The message of the New Testament

What does one do when one is no longer solvent? When one cannot now and cannot foresee the possibility of ever starting to, managing to, being able to pay back one’s debt? Well, then the only thing one can hope for is debt cancellation.

And it is here that the crucial aspect of the Christian message lies. Not that we are born, live and die with obligations to others – that is something that people actually believe all over the world – although Jesus makes the responsibility more onerous and more drastic than one otherwise sees. The crucial thing lies in the fact that He particularly emphasises one aspect of God that appears in The Old Testament, but which plays a far greater role in Jesus’ ministry and thereby in The New Testament.

A god who does not insist on an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.

One can perhaps say that he speaks of God as He really is. We hear a number of stories about ‘God’s kingdom’, i.e. how God acts and reacts towards us, where repeatedly the point is that neither Jesus himself nor his father have come to reward those who have done their duty, but to those who have not. He has not come to the righteous but to sinners (Mark II, v. 27), not to the healthy but to the sick.

The stories fetch their motifs from the everyday world at the time of Jesus, and most of them have to do with economic matters and labour market relations. At the same time, however, they are comparable with God’s kingdom, and are therefore known as ‘parables’. He tells of the lost drachma, and the one lost sheep that the owner does everything he can to find, and of the lost, prodigal son the father is overjoyed to get back, even though the son has done nothing at all to deserve it (Luke XV). He tells of the debtor whose master cancels his debt (Matthew XVIII). Of the sower who sows (Mark, IV); of the Samaritan businessman who breaks off his journey to help a man who has been attacked (Luke X). Of the wedding of the king’s son, where those invited decline to attend and people from the street have to be invited so there can be a proper celebration (Matthew XXII). Of successful and unsuccessful investment policy in the parable of the talents (Matthew XXV), and of how a land steward may have to be dishonest and untrustworthy (Luke XVI). The strangest of Jesus’s parables is perhaps the one about the workers in the vineyard (Matthew XX). Here the big surprise is that all the workers are paid the same, no matter how long they have been working. Twelve hours or just one – the result is the same. There is no correspondence between work effort and payment, which means that the very concept of a ‘wage’ ceases to exist. For God it is less important what one has done or not done – it does not change our relation to Him. And that
of course means that He overlooks or ignores what we have not done. The good we have done does not put Him in a milder mood, and the evil we have done does not cut Him off from us, or make Him angry towards us.

This does not mean that we are to sit with our hands in our laps. On the contrary, we are to pass on what we have received from God. The most famous parable about this is that of the Good Samaritan (Luke, X, v. 25 ff), which to this day profoundly influences our culture with its demand that we should help those lying in the ditch. Our health service and social service owe a great deal to the Samaritan for their existence.

Jesus tells stories, and stories are told about Him. The story is therefore a fundamental form of expression as regards the message of the gospels. And then he exploits to the utmost the genre which He shares with Judaism, and which one could call the story as argument. Namely, in the form of the many stories, parables and allegories He makes use of to proclaim his message. It is not only to entertain his listeners but to get them over onto His side.

This does not mean that other forms of expression are not made use of. Jesus lists commandments (as in the Sermon on the Mount), He discusses with the Pharisees, He heals and performs miracles, but all of these things have the story as basis and framework.

All four evangelists give their version of the story of Jesus, from beginning to end, from when he is born in stable to when he dies on the cross. In a way, he is the main character, but through his ministry he makes his father the absolutely main character, as He also is in The Old Testament.

Another important way in which the evangelists tell us about God’s love is not in Jesus’s own words but in the story of his life and fate. Jesus is accused by the Jews of blasphemy and suffered death at Easter, but rose again on the third day. Jesus atoned for our guilt, our offences. It is a piece of poetical history, or historical poetry. The underlying idea is, to put it briefly, that God has been offended and outraged to such an extent because of human disobedience that He must be compensated for pain and suffering incurred. This is a different way of depicting God Almighty – as someone to whom we are in great debt. Forgiveness from God only ultimately makes sense if we owe Him for all the offences we have committed against Him.

How could it actually have been any different? He is the creator of heaven and earth, which means that He is the one we are up against, no matter which way we turn. If we get into debt with our fellow human beings, debts we cannot pay, He is the one who takes over the security and makes sure that the debt is honoured: either by holding us back until we have paid the very last penny, or, as we have seen, by covering us via a debt settlement.

The prerequisite for this is that He himself has been indemnified. This is a strange way of thinking, for why should the loving, almighty God insist on compensation from others for what we have done? But that is actually what He does when He says that if we cannot pay, then someone else will have to. No one else that His own son, Jesus Christ, is capable of doing this, and that is why compensation is demanded of him. Via a couple of thousand years of the gospels we have perhaps got used to the idea that the good Lord is so loving and so indulgent that he overlooks every kind of
transgression. He does so too, but that is because in reality our debt has been paid elsewhere. The Lord God has got what belongs to Him, and in a way He is not owed anything else.

The evangelists tell the saddest and most uplifting story in the history of the world, one of a lonely and abandoned person who though innocent went to his death so that others could go free. And a story of God accepting the atonement/payment and allowing us to be let off.

**Forgiveness**

God’s indulgence can be expressed in many ways. One of these is in the form of ‘forgiveness’, i.e. something is given for what one lacks (hence the word forgiveness). Other terms for this are ‘grace’ and ‘mercy’, which are used to translate the Latin word *gratia*, favour, that one receives something as a gift without paying for it. Hence the Danish word *gratis*, free of charge.

Another way of expressing the same thing is to say that God is indifferent. He overlooks us and perhaps is even unknowing. This is present in the old Danish word for mercy, *miskundhed*, which roughly signifies loving-kindness, although etymologically it means a lack of knowledge. It is almost like the old saying that what the eye doesn’t see the heart doesn’t grieve for. As mentioned earlier, there is a form of kinship between theology and poetry: If one is to express the Christian message, one has to find various images and comparisons. On the one hand, one must not take all images literally: Even though God is full of loving-kindness or unknowingness, that does not mean that He does not know what is going on. Perhaps one could say that He does not want to know about it.

One can also look at it differently. If one says that one has to do something definite, behave in a particular way or live up to a certain norm in order to gain God’s love, one is actually casting doubt on His love. Martin Luther uses a fine image: If a man and a woman love each other, they expect nothing but good of the other, but if they are not convinced of each other’s love, they will desperately do all sorts of things to deserve the other person’s love. In a good love relationship, one does not have to deserve the other person’s goodwill all the time. If one attempts to do this even so, it is often a sign that there is something wrong and that one does not completely trust the other person. Hans Christian Andersen has told a tale called ‘What hubby does is always right’: A man sets out for the town to sell the horse, but exchanges it for a cow, which he exchanges for a goat, etc. – and finally he is left with a bag of rotten apples. His wife is delighted with this, for she was just about to use some chives for a country omelette, and she could exchange the apples for some chives from her neighbour. The story is amusing, and the woman is crazy – and she is so happy with her husband all the time, hence the title. God is happy with humanity in that way.

What one attempts to say with these images is that God’s love is not determined by our deeds. For that reason, one can never completely get things completely wrong or extort any goodwill from Him by buying his love. One already has it.