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Hope: Demanding the divine words

Bill Tammeus | Dec. 29, 2010 A small c catholic

A bedraggled cliché says that people tend to enter a new year with hope. But hope itself, at least in a Christian context, is often badly misunderstood, hung with the cheap, glittering tinsel of vague sentimentality.

So as we move into 2011, I want to draw on a great thinker who came from largely Catholic France but whose commitment was to the Reformed Church of France. Jacques Ellul [1] (1912-1994) can help us think more realistically about hope.

Among his many books, the one that speaks to me most clearly is *Hope in Time of Abandonment* [2]. It?s hard for me to think of a more pertinent message for what we face in 2011 -- from war to homelessness, terrorism to cultural degradation and all the destructive ?isms? of our time -- than the one Ellul offers there.

?Hope,? he writes, ?comes alive only in the dreary silence of God, in our loneliness before a closed heaven, in our abandonment. God is silent, so it?s man who is going to speak ... Man is going to express his hope that God?s silence is neither basic nor final, nor a cancellation of what we had laid hold of as a Word from God.?

What Ellul is telling wearied people is that it?s up to us to tell the world that the bleakness all around us is not the end of the story. Rather, we must insist that, despite all appearances, God is active and drawing us into a brighter future. That means we must find where and how God is working in the world -- in effective ministries, in brave people standing up for what is right -- and get the word out.

And we need not rely only on religious institutions to help us do that. Think, for instance, of CNN?s annual show about ?heroes,? [3] individuals who are changing the world for good. Surely we can claim that God is in the midst of that, speaking a word that Ellul calls ?living, active and disruptive.?

At the same time, Ellul tells us we cannot let God off the hook. When God seems to say nothing, we must demand divine words. When God seems absent, we must insist that God come be with us.

?When God is silent,? Ellul writes, ?he has to be made to talk. When God turns away, he has to be made to turn back to us again. When God seems dead, he has to be made to exist. It can take the form of an anguished appeal, a complaint, a lamentation or a prayer of repentance. It can also take the form of daring protest, of violence against God, of accusation ? [I]n a sense, it could be said that hope is blasphemous. It actually rejects the decision of God?s silence ... It appeals to God against God. It demands an accounting of God, who is not acting the way he said and had shown that he acts.?

The hope spoken of so often in our culture and by the poets seems empty of substance. Emily Dickinson called hope ?the thing with feathers,? and Shakespeare wrote that ?The miserable have no other medicine,/But only hope.?

That does not describe Christian hope, which is, rather, active, virile. It stands up in the midst of chaos and calls forth order -- or at least invokes the one who first turned chaos into form. It sees beyond what can be seen and

imagines the future that God promised. Then it demands of God such a future, even if it means we must work with God to create it.

This kind of hope insists that we pay attention to where God already is active in the world, that we not miss God?s healing presence because either we?re too depressed by conditions of the world or we attribute to Caesar the work that is God?s.

So our resolution for this new year should be that we learn again how to hope.

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Links:
[1] http://www.ellul.org/bio_e1.html
[2] http://www.amazon.com/Hope-Time-Abandonment-Jacques-Ellul/dp/0816421382/ref=sr_1_23?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1291153573&sr=1-23
[3] http://www.cnn.com/SPECIALS/cnn.heroes/index.html
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