

First Meeting: Relative to the 1<sup>st</sup> Sunday of Advent.

## ***STAND READY!***

### ***The spirituality of the sects***

**Preparation:** A Bible, press cutting about catastrophes, other cuttings about Christians involved in work for a better, world.

Those conducting the meeting arrive first ahead of the others to set everything up and warmly welcome the members of the group. (If considered appropriate, supply name tags). Particular attention should be paid to those coming for the first time.

**Welcome:** Today is our first meeting focused on St Luke's Gospel. The study of the Word of God will compel us to commit ourselves for greater justice. We will therefore need to feel we are supporting one another, as in a good family. Let us take a few moments to get to know one another and extend a welcome by a handshake or friendly hug.

The Word of God is our reason for meeting here. It seeks to be strength and light for our path. Let us sing with gusto - (hymn on the theme of Christian commitment).

**Opening Prayer:** Preferably, it should be composed by one of the leaders and be in the line of the campaign for justice.<sup>1</sup>

- 1- Life as such:** at the start of the meeting, we placed some newspaper cutting relating catastrophes and disasters. These cutting are placed around a copy of the Bible (within which there are cuttings about Christians committed for a better world discreetly inserted). Questions:
- *What effect does seeing this Bible surrounded by bad news have on you?*
  - *Are you challenged by these indicators?*
  - *Have you already heard someone preaching about the end of the world?*

After a few minutes discussion, we ask for some silence and attention: the Bible is solemnly opened and some 'good news' emerges from it. Questions:

- *What did you feel when messages of hope came from the Bible?*
- *Do you know people who do something similar? Share a little with us about it.*

**2- Listen to the Word of God.** A hymn is begun telling us of the Word of God as strength. **Gospel Reading: Lk 21: 25-36.** It will be read twice, leaving a time of silence between the two readings. Questions:

- *What are the signs of the imminent coming of Jesus? Is there a comparison to be made with our times?*
- *Does this reading help us to prepare for Christmas?*
- *The reading seems to refer to the end of the world. Is it the only subject tackled by Jesus?*

When everyone has had a chance to speak, (max. 30 minutes), repeat the **Sung Acclamation of the Word of God.**

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<sup>1</sup> The prayer in the section 'Moving Ahead' is only a suggestion... if inspiration were lacking!

**2- Message for today:** we have all met sects that speak of the end of the world. Often they tell us that we need to prepare to meet God at the Last Judgement. However, no sect or false preacher speaks, as a means of preparation for the Last Judgement about feeding the poor, visiting the sick without families, doing something for outsiders, prisoners, etc., in spite of Jesus teaching: (Mt 25: 41-46. – read appendix ‘Two concepts of salvation’). The only thing the sects never forget is to make an appeal to the wallets of the faithful!

- *Jesus speaks of debauchery, drunkenness and the cares of life. What could weigh our hearts down today?*
- *Faced with a social, ecological, emotional, intercultural, problem (etc.), we could cry out in distress or try to resolve it. From our current situations, let us share our experiences of both attitudes.*
- *Jesus speaks ‘of staying awake and praying without ceasing’: is this realistic? What can prayer change in us?*

**3- Pray with the strength that comes from God.** Let us pray **Psalm 25** in two choirs:

**A-** To you, Yahweh, I lift up my soul,  
O my God, make your ways known to me, teach me your paths

**B-** Set me in the way of your truth and teach me, for you are the God who saves me.  
All day long I hope in you because of your goodness, Yahweh. Yahweh is so good, so upright; he teaches the way to sinners;

**A-** Yahweh is so good, so upright, he teaches the way to sinners;

**B-** Everyone who fears Yahweh will be taught the course a man should choose;

**A-** My eyes are always on Yahweh, for he releases my feet from the net.  
Turn to me, take pity on me, alone and wretched as I am!

**B-** See how my enemies multiply, and how violent their hatred has grown.  
Relieve the distress of my heart, free me from my sufferings.  
Let innocence and integrity be my protection, since my hope is in you, Yahweh.

### **5- Putting the Word of God into practice.**

Not asking disturbing questions, not changing our habits, not becoming involved makes of our faith a balm for our conscience (*religion is the opium of the people*, said the enemies of our faith) Advent is a time of active preparation for the coming of Jesus, Judge of the living and the dead:

- *What are we going to do practically to ‘stand ready’?*
- *What changes should we introduce into our way of praying – (choir, homilies, bidding prayers, catechesis?)*

Try to be as detailed as possible avoiding generalities and escaping from constructive involvement. The meeting should not conclude without making clear decisions, however humble, to put our faith into action.

Don't forget to prepare the next meeting: place, date, leaders...

**Final Hymn:** (chosen by the leaders in the line of the theme of this meeting).

## MOVING AHEAD

### Some more ideas ....

- a- Ask your Church leaders for documents on the 'social doctrine' in application there.
- b- Organise a discussion on the harmful consequences of sects.
- c- Search the Internet for examples of Christians commented for greater justice.
- d- Think about the idea: 'If everyone thought like me, the world would be...'

### PRAYER OF POPE PAUL VI (1897-1978) FOR PEACE

Lord, God of Peace,  
You who created us as the object of your kindness to be intimately acquainted with your glory, we bless you and we give you thanks; for you have sent us Jesus,

Your only beloved Son; you made him in the mystery of his Passover the architect of all salvation, the source of all peace, the bond of all fraternity.

We give you thanks for the desires, efforts, and achievements that your spirit of peace has given rise to in our times; replacing hatred with love, mistrust with understanding and indifference with solidarity.

Open our minds and hearts more to the practical demands of love for all our brothers so that we may be always greater architects of peace.

Remember, Father of mercies, all those who toil, suffer and die in the creation of a more fraternal world.

May your Kingdom of justice, peace and love come for people of every race and tongue and may the earth be filled with your glory!

Amen.

## Two conceptions of salvation<sup>2</sup>

The plan that God has with creation has been conceived in different ways. The two best known are the following. The first one sees salvation foremost as a rescue operation from this sinful and evil world whereby the good ones are selected and taken into the New Heaven and the New Earth. This view corresponds well with the one which sees the Kingdom as a totally transcendent reality, something not related to this world.... The second one sees God's plan of salvation more holistically as including all of creation. It means a transformation of all reality rather than a selective process.

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<sup>2</sup> Adapted from 'Manual for promoters of Justice, Peace & Integrity Creation', Rome 1997, pp. 71-72

### **Individualistic view of salvation**

The plan of God for creation is here primarily conceived as totally otherworldly and transcendent with no connection to this present world and its social dimensions. We could describe such a view in this way: God created human beings with the intention to lead them here on earth to their final destiny which we usually call heaven. The individual human being, however, must prove himself or herself worthy of such a calling. For this reason he or she is put into this world which is sin permeated, corrupt and therefore, dangerous. This world resembles a huge testing ground created to provide for human beings the perfect occasion where he or she can gain or lose his or her eternal salvation. If the person stands the test, God will reward him or her with eternal life. In terms of Gnostic and mystery religions, the gods are busy trying to populate Olympus with a few selected souls who have been rescued from the tumultuous sea of matter and human history. The individual is regarded as a self-contained unit, a Robinson Crusoe to whom God's call is addressed as to someone on an island, whose salvation takes place exclusively in terms of a relationship with God. What is overlooked is the fact that no individual exists in isolation. It is not possible to speak of salvation without reference to the world of which one is part.

Such a picture is, of course, accompanied by a corresponding spirituality concerned only with the salvation of one's own soul. In such a view, salvation is easily conceived of as being totally individual and deprived of any connection to one's fellow human beings, to this world and its destiny. History with its constant flow of people and cultures has no meaning. Human achievements on this earth have no connection with the world to come. They will all disappear with the arrival of the New Heaven and New Earth. Not a trace of them will be found in the new creation. This world does not matter at all. It is totally unimportant whether one is rich or poor, sick or healthy, of high esteem or low caste. The only thing that counts is that I will stand the test and get to heaven, no matter what else I or we accomplish here on earth. But is such a conception of God's plan correct?

### **Universal view of salvation**

Looking at the Signs of the Times we will find in Scripture, images of the 'world to come' which allow a different interpretation. Here the plan of God with the world is perceived not in terms of a total destruction of creation but in terms of transformation or 'trans-creation'.

The "New Heaven and New Earth" are understood as being this world transformed, renewed, cleansed and made new. It is this old, sin permeated, corrupt world, a world in which there is so much hatred, egoism, oppression, despair and suffering, that will be the object of transformation. It will become something totally new. Our world is the arena where God's ultimate plan for creation unfolds. The 'Kingdom of God' happens here, in the midst of human affairs. It is meant for this world here and now. It has happened already in our presence although the fulfillment is still to come.

If we accept this view of God's plan for creation, our whole understanding of salvation will change. Being saved does not mean being taken out of this world and being transferred to another place. Being saved means remaining a part of the whole of creation that has been transformed into the "New Heaven and the New Earth". I will be saved because creation as a whole will be saved. My salvation is imbedded in the salvation of all human beings. Because my brothers and sisters will be saved, I will be saved since I am one with them. Strictly speaking, we cannot talk about individual salvation since we are tied with a thousand strings to each other and to creation as a whole.

