and more man has been cherishing a growing conviction that he could make a paradise of earth with his own hands, on the basis of his own knowledge and achievements. Now he is finding that he has been building upon the sands, and

the foundations of his paradise have given way. But instead of hunting around for a solid rock in order to start building anew and better, he has thrown up his hands and cried out that paradise is after all not possible. The best that can be done is a series of jerry-built houses on the shifting sands of human whims – a new one after every storm.

This is why joy eludes our generation. In the midst of suffering, we have lost the knowledge of eternity and the vision of paradise. A people with a certain conviction of eternity do not take refuge in the barren corridors of existentialism and cling desperately to the fleeting moment. A people with a vision in which they believe cannot be so easily satisfied with a television set which provides all of life at second hand, including religion. For centuries mankind has dreamed of and worked for a better tomorrow, and now all dreaming has suddenly stopped. Man has come to a halt, terrified, at the edge of an abyss. What does he see when he looks over the edge? He sees Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, or George Orwell's *Nineteen-Eighty-Four*, or any one of the hundreds of grim pictures of tomorrow painted by the growing band of science-fiction writers who have become almost alarmingly productive in the last two decades. You don't read science fiction? Perhaps not. But a strikingly high percentage of college-trained men and women in their middle thirties who are engaged in scientific or other professional work do. Furthermore, most of the people who write these books are no literary hacks who live by filling the pages of pulp magazines with cheap sensationalism. They are physicists, philosophers, political scientists, medical men – the same kind of thoughtful, intelligent, well-trained people as their readers. (Incidentally, they dislike as much as you or I the lurid covers to which pocket editions of science-fiction books are invariably treated.) They take a high view of their calling as science-fiction writers. Recognizing the

dangers of trial-and-error methods in dealing with the powerful sources of destruction now available to man, they feel they are “practising out in the no-practise area” as one writer puts it. In other words, they are trying out possible futures for mankind on paper.

The visions of the future painted by these serious-minded writers are not to be ignored. I have had occasion to examine some of them in recent months, and it is a grim business. Many of them are set out in space, and tremendous galactic empires are described. In the process, every sin of our poor little earth is writ large all over the universe. I think I can bear with the earth as it is, but a whole universe of earths, with nothing better anywhere, is almost too much, both for my imagination and my faith! Sometimes the grosser evils of physical want have been overcome, as in *Brave New World*, only to face man with spiritual evils of overwhelming dimensions. If the story is confined to earth, it quite frequently begins with a few ragged and hardy individuals starting life over again after a world cataclysm. What optimism there is, consists chiefly in giving man a chance to rise to his former heights before the next cataclysm, so that his story may be repeated indefinitely. Many of these stories are haunted by a growing fear of radiation-induced abnormalities, and outline possibilities for future human relationships that make plain old-fashioned race prejudice seem innocent indeed by comparison. An editorial introduction to one of these stories praises it for its “grimly determined optimism and bitter faith.” This, I fear, describes a high-point in optimism which few of these novels reach. Occasionally a mystical note is introduced, and an evil world goes up in smoke that the Creator may create a new and perfect one. It is a far cry from the Christian struggle for perfection, however.

Why do I dwell on these dark visions? Because they have a far greater significance than I would willingly ascribe

to them. For the past year I have been engaged in translating a book by the Dutch sociologist, Dr. Fred Polak, on the image of the future. His thesis is that the visions of the future which a society holds provide the dynamic power for moving that society toward the fulfillment of these visions. Societies tend to become that which they *really* aspire to – and something more is meant here than mere lip-service idealism. His book is partly a study of the visions of cultures of the past and how they have operated to change those cultures, and partly an analysis of the visions of modern western society. The western world, as he points out, is a product of the Judaic-Christian vision, and many great things have come of this vision. But it is no longer true to say that this is the vision which is uppermost in the minds and hearts of the average man and woman of the West. It is perhaps least of all true in America, and this in spite of the fact that there is a much higher percentage of church-goers among the population than ever before. The practical (and not-to-be despised) benefits of church membership in providing a community of social identification and a sense of belonging are, I fear, a far cry from the response of the early Christians to the call to enter into the Kingdom. If it is true that we *do* move in the direction of our visions, then it behooves us to examine our visions.

Once people felt secure in the midst of earthly insecurity because they knew of another Kingdom, existing since the beginning of time and which would one day *rule* on earth too. Now they stand on the edge of the abyss and see nothing but horror before them. Can we blame them for shutting their eyes to the future entirely and clinging desperately to the present? They live from day to day, from paycheck to paycheck, from mortgage payment to mortgage payment. They have children, but out of fear, not out of faith. They send them away from home as quickly as possible – to school,

to church, to the Scouts – anywhere in the hopes that someone else can teach these children the magic wisdom that will avert the impending catastrophe that has frozen the parents to impotence. I have heard many well educated middle-class mothers of young children confess that they feel they have nothing to “give” their children – no faith, no wisdom for living. It is not lack of a sense of responsibility that prompts these mothers to encourage their youngsters to enter a plethora of outside activities under someone else’s supervision, but a painful sense of inadequacy. It is no longer true that he who has children has a vision of the future.

The parents who feel they have nothing to give their children are the products of several generations of idealistic and well-meaning Americans who brought up *their* children on democracy as a religion, with the pursuit of happiness (for all) as its ultimate goal. There was a very brief period in human history – the nineteenth century, to be exact – when democracy could pass for an adequate religion. We were still moving forward on the impetus provided by the visions of early settlers like Roger Williams and William Penn. People genuinely believed that the form and philosophy of democracy embodied everything that was in the religion these men had, and more. Some people still believe this, and something very like it was taught in many high schools when I was in my teens. The repeated waves of immigrants who came to America seeking relief from want and oppression have contributed to surrounding democracy with the aura of religion. As the child of an immigrant family myself, I very early caught a feeling of reverence for America as The Promised Land which it might be hard for the American-born person to duplicate. But while democracy at its best may well be a blueprint for utopia, this generation is finding to its cost that religion is something more than a blueprint.

In their fear and insecurity people are flocking to churches as never before. In a recent public opinion survey,

95 per cent of the American people identified themselves as either Catholic, Protestant or Jewish, and only five per cent said they had no religious preference. We have grown so accustomed to thinking of Americans as a highly secular people that this figure comes as something of a shock. But before shock turns to elation it is wise to examine the meaning of this religious identification in the lives of the people who claim it. Will Herberg, religious leader, social philosopher and social scientist, has done just this in his recent book entitled *Protestant-Catholic-Jew* and his careful inspection of the nature of America's religiosity confirms, alas, our impressions regarding the basic secularism of Americans. In 1953, nearly 10 million volumes of the bible were distributed in the United States, but 53 per cent of the people asked to name the first four books of the New Testament in a public opinion poll could not even name one! When thirty outstanding Americans were asked to name in the order of their importance the hundred most significant events in history, Columbus' discovery of America came first and the birth and crucifixion of Christ came fourteenth! When asked whether they believe in God, 95 per cent or more of the sample population queried replied that they did, but when asked whether their religious beliefs had any effect on their ideas of politics or business, 54 per cent said no!

I do not have any particular reverence for public opinion polls as the best way to discover a man's deepest beliefs, but these figures serve to point up in a dramatic way what has also been uncovered by much more careful study – that the churches of America are hardly auxiliaries of the Kingdom of Heaven. In this trek to the churches, it is not the people who have been transformed, but the churches; they are the settlement houses of the poor, the community centers of the middle class, and the family showpieces of the rich. This is perhaps both cruel and unfair to say, for

there is a genuine faith in the hearts of many men and women. But it is a blind and groping faith, for very few people know what they believe *in*. Where the vision of the Kingdom ought to be, there is mist and shadows, with soft music in the background.

The soft whispers of an uncertain church can do little to dispel the nightmare picture of the future which scientists are conjuring up. Let down in his hour of need by both democracy and the church, what is the conscientious man of good will to do? He is increasingly taking refuge in a kind of last-ditch individualism. The line of thought runs thus: "I don't understand what is happening in the world, and there is nothing I can do about it anyway. But I can't help feeling, deep down, that there is something good in man, and maybe we can somehow ride this storm out. I'll just hang on as best I can, take care of my family, help others when I can, and make the best of each day as it comes. Let tomorrow take care of itself."

Now mind you, this is very far from being the worst that a man could do in these times. This is a basically healthy reaction for one who feels hopelessly lost in a situation, and I have the more hope for our civilization just because this kind of last-ditch individualism exists. There is certainly no virtue in a preoccupation with the future as such. You may remember what C. S. Lewis' *Screwtape* writes to his nephew devil, just out of Tempter's College and working on his first case: "We want a man hag-ridden by the Future – haunted by visions of an imminent heaven or hell upon earth – ready to break the Enemy's commands in the present if by so doing we make him think he can attain the one or avert the other – dependent for his faith on the success or failure of schemes whose end he will not live to see. We want a whole race perpetually in pursuit of the rainbow's end, never honest, nor kind, nor happy *now*, but always using as mere

fuel wherewith to heap the altar of the future every real gift which is offered them in the Present.”

As a matter of fact, distinctions between present and future are relatively unimportant for the truly religious person, because he lives in the Eternal Now, and his awareness encompasses equally yesterday and tomorrow. But to the extent that we are men we are also time bound and imperfect, and we have a responsibility laid upon us by God himself, for the time-bound and imperfect world we live in. We must have something to grow towards, and our vision of the future provides the direction of growth. Our last-ditch individualist may survive for a long time, but he will only survive and nothing more until he gets his bearings, brings a vision into focus, and moves in its direction. Survival is a contentless phenomenon, and I think none of us are interested in mere survival, either for ourselves, for our society, or for the world.

We have been assuming that the man who stands terrified at the edge of the abyss is either a humanist or a very secular member of the church community. What of the man who is religious in a more orthodox sense? What of the Christian who can not only name the first four gospels but quote from them and who feels that he knows what he believes in? What does he see? Does he stand rooted in eternity, and see a vision of the Kingdom of God? We are not, let it be said immediately, without prophets and religious visionaries (in the best sense of the word) in our time. But what of the larger body of dedicated Christians? What of our religious community of Quakerdom? Eternity is receding from us. For many deeply devout and sincere Christians, the living core of their religion is located well in the past. It centers about a son of God who lived, died on the cross and was resurrected nearly two thousand years ago. Outside of a few pentecostal and adventist sects who expend nearly all

of their precious vision in loud hosannas, no one is looking for a Second Coming today, and no one expects any miracles or resurrection to take place now. Our religious language is rich in images which convey the idea that Christ is in every man, that every mother is a Mary, that every birth of a child is a repetition of the miracle of the birth of Christ, that out of every death springs some kind of new life. The living truth which gives rise to these images is a profound and moving one, but the images themselves often degenerate into mere figures of speech and platitudes. The sense of expectancy, that *something is going to happen, is gone*. The human mind, with its peculiar capacity for paradox, has on the one hand pushed Jesus into the remote historical past and on the other hand drawn him into the kitchen and made of him a cozy every-day figure of speech. Both phenomena have contributed equally to dissipating the sense of imminence which his own message originally aroused.

As Jesus has faded into history and become a figure of speech, so has his Heavenly Father. In fact, where God is concerned even the familiar figures of speech are disappearing in some quarters, and people who are embarrassed to refer to Him as if He were a person confine themselves to more comfortably vague and remote terms (which are still figures of speech, mind you) like “divine power” or “spiritual force.” Obviously man has been compelled into figures of speech in describing the Creator, not only because of the limitations of language in expressing the inexpressible, but because of the limitations of man in conceiving the inconceivable. Our only safety lies in remembering these limitations of the human mind, for we are in danger of finding ourselves worshipping a figure of speech. Ultimately, there is little difference between worshipping a figure of speech and worshipping a graven image. By allowing the symbol to replace the reality in our

religious experience we have lost touch with the reality and thus with the eternity in which it is embedded. As a result it has become possible for us to pray with great conscious sincerity that God may remake and remold us, for we know all the while deep in a corner of our minds that is quite safe to pray – nothing can really happen to change us. It is this “knowledge” that we are after all safe from the possibility of a Living Presence that effectively cuts us off from Eternity and chains us to the present. Living in eternity means that anything is possible, *now*.

If eternity is receding from us, what is happening to the Kingdom of God? A great deal has happened to it since the prophets first preached the coming of the Kingdom to Israel. We have been called, and rightly so, to live as if the Kingdom were already here. We have also been told that the Kingdom of Heaven is within us. Again the symbol, intended to call us to righteous living *now* instead of waiting for a miraculous End of Time, has obscured the reality of the concept of the Kingdom. While it is true that in every age there have been Christians who have succeeded most gloriously in living in the Kingdom here and now, many of us use this admonition as an excuse to escape into our own private spiritual world. I fear that it enables us to evade our responsibility to our fellow-man who is still standing outside the gate. If the call to live in the Kingdom means anything, it surely means helping by our lives to create the conditions for the Kingdom to come to all the world. It is not meant to be a restricted club, for use by members only. Cozily locating it inside us may give us a warm and pleasant feeling during Meeting for Worship, but it does not serve the Kingdom.

There was no question concerning its nature in the minds of the prophets who first proclaimed its coming. Because so many of us have traveled so far from this original conception in our own minds, I would like to spend a little

time reminding us of it. I quote from the chapter on Israel in the translation now in process of Dr. Polak's *Image of the Future*.

"The crucial point to keep in mind concerning the Jews is that they expected their paradise *on earth*. The Kingdom which Jehovah was to establish for His people had the same material reality as the Promised Land. It could be geographically located and described; it flowed with milk and honey ... This is the land where 'The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; and the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them.' (Is. 11:6)."

"Above all, there is no mention of a heaven or a hereafter. Salvation is a tangible thing, and it will touch and transform that which can be seen with the eye. Every living creature, every tree and flower, every rock, river and mountain will glow with this salvation. When this time comes, those who have hungered and thirsted will be fed, both in body and in spirit ... 'and their souls shall be as a watered garden; and they shall not sorrow any more at all.' (Jer. 31:12)."

Most Christians who read their bible at all read and love Isaiah. We tend to treat it as inspirational and poetic symbolism, however. Try listening to these passages with the ears of the Israelites of 700 years before Christ. The people are huddled within the fenced cities of Judah, quailing before the attacks of the mighty Sennacherib. Their resources are few, their army is small, and they are surrounded by enemies and waterless desert. But they are a people with a Covenant. God has made a promise to them. It cannot be fulfilled just now, but surely the time will come...? Then suddenly a stocky, rugged looking, glowing-faced man springs to his feet in the midst of the discouraged Israelites, and gives them the Word of the Lord in their doubt;

“Remember ye not the former things, neither consider the things of old. Behold, I will do a new thing; now it shall spring forth; shall ye not know it? I will even make a way in the wilderness, and rivers in the desert.” (43:18, 19) “Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped. Then shall the lame man leap as an hart, and the tongue of the dumb sing: for in the wilderness shall waters break out, and streams in the desert. And the parched ground shall become a pool, and the thirsty land springs of water.” (35:5, 6, 7). A prince of peace will come: “And he shall judge among the nations, and shall rebuke many people: nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.”(2:4) And God himself will reign over His Kingdom: “The sun shall be no more thy light by day; neither for brightness shall the moon give light unto thee: but the Lord shall be unto thee an everlasting light, and thy God thy glory. Thy sun shall no more go down; neither shall thy moon withdraw itself: for the Lord shall be thine everlasting light, and the days of thy mourning shall be ended.”(60:19, 20). I have taken some liberties with historical chronology here, but the point is that for the listening Israelites this vision was so real that they could almost reach out and touch it. Many of them hoped to live to see it come to pass, for “I the Lord will hasten it in his time” was the word Isaiah gave them.

Originally the Israelites thought of this new earth as for themselves only, but their conception expanded over time, with the help of the prophets, until they thought of themselves as helping God to bring about the Kingdom for all people. The Chosen People were chosen, not for special blessings, but to help save the world. They never expected the Kingdom to come about automatically. It was a part of the Covenant that they must create the conditions for the coming of the Kingdom by their righteousness and piety.

They knew that they could help to create these conditions by living as if the Kingdom were already here, but they never confused the “as if” with the fact. They knew there was much to be done before the Kingdom could come for all people, and there was no stopping-place short of a Kingdom for all.

For the Jew 2500 years ago, then, the Kingdom of God was a good deal more than a warm feeling inside. It was a good deal more than that for the men and women who listened to Jesus 500 years later, and for the early church community. Jesus said repeatedly that the Kingdom was at hand, that it was very near. On several occasions he was even more specific than that: “Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of man coming in his Kingdom.”(Matt. 16:28). In spite of the fact that the Gospels were written some time after Jesus’ death, the feelings of excitement and expectancy which he had aroused and the readiness to make radical changes in way of life in order to enter into the Kingdom, break out all through the Gospels and the Epistles. In Paul’s time the churches were in a regular ferment of excitement about the coming of the Kingdom, and Paul sometimes had to wield a firm hand to prevent this from degenerating into wild and excessive enthusiasm.

I am not advocating that we should all go out and join the Jehovah’s Witnesses! But what has happened to that sense of expectancy which all Christians once had? When it comes to that, *what are we expecting?* Perhaps not very much, because the more we have become aware of the limitations of men the less we have expected of them, and God as an active agent is pretty well out of the picture in this humanistic age. Let us each one take a good look at our own expectations – our own vision of the Kingdom of God. What sort of condition is the vision in? Is it good enough? Is it clear enough? We pride ourselves as a Society on our

practical work for the Kingdom. Others may talk, but we are doing! And indeed, it is right that we should be doing. Many Friends are at this moment about their Father's business in many parts of the world, and have little time to spare for sitting down and listening to lectures about it. But suppose someone should stop one of us tomorrow as we are going about our tasks, and say, "I hear you are working for the Kingdom of God. What is this Kingdom like? I want to know, because I might like to work for it too. I am not very satisfied with things as they are." Very probably we should answer, "I'm so sorry, but I am already late for a committee meeting. Ask me some other time, won't you?" And we would know in our hearts that we could not give an adequate answer. We are so immersed in "next-stepism" that we have no time to look at the vision on the far horizon.

But it is not the blueprinters and social planners who have had the greatest impact on history! Who knows the men who drew up plans for abolishing discrimination in the distant provinces of the Roman Empire? And who does not know Jesus, the man who turned the Roman Empire upside down by simply ignoring it, and proclaiming and living a way of life so different from anything men then knew that it seemed utterly absurd? Other men through the ages have managed to ignore the rules of orderly social change and break right through to the Kingdom. John Woolman took that leap into the future, and lived as if the Kingdom were already here. He could not have done so if he had not had a clear vision of that Kingdom. By his life, he brought it a little closer to the rest of the world than it had ever been before. The Bruderhof is doing the same today. Most of the rest of us have let our *plans* obscure our *visions*. Instead of entering eagerly into the joy that is set before us, we are dispiritedly turning all our tomorrows into yesterdays before we ever reach them. We do this because we dare not lift our

eyes to the vision of that which is totally different from the life we know. A change here, an alteration there – that we can work for and gladly. A patchwork job of salvation is good enough for us. If there are to be radical changes, time enough for that in the Hereafter. After all, the Kingdom of God was probably never meant for earth anyway. If it was, why is it so often referred to as the Kingdom of Heaven? Most Christians do not realize that this is our semantic heritage from the Jews, who were reluctant to use directly the name of God. One means of avoiding this was to refer to His Dwelling Place instead, but they never supposed that He would permanently confine His Kingdom to heaven. We however find it easier and more comfortable to keep it at this safe distance.

But we cannot all be saints! At least, we don't think we can. The saints, you know, never suspected that they were saints. But it is true that gifts and strengths differ, and it is not given to many to act with such power that the spiritual center of gravity of the world shifts at their touch alone. But the Kingdom will never come if we don't grow towards it; at least it seems highly unlikely that God will simply introduce it by a tour de force, although there are those who believe this. At the present time man's eyesight is so poor that he seems more likely to grow towards hell than heaven. Let us look to our vision, that we may direct our growth.

For most of us, the great enemy of the Kingdom is Today. The trap of dailiness catches us, and makes cowards of us all. For the train leaves for the office in five minutes; if the beds aren't made and the dishes washed now the house will be a mess all day. The baby is crying for his bottle, nobody can find any clean underwear this morning, and the editor of the Meeting's Monthly Bulletin must have information about all the committee meetings to take place next month

within an hour. It is not only that these things can't wait today, it is that the same things recur with the same immediate urgency day after day after day. It is not as if we could work up an extra burst of speed, finish our tasks for once and all, and then be free to do "God's work." The more we long to be doing other work, the more overwhelming the tasks of the present seem, until they sap our courage and our strength. Or we may respond to the pressure by a complete about-face, and come to feel that these tasks are after all the only ones that matter. Then we are in danger of finding all our security in our daily routine, and will fear anything that might change it.

Should we leave our daily tasks then? Should we leave the plow standing in the middle of the furrow to follow Him? There are some people whose special gifts require them to do just this, and no man should hinder them. But God does not call most of us away from the plow; he would rather have us shift bosses, since it is after all His acre, and start plowing the field for Him. St. Francis heard a voice before the crucifix at St. Demian's saying, "Francis, go, repair my house that thou seest is all in ruins" – and he walked out of the shop where he had been selling cloth for his father, never to return. Brother Lawrence saw a vision of God's Providence in a tree stripped of its leaves in winter, and stayed all his life in a monastery kitchen washing dishes – in the presence of God. Each man, through the strength of his vision, was living as if the Kingdom were already here. Some men must change their work, like St. Francis; others must do for God's sake what they formerly did for their own, like Brother Lawrence. Many of us will find that we are called to one kind of service at one time of life, and another at a later time. Washing diapers and feeding young children commands by far the largest share of my life right now, but I know it will not always be so.

For those of us who know that it is right for us to stay where we are is it possible to avoid the trap of dailiness? Can we transform our homes and offices into advance outposts of the Kingdom? In the moments of exaltation that come to us all, certainly. But day after day? You may say, “But that is expecting too much! These are very fine words, and we have used them ourselves occasionally, especially on Sunday morning in Meeting for Worship, but we can’t really do this!” Friends, I have shared this reaction with you. But I have been having some “close, plain work” with myself in recent weeks on just this subject. I have gradually come to realize that I have been expecting far too little of myself. With the coming of the fifth baby, the usual sicknesses in the other children and a major operation for one of them, all in one month, I have been getting more and more adept at making excuses for myself. I am too tired to be patient, too tired to pray, too tired to make our home “a place of friendliness, refreshment and peace, where God becomes more real to all who dwell there and to those who visit it.” And all the time that I have been telling myself this, I have been turning my back on the one Source of refreshment that I needed! If we keep our backs turned to God, His Kingdom gets to seem more and more unreal and impossible, and we come to expect less and less of ourselves in the way of service.

I trust that I will never again be able to persuade myself that I am too tired to pray. For this, this is the one thing needful. We like to think of prayer as a free overflowing of the spirit, but there are times when it must be undertaken as an act of the will, a discipline in the strictest sense of the word. Religious temperaments differ, and I am not one of those who place great reliance on specific procedures and “steps” in the religious life. But turning to God in prayer is the one indispensable step. Only through prayer can our

vision of His Kingdom come clear. The clearer it comes the greater the strength, the greater the joy, the greater the spiritual release which will enable us to live here and now in such a way that the Kingdom can come to all mankind. If there are things inside us that block our sight so that we cannot look upon the joy that God has set before us, it is through prayer that we can examine and gradually dissolve these obstacles, for God is the First and Last Counselor. Earthly counselors have their important place too, but it is my experience that insights from the psychiatrist's couch still have to be offered up to God in prayer before the real liberation of the imprisoned spirit can take place. In spite of all that can be said about the "God above God" and the ultimate impersonality of the universe, it is the God of the divine encounter, the personal God we meet in prayer, who touches, transforms and liberates us. It is in Him that we must put our trust.

But we must also trust ourselves. In a world that specializes in props and supports, both physical, psychological and spiritual, and devices to make life easier, let us not be fooled into expecting too little of ourselves. If we keep our eyes turned toward the Kingdom, we will know that all things are possible in God's Sight. Paradoxically, we must not expect too much, either. For even though we are faithful in prayer, there are periods of spiritual dryness which come to us all, periods when the inward obstacles loom very large indeed, and the Kingdom seems to recede. Madame Guyon experienced seven years of such dryness, when God seemed to with-draw His presence from her entirely. "But taught by the great inward Teacher, she was enabled to perceive from the first, that it would not be safe for her to estimate either the reality or the degree of her religion by the amount of her happiness ... She did not seek joy, but God. God *first*, and what God sees fit to give, afterwards."

We must not *depend* on joy, then. It is set before us, as a fruit of the spirit, but we must *first seek the Kingdom*. When we are spiritually liberated to live as if the Kingdom were already here, as we surely will be if we are faithful in prayer and seeking, it will slowly move in upon us from the horizon. Our brothers who now stand frozen before the abyss will look up, and see the Kingdom coming – and they will start to build a bridge across the abyss – in joy.

While yet we see with eyes, must we be blind?
Is lonely mortal death the only gate
To holy life eternal – must we wait
Until the dark portcullis clangs behind
Our hesitating steps, before we find
Abiding good? Ah, no, not that our fate;
Our time-bound cry “too early” or “too late”
Can have no meaning in the Eternal Mind.
The door is open, and the Kingdom here –
Yet Death indeed upon the threshold stands
To bar our way – unless into his hands
We give our self, our will, our heart, our fear.
And then – strange resurrection! – from above
Is poured upon us life, will, heart, and love.

(XXVI From The Naylor Sonnets by Kenneth
Boulding)