



Father, today may our hearts really sing of Christmas!

May we respond to this wonderful gift with a leap of acknowledgement and of faith.

Lord, may we be humble faced with your humility, obedient faced with your obedience, loving faced with your love, that we may enter into your joy.

Jesus, the manger where you were born was not behind closed doors. You wanted the whole world to be able to come and see you, because you came for the whole world.

Jesus, before you were born, Mary and Joseph found only closed doors, houses closed to the secret of God. They found open a stable, a poor stable.

Jesus, today you are no longer born in a stable: but you want to be born, you want to tell the secret of God, in all homes and in all hearts. Amen

Chant : 31-28 Toi qui est lumière

JEAN GIONO

The Man Who Planted Trees

About forty years ago I went on a long hike, through hills absolutely unknown to tourists, in that very old region where the Alps penetrate into Provence.

At the time I undertook my long walk through this deserted region, it consisted of barren and monotonous lands, at about 1200 to 1300 meters above sea level. Nothing grew there except wild lavender.

I was crossing this country at its widest part, and after walking for three days, I found myself in the most complete desolation. I was camped next to the skeleton of an abandoned village. I had used the last of my water the day before and I needed to find more. Even though they were in ruins, these houses all huddled together and looking like an old wasps' nest, made me think that there must at one time have been a spring or a well there. There was indeed a spring, but it was dry. The five or six roofless houses, ravaged by sun and wind, and the small chapel with its tumble-down belfry, were arrayed like the houses and chapels of living villages, but all life had disappeared.

I had to move my camp. After five hours of walking, I still hadn't found water, and nothing gave me hope of finding any. Everywhere there was the same dryness, the same stiff, woody plants. I thought I saw in the distance a small black silhouette. On a chance I headed towards it. It was a shepherd. Thirty lambs or so were resting near him on the scorching ground.

He gave me a drink from his gourd and a little later he led me to his shepherd's cottage, tucked down in an undulation of the plateau. He drew his water - excellent - from a natural hole, very deep, above which he had installed a rudimentary windlass.

This man spoke little. This is common among those who live alone, but he seemed sure of himself, and confident in this assurance, which seemed remarkable in this land shorn of everything. He lived not in a cabin but in a real house of stone, from the looks of which it was clear that his own labour had restored the ruins he had found on his arrival.

The shepherd, who did not smoke, took out a bag and poured a pile of acorns out onto the table. He began to examine them one after another with a great deal of attention, separating the good ones from the bad. I smoked my pipe. I offered to help him, but he told me it was his own business. Indeed, seeing the care that he devoted to this job, I did not insist. This was our whole conversation. When he had a fair number of acorns in a good pile, he counted them out into packets of ten. In doing this he eliminated some more of the acorns, discarding the smaller ones and those that showed even the slightest crack, for he examined them very closely. When he had before him one hundred perfect acorns he stopped, and we went to bed.

Chant : 32:30 Voici Noël

The company of this man brought me a feeling of peace. I asked him the next morning if I might stay and rest the whole day with him. He found that perfectly natural. Or more exactly, he gave me the impression that nothing could disturb him. This rest was not absolutely necessary to me, but I was intrigued and I wanted to find out more about this man. He let out his flock and took them to the pasture. Before leaving, he soaked in a bucket of water the little sack containing the acorns that he had so carefully chosen and counted.

I noted that he carried as a sort of walking stick an iron rod as thick as his thumb and about one and a half metres long. I set off like someone out for a stroll, following a route parallel to his. His sheep pasture lay at the bottom of a small valley. He left his flock in the charge of his dog and climbed up towards the spot where I was standing. I was afraid that he was coming to reproach me for my nosiness, but not at all: it was his own route and he invited me to come along with him if I had nothing better to do. He continued on another two hundred metres up the hill.

Having arrived at the place he had been heading for, he began to pound his iron rod into the ground. This made a hole in which he placed an acorn, whereupon he covered over the hole again. He was planting oak trees. I asked him if the land belonged to him. He answered no. Did he know whose land it was? He did not know. He supposed that it was communal land, or perhaps it belonged to someone who did not care about it. He himself did not care to know who the owners were. In this way he planted his one hundred acorns with great care.

After the midday meal, he began once more to pick over his acorns. I must have put some insistence into my questions, because he answered them. For three years now he had been planting trees in this solitary way. He had planted one hundred

thousand. Of these one hundred thousand, twenty thousand had come up. He counted on losing another half of them to rodents and to everything else that is unpredictable in the design of Providence. That left ten thousand oaks that would grow in this place where before there was nothing.

He had also begun to study the propagation of beeches. and he had near his house, a nursery filled with seedlings grown from beechnuts. The seedlings, which he had protected from his sheep by a screen fence, were growing beautifully. He was also considering birches for the valley bottoms where, he told me, moisture lay slumbering just a few meters beneath the surface of the soil.

We parted the next day.

The next year the war of 1914 came, in which I was engaged for five years. An infantryman could hardly think about trees. To tell the truth, the whole business hadn't made a very deep impression on me; I took it to be a hobby, like a stamp collection, and forgot about it.

Chant : 32-27 Les anges dans nos campagnes

With the war behind me, I found myself with a small demobilization bonus and a great desire to breathe a little pure air. Without any preconceived notion beyond that, I struck out again along the trail through that deserted country.

The land had not changed. Nonetheless, beyond that dead village I perceived in the distance a sort of grey fog that covered the hills like a carpet. Ever since the day before I had been thinking about the shepherd who planted trees. « Ten thousand oaks, I had said to myself, must really take up a lot of space. »

I had seen too many people die during those five years not to be able to imagine easily the death of Elzéard Bouffier, especially since when a man is twenty, he thinks of a man of fifty as an old codger for whom nothing remains but to die. He was not dead. In fact, he was very spry. He had changed his job. He only had four sheep now, but to make up for this he had about a hundred beehives. He had got rid of the sheep because they threatened his crop of trees. He told me (as indeed I could see for myself) that the war had not disturbed him at all. He had continued imperturbably with his planting.

The oaks of 1910 were now ten years old and were taller than me and taller than him. The sight was impressive. I was literally speechless and, as he didn't speak himself, we passed the whole day in silence, walking through his forest. It was in three sections, eleven kilometres long overall and, at its widest point, three kilometres wide. When I considered that this had all sprung from the hands and from the soul of this one man - without technical aids -, it struck me that men could be as effective as

God in areas other than destruction.

This creation had the air, moreover, of working by a chain reaction. He had not troubled about it; he went on obstinately with his simple task. But, in going back down to the village, I saw water running in streams that, within living memory, had always been dry. It was the most striking revival that he had shown me. These streams had born water before, in ancient days.

But the transformation had taken place so slowly that it had been taken for granted, without provoking surprise. The hunters who climbed the hills in search of hares or wild boars had noticed the spreading of the little trees, but they set it down to the natural spitefulness of the earth. That is why no one had touched the work of this man. If they had suspected him, they would have tried to thwart him. But he never came under suspicion: who among the villagers or the administrators would ever have suspected that anyone could show such obstinacy in carrying out this magnificent act of generosity?

Chant : Là-bas dans l'étable

Beginning in 1920 I never let more than a year go by without paying a visit to Elzéard Bouffier. I never saw him waver or doubt, though God alone can tell when God's own hand is in something! I have said nothing of his disappointments, but you can easily imagine that, for such an accomplishment, he had to conquer adversity; that, to assure the victory of such a passion, he had to fight against despair. One year he had planted ten thousand maples. They all died. The next year he gave up on maples and went back to beeches, which did even better than the oaks.

In 1933 he received a visit from an amazed forest ranger. This man ordered him to cease building fires outdoors, for fear of endangering this natural forest. It was the first time, this naive man told him, that a forest had been observed to grow up entirely on its own. At the time of this incident, he was thinking of planting beeches at a spot twelve kilometres from his house.

I remembered the look of the place in 1913: a desert... The peaceful and steady labour, the vibrant highland air, his frugality, and above all, the serenity of his soul had given the old man a kind of solemn good health. He was an athlete of God. I asked myself how many hectares he had yet to cover with trees.

I saw Elzéard Bouffier for the last time in June of 1945. He was then eighty-seven years old. I had once more set off along my trail through the wilderness, only to find



that now, in spite of the shambles in which the war had left the whole country, there was a motor coach running between the valley of the Durance and the mountain. I put down to this relatively quick means of transportation the fact that I no longer recognized the landmarks I knew from my earlier visits. It also seemed that the route was taking me through entirely new places. I had to ask the name of a village to be sure that I was indeed passing through that same region, once so ruined and desolate. The coach set me down at Vergons. In 1913, this hamlet of ten or twelve houses had had three inhabitants. They were savages, hating each other, and earning their living by trapping: physically and morally, they resembled prehistoric men. The nettles devoured the abandoned houses that surrounded them. Their lives were without hope, it was only a matter of waiting for death to come: a situation that hardly predisposes one to virtue.

All that had changed, even to the air itself. In place of the dry, brutal gusts that had greeted me long ago, a gentle breeze whispered to me, bearing sweet odours. A sound like that of running water came from the heights above: it was the sound of the wind in the trees. And most astonishing of all, I heard the sound of real water running into a pool. I saw that they had built a fountain, that it was full of water, and what touched me most, that next to it they had planted a lime-tree that must have been at least four years old, already grown thick, an irrefutable symbol of resurrection.

It has taken only the eight years that now separate us from that time for the whole country around there to blossom into splendour and ease. On the site of the ruins I had seen in 1913 there are now well-kept farms, the sign of a happy and comfortable life. The old springs, fed by rain and snow now that are now retained by the forests, have once again begun to flow. The brooks have been channelled. Beside each farm, amid groves of maples, the pools of fountains are bordered by carpets of fresh mint. Little by little, the villages have been rebuilt. Young people have come from the plains, where land is expensive, bringing with them youth, movement, and a spirit of adventure. Walking along the roads you will meet men and women in full health, boys and girls who know how to laugh, and who have regained the taste for the traditional rustic festivals. Counting both the previous inhabitants of the area, now unrecognizable due to living in plenty, and the new arrivals, more than ten thousand persons owe their happiness to Elzéard Bouffier.

When I consider that a single man, relying only on his own simple physical and moral resources, was able to transform a desert into this land of Canaan, I am convinced that despite everything, the human condition is truly admirable. When I take into account the constancy, the greatness of soul, and the selfless dedication that was needed to bring about this transformation, I am filled with an immense respect for this old, uncultured peasant who knew how to bring about a work worthy of God.



Elzéard Bouffier died peacefully in 1947 at the hospice in Banon.

Chant : 31-01 Oh ! viens bientôt, Emmanuel !

Reflection

Of course, this is not a Christmas story, nor even a Christian story. There are no wise men, no manger, no Christmas tree, no Christmas dinner...

And yet, this story illustrates the profound significance of Christmas, the incarnation.

It shows us that people can do good and beautiful things, as God expects of them.

It is the heart of the Gospel message: when God comes to meet us, it is to entrust to us his creation, to show us what we can do for ourselves and for others, what we can do for this life, what we can do for this world that he has created for us.

By being born amongst us, God teaches us that he is present in the heart of the world, and this changes the 'old' visions of the Divine, of the gods who live outside the world, who act from 'above', from their home in Olympus. With Jesus, we discover God who is present in us, in each one of us; God who is in our lives and in our world. And Jesus gives us responsibility for this world. It is for us to battle for peace by making peace with others. It is for us to shout out for love by first of all learning to forgive. It is for us to look after the earth, to continue creation. And it is for these reasons that this tale from Jean Giono illustrates so well a sense of incarnation: we can do enormous good. We have been given enormous potential. A person can plant the deserts; a person can abolish racism; a person can transform a society.

Just born, and Jesus was already transforming ways of thinking; he was already bringing great joy to the shepherds and the wise men. It is for us therefore to make the world bloom: to sow seeds like Elzéard Bouffier, to sow tolerance like Martin Luther King, to sow



trust in God like so many prophets and witnesses...
For if God became flesh in humankind, it is so that humankind can accomplish the work of God.

Chant : 32-29 Il est né le divin enfant

OFFERING

Yesterday on the roads of Galilee, today on the roads of our lives.
You sow always in profusion, always moving, never tiring, for you have to count the birds, the bushes, and the scattered stones.
You who, in spite of vain sowing and apparent failures, have tirelessly continued your mission.
You, the grain of wheat which dies, buried in death, you say again to each one of us whom you send to gather your harvest:
Go to all people, risk my Word every morning, every evening, every day of your lives,
In the promises of birth, in the questioning of adolescence, in the commitments, the choices, the failures and the doubts of maturity, in the ultimate passing at the end of the road where eternity opens, sow my Word to all the winds, never tiring.
Sow in celebrations, in grief and in revolutions, sow in social movements and in disputes, sow in public places and on street corners.
sow in places devastated by war, hate, or misery;
sow in fields ploughed with trials, suffering, and prayer;
sow in children and pure hearts.
Sow in each generation and each culture,
sow in countries trampled by enslaved peoples,
sow in lands approaching the evening of life.
And remember that all you have patiently sown, at times with tears and pain, will be harvested by others,
you will not see with your own eyes the fertility of your labour,
for it will never be yours alone,



but that of my Father who is in heaven.

Blessing :

May the tenderness of God live in our hearts and spirits,
and may the peace of Christ shine all the days of our lives,
until his Kingdom come. Amen

Chant 32-22 O peuple fidèle