"Turn to God — Rejoice in Hope!"

An Approach to the Theme of the Eighth Assembly of the WCC

Thomas F. Best

Winter under cultivation
Is as arable as Spring
Emily Dickinson[1]

1. A theme for today

The World Council of Churches' eighth assembly will gather at a *kairos* moment — a time of crisis, challenge and opportunity — for the churches, for the ecumenical movement and for the world. The theme of this assembly is "Turn to God — Rejoice in Hope!" It is an exhortation, a challenge to Christians and the churches today, uttered in response to this *kairos* moment. The theme calls us to proclaim together the Christian faith, to bring a message of hope and new life to a world gripped by doubt, meaninglessness and despair. It calls us to live out our faith in witness, mission and service in response to the injustice and suffering endured by both humanity and the natural world. The theme is, fundamentally, a call to Christian obedience today.

The theme is bold, realistic, flexible and resilient. It has been developed with a lively awareness of the challenges testing our faith, and the capacity for a Christian response, today. These challenges are manifold. There is, for example, the challenge of a world situation in which hope and hopelessness vie for ascendancy: the fall of communist regimes in Eastern Europe, the rise of a democratic regime in South

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Africa, the tentative and troubled moves towards peace in Ireland and in the Middle East, all offering the promise of liberation from violence, oppression and human suffering. These are powerful signs of hope, signs of God's presence in history.

But powerful counter-forces are also at work in the world: there is a personal individualism, encouraged by the needs of an apparently insatiable market, which defines personal and social worth in terms of material gain. There is a collective individualism, often fed by a long history of oppression and frustrated hopes, which promotes a particular ethnic, cultural or racial group at the expense of others. There is a culture of violence — of death — which defies humanity and reason alike, preferring competition to cooperation, domination to solidarity and sharing, and absorbing vast resources in the development of engines of destruction. It is a culture, for example, which prefers "smart" land mines to no land mines at all; referring especially to the immoral use of such promiscuous weapons, an article in the prestigious journal *Scientific American* notes:

> The great majority of modern conflicts are now internal rather than international: they are civil wars, struggles for independence, ethnic and racial "cleansings," terrorist campaigns... Accordingly, civilians have increasingly become victims of war. In World War I, they represented only 15 percent of all fatalities...; in today's hostilities, *more than 90 percent of all those injured are civilians.*[2]

There is also the challenge of a church situation in which signs of both renewal and of decline abound. In the Southern hemisphere churches are growing, and acting increasingly as if their historic divisions have been healed; in the North there is the explicit undoing of old anathemas and divisions; everywhere there are many and mighty examples of greater unity, of witness, of service, of resistance to oppression and evil, of faithfulness unto death. But in the North many established churches are declining; in many countries, both North and South, new patterns of religious life emerge, challenging traditional church structures. Often new "missions" repeat the colonial patterns of one hundred years ago — only more efficiently, now that the tools of mass communication and mass marketing lie ready to hand.

There is the challenge of an ecumenical situation balanced between resolution and resignation. Over the past one hundred years the churches have learned to reflect, worship, witness and serve together. There are signs that they are ready to enter a next stage of the ecumenical movement, one in which, having advanced from comparison to discussion, they now move together to decision about the next steps on their journey. But they hesitate. They strengthen their denominational structures at the expense of ecumenical commitments. They decrease their support for ecumenical bodies, including the WCC. They seem strangely unable, or unwilling, or simply afraid, *to draw the consequences of their own shared experience* in this "ecumenical century". Some even dare to speak of an "ecumenical winter".

And there is the challenge of all the false hopes, the idols which beg us to make them powerful by granting them power over us. There are false hopes based on illusions, or on wishful thinking. Many "prophets" will cater to the need, rooted in our anxiety about the future, for simplistic certainties. These will be offered in abundance by the market-place, by political systems and, not least as the next millennium approaches, by "religious leaders" claiming a certain knowledge of God's will. As we approach the year 2000, the Christian virtue of critical discernment will become more

and more essential, not only over against the world, but within and among the churches and Christian movements as well.

2. A theme to bring hope

These challenges, and others in abundance, will confront the delegates to the eighth assembly of the WCC. Other matters particular to the WCC itself will also come together at the next assembly, making it certainly a decisive moment, and possibly a decisive turning-point, in the life of the WCC and in the churches' ecumenical journey. The year 1998 will mark the 50th anniversary of the founding of the WCC. There will be appropriate celebrations, but also a fundamental stocktaking and setting of new directions. A process is now underway to take account of the momentous changes in the churches, the ecumenical movement and the world since 1948, and to identify a new WCC "common understanding and vision". This will be appropriated at the assembly in a solemn, yet festive, liturgical act. And there will be the chance for participants, including church leaders, to commit themselves to a fresh ecumenical vision for the future.

This is the context in which the theme for this assembly will function. It must invite and compel the churches, and their delegates, to wrestle with all these complex issues of church and world. While recognizing the diversity of Christian experience and expression, it could help the assembly process greatly by providing a common vocabulary for discussion of the issues. It must inform and enable reflection, encouraging the delegates to claim a common hope and to shape together a common vision. In short: the theme must live within the assembly, shaping and influencing its life in many ways. This will happen centrally through worship and, in appropriate ways, in the discussions, reflections and deliberations of the delegates in plenary session, in small groups and in Bible study.

Fundamentally the theme should encourage the churches to *move* — to move closer together in faith, life and witness; to move together closer to the suffering and need of the world; to move away from a focus on their own organizational and financial difficulties, fears and hesitations. This means a theme which explores hope in its deep dimensions, including the grounds for our hope, its practical consequences in our lives today, and its final aim and goal.

Despite all the challenges and negative factors catalogued above, it is hope which should be prevailing in our churches today: for everywhere, for those with eyes to see and ears to hear, there are signs of a search for a new vitality in the churches, for a new commitment to Christian unity, for a renewed spiritual life and for fresh impulses of prophetic witness and service to the world. But although the resources for the next millennium are at hand, they are not yet served by that authentic, coherent vision which will liberate their energies and bring them into creative focus. *This is why we are not more hopeful than we are*. And this is why a theme which calls us to hope is so urgently needed today.

3. The theme and the threefold movement of the Christian life

The assembly theme has a structure and a dynamic. This is based upon a threefold pattern, particular to the Christian faith and life, which can be summarized in the following affirmations:

— God turns to us in grace.
— We respond in faith, acting in love.
— We anticipate the coming, final fullness of God's presence in all of creation.

These three elements — remembering God's saving acts, putting faith into practice today, and hope for the future — are distinct, but inseparable, moments within the ongoing life of faith.

They resonate with other threefold Christian affirmations: they are grounded in God's unshakable fidelity, Christ's saving acts and the Spirit's powerful presence. They remind us of the threefold nature of the church as a community of memory, a community of love in action and a community of hope. They greet us at every baptism as we celebrate God's gift of faith, the human response, and the movement into the joy of a new life lived in hope. And they are the three aspects celebrated in the eucharistic witness of the churches, as we celebrate the constitutive elements of our faith in remembrance *(anamnesis)*, turn to God and receive the life poured out in Christ in the present, and rejoice in the hope that the present age is only the foretaste (the *arrabon*) of the fullness of God's promise, to be realized in the power of the Holy Spirit.

The theme reminds us also of recent ecumenical reflection on koinonia,. the fellowship, both spiritual and material, which binds Christians and the churches together. This "koinonia of the Holy Spirit" (2 Cor. 13:13) flows from God's action in Jesus Christ, our response in faith and our hope of moving towards fuller koinonia. This has been expressed in the prayer which concludes the Message from the fifth world conference on Faith and Order:

> Holy and loving Trinity:
> — we come to you in thanksgiving,
> for your gift of koinonia which we now receive
> as a foretaste of your kingdom;
> — we come to you in penitence,
> for our failures to show forth koinonia
> where there is division, hostility and death;
> — we come to you in expectation,
> that we may enter more deeply into the joy of koinonia;
> — we come to you in confidence,
> to commit ourselves anew to your purposes
> of love, justice and koinonia;
> — we come to you in hope,
> that the unity of your church, in all its rich diversity,
> may be ever more clearly manifest as a sign of your love.[3]

The following three sections of this paper take up, one by one, the three "movements" of the theme; each section is headed by a scriptural verse which captures the special emphasis of this aspect of the theme. In addition, a fourth section develops the notion of the Jubilee Year, a fiftieth year of restoration and justice proclaimed to end each cycle of forty-nine years. The Jubilee tradition shares the same basic threefold structure as the assembly theme; and reflection on the Jubilee tradition, with its insistence that justice be done, helps to focus and sharpen our approach to the assembly theme. The topic is, in many ways, especially appropriate in this fiftieth anniversary year of the WCC, and in light of the WCC's reflection on its own future direction.

A. "Turn to God": the God to whom we turn

> Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead... (1 Pet. 1:3).

The God to whom we turn is that faithful God who has acted, in creation and throughout history, to establish and maintain God's world and God's people. Our turning to God is rooted in the reality of God's antecedent act: we turn — we can turn — because God has first turned to us. This means that our turning to God is founded upon God's unshakable fidelity. Not our own faithfulness, but God's faithfulness, is the bedrock of our hope and the source of our life. Indeed God remains faithful, even if we are not faithful; God's faithfulness continues unshakably, despite and against all human unfaithfulness and betrayal, as the history of God's covenant with God's people makes plain (cf. Gen. 9:11, Deut. 4:25-31).[4] The affirmation that God is "the same forever" does not mean that God is static and unchanging, but that God's relationship with God's people and world is marked ever anew by this same, constant caring.

We appropriate God's fidelity, and confess that we are called to obedience by God, through an active remembering of the mighty and loving things which God has done. It is in this act of remembering and confessing that we claim the faith as our own, and affirm and shape our own identity as God's people. This is the persistent witness of the biblical writings, classically stated in the Old Testament in Deuteronomy 26:1-11: "You shall make this response before the Lord your God: 'A wandering Aramean was my ancestor...'" (Deut. 26:5). As it is remembered, told aloud, and handed down, the history of God's liberating acts in the past becomes the story of Israel's liberation in the present, a story which is renewed as each generation makes it its own. In telling and retelling the story, God's people learn not only who they are, but who God is as well.

The New Testament, too, witnesses to the priority of God's action and God's faithfulness. Thus Jesus links his call to repentance, issued at the beginning of his ministry, to his announcement that the longing of the ages "is fulfilled", that God's reign, long promised and long anticipated, has, in his own person, finally drawn near (Mark 1:15). Christ died for us "while we were yet sinners" (Rom. 5:7,10); God's love is "prevenient", out ahead of us, calling us: "we love because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19). In the way of faithful caring, Christ too is "the same yesterday and today and forever" (Heb. 13:8).

Thus the remembering of God's fidelity, and God's liberating and loving acts in history, is the first step in our "turning to God". In our individualistic age it is crucial to note that such "remembering" so often takes place in a liturgical setting. Here the verbal affirmation is intensified and strengthened through symbolic action, in the presence of the community or its representatives, and sealed by acts of commitment through which the worshippers are touched and claimed not just by the past and in the present, but for the future as well. Thus the confession in Deuteronomy 26, noted above, takes place within the feast of first-fruits. Luke emphasizes that Jesus' ministry began with his teaching "in their synagogues" (Luke 4:15), and Jesus' identification of himself as the one sent "to bring good news to the poor..., to proclaim release to the captives..., to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour" (Luke 4:18-19) takes place in

the context of synagogue worship in Nazareth (cf. Mark 1:15, and the discussion of the Jubilee tradition, below).

The supreme example of this "active remembering" is, of course, the eucharist or Lord's supper. Here Christ's full sacrifice of love is "re-presented" in the midst of the community, the people of God who, as they remember (cf. *anamnesis*) Jesus' last meal with his disciples, receive it again in the present and, through the Holy Spirit, appropriate its power for their lives today. It is important that this "remembering" is not an individualistic or solitary act; it takes place within the community's celebration of Christ's gathering of his disciples for a meal. And we can "remember" only because someone has "handed on" the story to us, as Paul insists in 1 Corinthians 11:23.

This active remembering of God's deeds leads, as so often in worship, to affirmation. God's people celebrate the presence of God, and they respond to God's actions with a commitment to their own present and future action; and they have to announce this joyfully in their congregation: "God has gone up with a shout, the Lord with the sound of a trumpet" (Ps. 47:5). Such an acclamation in worship can also be a witness to an indifferent, sceptical or hostile world, a missionary statement that God's reign is indeed at hand. Thus at Jesus' "triumphal entry" into Jerusalem:

> The whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen, saying, "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!... glory in the highest heaven!" Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, order your disciples to stop." He answered, "I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out" (Luke 19:38-40).

In its first movement, then, the assembly theme speaks of the God to whom we turn. God is faithful, despite and beyond all human unfaithfulness — beyond, indeed, all human *faith*fulness — and has acted mightily and in love. We respond in joy, gratefully affirming our place among the people of God's calling,[5] and celebrate and announce the reality of God's rule in our lives and in the whole of creation.

B. "Turn to God": our response in active love

> With what shall I come before the Lord,
> and bow myself before God on high?
> Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams,
> with ten thousands of rivers of oil? ...
> He has told you, O mortal, what is good;
> and what does the Lord require of you
> but to do justice, and to love kindness,
> and to walk humbly with your God? (Micah 6:6-8).

In joyful response to God's faithfulness we turn to God, discovering, in the process, ourselves and our true humanity. We discover the meaning of our life in God: that is to say, the meaning of our life, and our true home. In turning to God we seek to be faithful to God's faithfulness to us.

Such a "turning" has a specific goal, and it leads to specific responses as we seek to be obedient to God's will for our lives. This turning is, first and fundamentally, a turning to God and God alone. It is inevitably, also, a turning away from certain other things, from all the "idols" which clamour for our allegiance today. The idols of wood

and stone denounced by Isaiah (40:19-20; 44:9-20) have been supplanted by things far more pervasive and far more seductive: by systems of material and social gain which reward greed rather than generosity; by political and economic systems which reward those who already have, at the expense of those who have not; by cultural and psychological systems which reward habits of domination and control rather than those of cooperation, sharing and solidarity.

Living within a cultural and social context we are inevitably influenced by it and we inevitably participate, to a greater or lesser degree, in its systems of value, control and reward: we have a stake in our own oppression by sin. Thus the call to "turn to God" is always a call to repentance *(metanoia)*, to a deliberate "about-face" *(shub)* from the dominant values of our society, in order to draw our values and our principles for action from elsewhere. Because we too participate in the structures of our society and are subject to their power (the "principalities and powers"; cf. Eph. 6:12), we can truly turn from them only through God's saving grace. But again God is ahead of us, having acted in Jesus Christ for our salvation: "Or do you despise the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience? Do you not realize that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?" (Rom. 2:4).

This "turning to God" is not only a mental reorientation; it demands a revision of our whole self-understanding, and affects every aspect of our lives and all of our relationships. That is: it calls us to a new spirituality, expressed not just in particular devotional acts but in a whole way of life oriented to the living God, who becomes our constant point of reference and our decisive, focal point of value. We are called to "will one thing", to respond as Jesus did when tempted by other claims upon his final loyalty: "Away with you, Satan! for it is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him'." (Matt. 4:10).

Through such "repentance", through letting go of ourselves as the centre of our own life, we establish a new relationship not only with ourselves but also with our neighbours. There again, God is out ahead of us. Because God is present with our neighbours it is hardly surprising that, in turning to God, we encounter them anew, as being made in God's image (Gen. 1:26-27) and beloved of God, of infinite worth in God's — and thus in our own — eyes. And there is more: Christ is present in the neighbour, so that in serving or spurning the neighbour we serve or spurn the very Christ himself (Matt. 25:31-46). How are we to "turn to" our neighbours? In the way in which God has turned to us, in the way of loving kindness *(chesed)*, that is, with compassion or steadfast mercy. *Chesed* is both intimate and immediate; the Hebrew term echoes the image of the womb where the child is carried and nourished, and from whence it is brought forth to new life. *Chesed* is due to all persons, including those who are powerless to demand even fair — much less compassionate — treatment. For God has already made an "option for the poor", rooted again in God's actions on behalf of God's people: "you shall not oppress a resident alien: you know the heart of an alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt" (Ex. 23:9).

This points to a further aspect of our "turning to" our neighbour: it must seek to establish justice for him, or her, or them. This *chesed*, this "deep mercy", is more than a sentiment; it must be expressed in active concern; as God has acted for our salvation, so we must act for the good of the neighbour, the community and the whole created order.

That is, justice is not basically a matter of calculating rights and wrongs, nor of establishing social programmes; it is fundamentally about relationship. It seeks to restore a right relationship where this has been distorted, or destroyed, by abuse of personal or communal power, or by inequalities in economic, cultural or social opportunity. The biblical passion for justice is driven by Israel's experience of its own liberation, by the God of justice, from slavery and oppression (Ex. 23:9, above), and by the earliest church's conviction that Jesus had called them into a fellowship of persons loved equally by God, and equally deserving of God's good things: "all who believed were together and had all things in common: they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need" (Acts 2:44-45, cf. Acts 4:32-35). The sense of justice embraces not only the *mishpatim* (casuistic case-law) found in Exodus 21:2-22:17, but also the prescriptive, ethically-oriented *zedekah* of Exodus 23:1-9: "you shall take no bribe, for a bribe blinds the officials, and subverts the cause of those who are in the right" (Ex. 23:8; cf. also Lev. 19:15-18). It is, at its extreme, a justice which goes altogether beyond the calculation of rights and wrongs; indeed, it often appears to contradict common-sense notions of fairness or even good sense, as when Jesus demands that his disciples practise a love which goes the second — and not only the second! — mile (Matt. 5:41; cf. 5:43-48, and Matt. 20:1-16).

Because justice seeks the good of the neighbour, and because it works to redress grievances and correct imbalances within the community, its final goal is reconciliation. Indeed, because estrangement grows from injustice and imbalances of opportunity or understanding, the establishment of justice is a precondition for true reconciliation. The Psalmist looks for a time when "righteousness and peace will kiss each other" (Ps. 85:10); and Paul can identify the kingdom of God as "righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit" (Rom. 14:17).

The demands of justice require that Christians and the churches should exercise the "ministry of reconciliation" entrusted to them (2 Cor. 5:18). This means they will be engaged in struggles for justice, according to the needs and possibilities for witness in their specific situation. It means, too, that the churches need to consider how far their own lives — as institutions composed of fallible human beings — actually reflect the biblical understanding of God's merciful justice, and the biblical vision of life in community, a community free from domination and coercion, where each person may freely exercise his or her gifts for the good of the community as a whole. Here the vision of Christ's self-emptying love (*kenosis*, Phil. 2:1-11) holds a challenge not only for individuals, but surely for the churches as well. Can we imagine, as part of their "turning to God", a "repentance" on the part of the churches themselves? Can we imagine the development of a *kenotic ecclesiology* which would help the churches to reflect on their own internal life, stewardship of material resources and exercise of power?[6]

In its second movement, then, the assembly theme speaks of how we turn to God. We turn to God alone, renouncing all idols; in so doing we discover both ourselves and our neighbour; we enter a life of loving service to the neighbour, and find that we will be satisfied only when justice is done, and reconciliation won.

C. "Rejoice in Hope!": Living in and by the promises of God

> May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit (Rom. 15:13).

From its evocation of the basis for our turning to God, and its explication of the values characteristic of a life turned to God, the theme moves — inevitably — to an exploration of joy and hope. For these realities establish the quality, and practical consequences, of such a life. This "joy" is not a superficial "positive feeling", nor is this hope a facile optimism; both notions emerged from the experience of the early Christian communities confronting impossibilities, hardships and persecutions and discovering that they had, in their life together in Christ, resources sufficient unto the day (cf. Matt. 10:19).

Joy and hope form together a structure of Christian response to God's gracious acts, two life-impulses, dynamically inter-related, mutually nurturing and resulting from the other. Certainly hope for the future is a source and confirmation of our joy in the present. But it is striking that Paul, in Romans 15:13 as quoted above, identifies our present joy (together with peace) as the basis for hope: may you be filled with joy, he writes, "so that you may abound in hope..." That is, hope is also a product of joy, rooted in the present experience of believers who rejoice in receiving the Holy Spirit.

Several qualities of this hope are especially helpful for our reflection on this assembly theme. First, the hope to which we are called is a radical hope. It is, after all, rooted in God's raising Jesus Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit, from the dead (Rom. 1:4). Such an act is the exact opposite of something to be predicted by clever analysis of the present, or "present trends": it makes a radical *dis*junction with the present order, offending common sense and reversing this world's values, a "stumbling-block" and "foolishness" (cf. Mark 8:31-38; 9:30-41; 10:32-45; 1 Cor. 1:22-25). In particular it is not presented in the biblical account as an example of renewal according to the "cycle of nature", with new life coming each year as spring follows upon fall and winter; rather it proclaims God's "no!" to the fundamental power of that cycle, the power of death itself. This is why Paul understands the resurrection as an act of new creation, reversing death's ascendancy, and why he views Christ as the new Adam — and Eve, we might add today.

The resurrection is God's "yes!" to Jesus of Nazareth and to the kind of Messiah he understood himself to be: not an imperious ruler, but a servant who suffered for others; in the language of Revelation, not a lion but a lamb, indeed a lamb "bearing the marks of slaughter" (Rev. 5:6).[7] The stone rejected by the builders has become the cornerstone (1 Pet. 2:7). The power of the hope to which we are called is the power of Christ's self-offering love; and such a hope, rooted in suffering, can be neither triumphalist, nor coercive, nor utopian and sentimental: Christ offers no "cheap hope", just as he offers no "cheap grace". The resurrection is not so much a victory over the cross, as a victory precisely through the cross.

This hope to which we are called is, secondly, an inclusive hope. Biblically it is rooted in the vision of Christ as the in-cohering principle of all creation ("to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth", Eph. 1:10). Theologically it is rooted in the vision of the Sacred Trinity, a re-visioning of the divine, not in terms of hierarchy and subordination but of loving, equal, interdependent, mutual and reciprocal relationships, a vision which is not static and fixed but dynamic and lively, hence life-giving.

This inclusive hope insists that all persons are within the scope of God's love and care and within the scope of Christ's concern. Jesus' ministry reached out to all: the marginal and the outcasts are brought to God's banquet table (Luke 14:15-35; 14:13).

This resonates with, and amplifies, the Old Testament insistence on the inclusion of the excluded as an essential mark of the just community which God requires for God's people (Deut. 14:28-29; 16:14; 26:13). For many the New Testament image of the "household of faith" conveys powerfully the inclusiveness of the Christian hope.

Certainly the church itself is called to live out an inclusive love that values all persons and welcomes their gifts. And if indeed it is the body of Christ — Christ who reached out to all, who came that all might "have life and have it abundantly" (John 10:10) — how can the church exclude any of those for whom Christ died, that is, any human being? This inclusive love should embrace all those in need, expressing itself in care for the suffering and outcast within society (minorities, the poor, refugees, the displaced, street children, the abused), in the struggle for justice on their behalf, and in efforts for their empowerment.

This love should embrace even the "other", even the offensively and threateningly other. It must reach out both to our victims and to our enemies, to those linked to us through the memories of wrongs done, and hurts inflicted, on one side or the other. These are not the liberating and empowering memories of God's actions for salvation. No, these are memories binding us, with others, into cycles of definition which determine how we understand both others and ourselves. Both "we" and "they" are identified not by God's intention for our future and theirs, but by the images and damages inherited from the past. In such a case memory *(anamnesis)* and forgiveness *(aphesis)* meet: for memory can be liberating only when there is the courage to forgive. Such a cycle must be *broken* by the power of forgiveness — a real forgiveness, one aware of both the costs of reconciliation and the demands of justice.

The vision of God "gathering up all things" into Christ (Eph. 1:10, above) points to a third quality of our hope: it regards the present joy as only a "foretaste" of the fullness to come, when God shall inaugurate "a new heaven and a new earth" (Rev. 21:5; cf. 2 Pet. 3:13). We live in the "time between", expressed classically as a tension between the "already" and the "not yet": the promised age has entered history (Acts 2:17), but it is not presently experienced in its fullness (1 Cor. 13:12).

That is an understatement. For make no mistake about it: redemption is necessary, for human beings and for all the rest of creation. Humanity is marked by sin, as any newspaper's woeful catalogue of social catastrophes makes clear. And for all its unfathomable joy and beauty, the natural order is also a place of waste and great suffering, where life exists from life, where animals kill and eat one other — *must* kill and eat one another — in order to survive. The measure of our hope is that this hope was born, and has flourished, in the face of rejection and death. This was possible because hope knows to whom it — to whom we — belong, to the God who has acted in Christ Jesus through the power of the Holy Spirit, and who has promised that we will not finally be abandoned nor given over to destruction.

Meanwhile we know that our birthright is secured in Christ, Christ who is the "first-fruits" of a liberated and transformed humanity (1 Cor. 15:20), and the "firstborn" within the "large" human family (Rom. 8:29). And all the rest of creation — stars and trees, other plants, rocks, animals, fish and the oceans in which they dwell — are marked equally for redemption and transformation (Rom. 8:18-25; cf. 2 Cor. 3:18). We reach out to take this promise: and the organ with which we grasp and claim our birthright is *hope* (Rom. 8:24-25).

In its third movement, then, the assembly theme speaks of hope as the power in and through which we rejoice. It is a hope at once radical and inclusive, bearing within itself all the present contradictions of life in the firm conviction that God will bring to pass all that has been promised.

4. The Jubilee Year: an impulse for justice and renewal

> You shall count off seven weeks of years, seven times seven years, so that the period of seven weeks of years gives forty-nine years... And you shall hallow the fiftieth year and you shall proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you: you shall return, every one of you, to your property and every one of you to your family (Lev. 25:8,10).

Many of the issues and challenges of the assembly theme come into sharper focus when seen through the lens of the Jubilee Year tradition. This post-Exilic tradition, found in Leviticus 25:8-55, extends the concept of the Sabbath (seventh) day, and year, of rest (see Lev. 25:1-7). What is proclaimed is a scheme of seven times seven (forty-nine) years, to be followed by a fiftieth, "Jubilee" year. The function of the Sabbath — and the Jubilee — was to proclaim that not only *space* ("the earth is the Lord's", Ps. 24:1) but also *time* belongs to God, and to signify this by setting apart a time when normal activities should cease, in particular when commerce and trade should stop in order that more ultimate values should take centre stage. These values included the worship of God, the restoration of community, and the rest and refreshment not only of human beings but also animals and the whole of the natural world, particularly the land (Lev. 25:4,11).

Thus the Sabbath and the Jubilee are God's gracious gift for renewal and restoration, for release and liberation. To observe the Sabbath and Jubilee is our response, in gratitude, for this gift; the prophet Isaiah refers to the Sabbath as a "delight" (58:13). To rest, to refrain from busyness, to let ourselves be refreshed, to regard *not* acting as something positive — these ideas are strange to societies based upon the acquisition of goods, where even "leisure" activities are pursued with such grim seriousness that they become work. The following Rabbinic text suggests how we can understand the Sabbath, and the Jubilee, in this different and positive way:

> You might think that I have given you the sabbath for your displeasure; I have surely given you the sabbath for your pleasure. To sanctify the seventh day does not mean: Thou shalt mortify thyself, but on the contrary: Thou shalt sanctify it with all thy heart, with all thy soul and with all thy sense. Sanctify the sabbath by choice meals, by beautiful garments; delight your soul with pleasure and I will reward you for this very pleasure.[8]

The Jubilee Year should bring with it several "releases" of radical consequence for human beings and human community: the release of many persons who are in servitude — including the financial servitude of debt — to others (Lev. 25:39-42), and the release of land from the control of new owners (Lev. 25:13-17,25-28). Both actions are understood as the restoration of something which, through misfortune or aggressive behaviour by others, has been lost. The person, freed from bondage, returns to him- or herself, to his or her full and free status within the community; the land returns to those to whose stewardship it was originally entrusted, to persons for whom it is part of their inheritance and honour, not merely property to be exploited.

The Jubilee Year tradition echoes many aspects of the assembly theme. It speaks about the God to whom we turn. For these social transformations were rooted in the memory of Israel's own experience, and God's saving action, taken at a time when Israel itself was in bondage and separated from "the Land": "you shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien, you know the heart of an alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt" (Ex. 23:9). Most strikingly the Jubilee Year tradition is found within the "Holiness Code", the Old Testament legislation which seeks to construct society so that it reflects Israel's identity as a people holy to God and set apart for God: the Jubilee prescriptions for social justice through restoration tell us who God is, and what kind of people can best serve God.

Furthermore, the inauguration of the Jubilee Year is marked by a dramatic liturgical moment, the blowing of the horn (Lev. 25:9) which elsewhere announces the descent of God upon Sinai in order to receive Israel within the covenant, to establish them as God's people and to unite them with God (Ex. 19:13,16,19; 20:18). It invites the acclamation that God is present and powerful to save.

The Jubilee Year speaks about our response in active love to God's saving acts. "The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; with me you are but aliens and tenants" (Lev. 25:23). Thus the relentless acquisition of land by fewer and fewer persons, the "piling field upon field until nothing is left" is acceptable neither to God nor to God's people. Instead we are to act in generosity (cf. Deut. 15:7-11), identifying ourselves with others in need and limiting our own self-interested claims: "you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God" (Lev. 19:34). This requires a praxis of love within the community, freely accepted by men and women as their response to God's generosity and care, with a special obligation falling upon those who have social and financial power.

The Jubilee speaks also about the last movement of our theme, the impulse to rejoice in hope. For it looks beyond the present world order, drawing its inspiration from God's desire to restore persons, communities and the natural world to a state of coherence and prosperous harmony. By its commitment to social transformation it gives hope to the oppressed and to the land: and this not as a "gift" from those who are mighty or exercise charity, but as a recovery of their birthright. It is an act of restoration to one's true identity, as a person created in the image of God; or the restoration of God's land to those to whom God has entrusted it. It is a hope which draws Israel towards the future, towards the vision of community which God desires for God's people.

The Jubilee hope exercised a powerful influence upon the development of Christian hope. Most importantly, its vision and concerns were prominent in the ministry of Jesus, who early in his Galilean ministry announced the inbreaking of "the year of the Lord's favour" (Luke 4:19) and proclaimed "release to the captives". He also incorporated the principle of the cancellation of debts into the prayer which he taught his disciples: "... and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors" (Matt. 6:12).

It is important to note that in using these Jubilee themes Jesus was not simply adopting traditional material current in the 1st century C.E. The Jubilee tradition had, by then, lost its religious and ethical character (even in the apocryphal book of Jubilees it functions only as a unit for reckoning time). Indeed, as far we can tell historically, *it had never been put into practice at all* (this is the clear implication of Neh. 5:1-13; cf.

Num. 36:4 and Ezek. 46:17). Thus Jesus was restoring this restoration tradition *par excellence*, and bringing its values — its challenge for personal and social transformation — to the centre of his own ministry and message. At the same time, of course, he was making a sharp critique of a society and system which had never dared to take the demands of God's Jubilee seriously.

It is difficult to know how far the early church consciously took up this Jubilee challenge. Certainly there are examples of radical sharing within the early Christian communities (Acts 2:42-47 and 4:32-27; cf. 1 Cor. 16:1), and there are sharp complaints about distortions of life within the body of Christ by those who refused to share (1 Cor. 11:17-22). Although these are not explicitly linked to the Jubilee tradition, either coming from the Old Testament directly or as it was transformed and intensified in Jesus' teaching and life-style, it is likely that the Jubilee challenge had some influence on these early attempts at radical Christian obedience. But by all accounts such obedience was limited then, even as now. Surely Jesus' "Jubilee critique" needs to be heard clearly today, and not least within the churches.

5. A theme for tomorrow

This is the theme — "Turn to God — Rejoice in Hope!" — offered for the eighth WCC assembly. It is strong in reminding us that God is faithful, that God's initiative is primary, that God has acted for our salvation and that of the natural world. It calls us clearly to respond to God's initiative with an active love, shown in work for unity in both church and world, and in work to establish justice for God's people and for the natural world. But most importantly, it reveals hope in God's future as the basis for all our life and striving, the source of our joy and our ability to continue on in face of difficulty or despair.

And because the theme is about hope, it speaks directly to the idea that we live in the midst of an "ecumenical winter". For those whose hope is rooted in God's having raised Christ from the dead; for those whose hope will not rest until all persons, and all of creation, are safely within the scope of Christ's love and care; for those who await, in the power of the Holy Spirit, the gathering of all things into Christ — for those who live in this hope, winter is a time full of opportunity. It is truly a time which is "as arable" — as fit for cultivation, as ripe with possibility — as any spring we could possibly imagine.

NOTES

[1] *Emily Dickinson: The Complete Poems*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson, London and Boston, Faber & Faber, 1975, no. 1707, p.694. The poem is given in its entirety.

[2] Gino Strada, "The Horror of Land Mines", in *Scientific American*, 1996, May, p.26, emphasis mine.

[3] *On the Way to Fuller Koinonia: Official Report of the Fifth World Conference on Faith and Order, Santiago de Compostela 1993*, eds Thomas F. Best & Günther Gassmann, Faith and Order Paper no. 166, Geneva, WCC Publications, 1994, p.227.

[4] The Hebrew scriptures are integral to the identity and self-understanding of the Jewish people — with whom they originated — as well as to Christians. As Christians we must approach these scriptures with a sense of respect for their historic origins, and for their central role in the life of the Jewish people throughout its long history.

[5] This phrase is suggested in the "CCJP Report on the Budapest Consultation: The People of God and the Churches' Self-Understanding", in *People of God/Peoples of God: A World Council of Churches' Consultation on the Church and the Jewish People [1994]*, ed. Leon Klenicki, New York, Anti-Defamation League and Consultation on the Church and the Jewish People, p.5.

[6] *Kenosis*, of course, must always be considered in relation to questions of power: Who sacrifices what? Is power given up voluntarily? Does this giving away of power lead — as with Christ — to the *em*powerment of others? Is this giving away of power done — as by Christ — to the benefit of others and, finally, to the glory of God?

[7] This brilliant translation is G.B. Caird's; see his *The Revelation of St John the Divine*, Black's New Testament Commentaries, London, Adam & Charles Black, 1966, pp.69-70.

[8] Deuteronomy rabba 3,1, in Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath — its Meaning for Modern Man*, New York, Noonday Press, 1990, p.19; quoted in Hans Ucko, *Common Roots, New Horizons: Learning about Christian Faith from Dialogue with Jews*, Geneva, WCC Publications, 1994, p.53.