

enced, it is experienced very concretely. Put positively, this is what we mean in Christian faith when we talk about incarnation, that God's *shalom* is always embodied in such a way that people know it is happening in their historical experience.

#### THE DRAMA OF THE BRICKYARD

The image I want to pursue with you now that may make *shalom* concrete as both scandal and incarnation is "brickyard." "Brickyard" is a remote image for those of us who mostly do not do physical labor, but we can get into it. I use the image to pursue the exodus event in the Old Testament; but before we talk about the exodus, let us try to get inside the tone and demand of the brickyard. A brickyard is a place of competent production. It is where bricks are made to specification and on schedule. If the workers there are treated well, they are supplied with the materials for their quota. If they are not treated well, they must even get their own materials (Exodus 5:7). That is what is meant by "making bricks without straw," not that they were inferior bricks but that in the same "time frame" they had both to secure the material and to make the bricks. So it is a place of competent production where the production schedule is taken with great seriousness.

The brickyard is also a place of coercion and profit. It is profit for the people who own and sell the bricks and set the production schedule. But for the people who make the bricks, it is a place of coercion. That is, they are there to meet other people's standards, to knuckle under to others' demands that they do not share. Here there is no zone of freedom, not even a hint of a break in the heat of the day. The gap between the people of profit and the people who are coerced is not an accident of the system, but is built into the design of the system. Most often the story of the brickyard is put out in the company literature. Remarkably, the biblical story of the brickyard is told from the perspective of the coerced.

And because they are coerced, it follows that it is a place of unhappiness and oppression, and, of course, enormous hostility. Hostility inevitably comes with oppression, the weary desperate recognition that I am not in charge of my own life, that I have no options, but that someone else is enjoying the immoral privilege of selecting my options for me. And at bottom, the brickyard is a place of hopelessness. Not only must we produce for the others, but there is no prospect, not in our wildest imagination, that things are ever going to change. There will never be enough bricks to meet the quota. There will never be enough profits to satisfy the regime. There will never be enough power to get rid of the pressure and demand. And so the alternatives in our

lives are to make bricks and to suffer, or to refuse to make bricks and to suffer more. Sort of like *Catch-22*.

Not a single one of us is far removed from that set of realities. This image could be a powerful one for us precisely because it is like our experience. We are each of us in the brickyard. We all owe our souls to the company store. It does not matter if it is a fifth-grader with a demanding baseball coach or a third-grader with a teacher who shouts or a father who demands; it does not matter if it is a taxpayer who is always playing catch-up or an unappreciated mother and wife. It does not matter if it is a graduate student never satisfying his or her committee, or a junior executive under enormous pressure, or a doctor with too many patients, or a salesperson whose quota is always upped, or a social worker with a heavy load. We are all of us caught in a way of life that yields only frantic hostility and desperate effort, which cannot finally pay off.

The symbol has power because we move in and out of the brickyards. Sometimes we are the hopeless slave, never having a zone of freedom. Sometimes we are the owner, eyeing the quotas with eagerness but always being inventive to find new ways of being anxious. It is a system that is obvious in public life, but which invades the dark recesses of our piety and our morality. Brickyards always seem to envelop us. And we go from one to another, but the space between is narrow and soon gone.

Everybody thought it had to be like that. The slaves and the owners. It had always been so, and still is today, isn't it? But the Bible, the announcement of *shalom*, raises an unheard-of question. You can see the small crowd gathering in the yard, and even the foreman comes over, partly in fear, partly in curiosity. And there is that stranger with a strange question. It could have been Moses or anybody with any name, because what counted is what he said: "Let my people go!" That is what he said. And the moment it was said, the brickyard was changed. And it will never be the same again. That is the good news, good news for the slaves, but also for the foreman. The brickyard has been completely transformed by that announcement: "Let my people go!" That is the beginning of *shalom*. A brickyard in which that statement is uttered.

The word traveled quickly to the big house. Pharaoh himself came to see the brickyard, and he noticed immediately that things were changed. So he joined the issue immediately. It seemed to be Moses versus the foreman. But it was quickly escalated to be Pharaoh versus Moses, and then it became clear it was Yahweh, the God of Freedom, versus the gods of Egypt. And each had a program for the brickyard. It

was "Let my people go," versus, "Make more bricks." It mattered, and still matters decisively, who wins that contest, because the outcome will determine forever the character and quality of life in the brickyard.

The drama of the brickyard revolves around the question: *Who is in charge?* If the Egyptian gods, the gods of coercion and oppression, are in charge, then there is nothing to do but to make bricks. But if Yahweh is in charge, then it is time to sing and dance and be free. So the issue is joined:

[Moses turned the water to blood.] . . . But the magicians of Egypt did the same by their secret arts; so Pharaoh's heart remained hardened, and he would not listen to them.

—Exodus 7:22

The suspense mounts, but the action is duplicated:

[Moses and Aaron brought frogs upon the land.] . . . But the magicians did the same by their secret arts, and brought frogs upon the land of Egypt.

—Exodus 8:7

So far it was a standoff, point for point, but it was only warm-up time. Then they moved to the next event:

[Moses and Aaron brought gnats on the land.] . . . The magicians tried by their secret arts to bring forth gnats, but *they could not*.

—Exodus 8:18

They could not! Imagine that! The ones who had always owned the brickyards were shown not to have the real power. The word spread all over the brickyard, and it was a decisive moment in the history of the brickyard. The powers of coercion were defeated. The power of Yahweh was superior. He was in charge! *Shalom* had come to the brickyard, and things were topsy-turvy. The old quota system was gone. Coercive, fearful power was overthrown. The end of oppression and hostility. But most of all the end of despair and the birth of hope. If this could happen in our brickyard, where it seemed nothing good could happen, then anything toward freedom can happen anywhere under any circumstances. And note—note above all: this is not a change of attitude, nor simply of perception. This is a real change of power, a decisive redistribution of power, an abrupt disruption of political, economic arrangements. Brickyards are no longer for coercion

but for freedom. And then the slaves left and hurried out to the wilderness on the way to the mountain of obligation and the land of promise. They made it to the first place, to new obligations, quickly. The promise was a long way off, but the brickyard was transformed.

In our tradition we cannot talk about *shalom* without talking about Exodus; and when we talk about Exodus, we affirm that the brickyard has become the place where the question of power is asked: "Who is in charge here?" And the question is answered: "My name is 'Let-my-people-go!'" And "Let-my-people-go" is now in charge.

Our forebears—our mothers and fathers—have spent the centuries since that event pondering what it means. That is really the task of theology—to face the issue. What does it mean that the Lord of Freedom controls the brickyards? Of course it says something about this Lord. It says that "Let-my-people-go" is powerful and for us. It says for us: "Get out from under the load of oppression and coercion." This Lord's intention is that we should not have to lead that kind of life, no matter how much the technological, bureaucratic propaganda of the regime lays it on us. This Lord is for freedom and is powerful enough to introduce freedom into the grimmest brickyard there could be. That is the odd faith of the children of Israel to which we are heirs. It says that the Lord has not abandoned the world and placed the power of life and the mystery of being at the disposal of the oppressive agents in the world.

But what it says about us! It affirms to us that we can never secure our existence nor order our brickyard by more quotas. We can't do it in the brickyards over which we preside. Nor can we do it in the brickyards where we are on the other end of things. We can't secure our own existence by our productivity and our hustle, nor by our loyalty to the owners of the yard. The capacity to secure our existence has not been turned over to us. The Lord has retained that. That, of course, is what we do not like. How convenient if it had been turned over to us. What has apparently been turned over to us is the capacity to destroy ourselves. But the Lord has not placed in our hands the comparable power to make our lives safe, whole, free. This is kept by God, who gives it in strange times and places. The supreme fact about us, which the slaves discovered that night in Egypt, is that our well-being, our salvation, our *shalom*, is hidden in God's holy mystery, which none of our best efforts can penetrate or explain.

We know this name—Yahweh—which is shorthand for "Let my people go." But we know this name only because Yahweh told us. And when we were told, it was enigmatic so that we knew nothing about the source or character of this incredible power. We know a name and we

guess at its meaning. The most we know is that Let-my-people-go comes to the brickyards and calls us to shift the basis of our being in the world. The victory won over the forces of Egypt is strange and never seems quite clear. But on the basis of that unclear victory by that one with the enigmatic name, we are called to forge a new life, choose a new identity, walk a new path on the way to the desert where Yahweh will meet us with a strange, ten-sided notion of freedom.

So who is really in charge? Answer carefully because we are expected to give an extraordinary answer. But if that answer is the right one, then every other answer is wrong. To suggest that any other is in charge, to name any other name, other than the Lord of disrupting, abiding freedom, is to answer wrongly. It is to embrace *idolatry*. Idolatry is at the heart of oppression and coercion. Idolatry is at the root both of our oppressing and our being oppressed. Idolatry—wrongly perceiving who is in charge—is the opposite of *shalom*. *Shalom*, as we are invited to perceive it, is premised on knowing who is in charge and making the life-reorienting pilgrimage to the mountain of freedom and obligation.

Talk about brickyards and idolatry, about deserts and mountains, about freedom and obligation—that is not the usual rhetoric of the Christian community. I want simply to affirm that while the vocabulary may sound a bit different, the issues are the same in the New Testament articulation of our faith. Only we have so beclouded the issue of power in the Christian gospel that we have been blinded to the question of the gospel: “Who is in charge here?” So let me comment on how that same issue dominates the Gospel memories of the New Testament.

#### THE GOSPEL AND THE BRICKYARD

Let us talk about the frame of the Gospel of Mark. It begins, as everybody is agreed, with this incredible statement:

The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel.

—Mark 1:15

Hear that statement as though it were announced in the brickyard. The time is the time for management change. Jesus comes to the brickyard and posts the sign: “Under new management.” Or more dramatically, it is as though he came to end colonialism, to take down the old flag of the empire and send the governor packing. The time is at hand to face the radical reorientation of it all. It is kingdom time. It is time for God’s kingdom, the same God who did in Pharaoh, the same God still at work