

December 11, 1983

Last summer, at the sessions of New York Yearly Meeting, the Bible study group concentrated upon the Psalms. Our resource person grouped the Psalms according to type: Psalms of praise, Psalms of lamentation, Psalms of faith, Psalms of thanksgiving. One of the odd little facts that stuck in my mind as a result of this study group is that there are 150 Psalms—a nice round, even number.

A few weeks later, after a meeting of the small group of Friends who care for the good order of this early morning worship service, when it had been decided that it would be useful to have a copy of the Scriptures handy, I thought I would render a small service by picking the book up. I went over to Barnes and Noble's fully intending to obtain a copy of the New English Bible. The translation we wanted had not been specified, so I concluded that this would be the most broadly acceptable version.

When I got to Barnes and Noble's and found my way to the religious literature section, I saw that on the shelf next to the New English Bibles there appeared another version with a somewhat jazzy wrapper announcing that there was contained therein, for the first time, the 151st Psalm! This startled me, for the "come-on" advertisement was not the sort of thing I associated either with the Scriptures or with the edition's publisher, the staid Oxford University Press. Yet I found myself overcome with curiosity. My hand wavered, and I picked up, instead of the New English Bible, the Revised Standard Version you see here which includes the newly revealed 151st Psalm.

I do not know what I expected from the 151st Psalm—perhaps something explicitly addressed to our modern condition, with references to space travel, nuclear weapons, and mass electronic communications. Needless to say, I hurried back to Rutherford Place and tore open the package. But the truth is I cannot remember what the 151st Psalm said, not even after all that anticipation! Perhaps this is a reflection on my powers of retention; perhaps it is a reflection on the good judgement of the Church elders who omitted it from the Canon in the first place.

We often speak of being seekers, and of expecting a continuing revelation. But what is it we are hoping will be revealed? Is it something completely new, or something old?

It is interesting to reflect that the early Friends, who lived in a time much like our own—an apocalyptic time, a time of violence, a time of the dissolution of social structures, of the debasement of religion—did not conceive of themselves as inventing a new religion to meet these extraordinary and unprecedented circumstances, but rather thought of themselves as rediscovering primitive Christianity. It was their idea that they were trying to live as Christ and his apostles lived.

One is also reminded of the wonderful paintings of Rembrandt, where the parables of the Gospel are presented in what was for the artist "modern dress." That is, stories such as the Good Samaritan, or Christ preaching in the Temple, are shown as taking place among people wearing the clothes of Rembrandt's Dutch contemporaries. The outer garments are new; the inner meaning of the stories eternally the same—recurring themes in human destiny.

We often think of Quakerism as an up-to-date religion, free of the hidebound, very "au courant." Be we should reflect about our purpose in being seekers after continuing revelation. Are we engaged in a restless search for the new, exciting, and different; or are we seeking to cultivate a centered openness to the authentic?

The other day I was reading some passages from Saint Bernard of Clairvaux, and I found in his simple words the purity of the air, the freshness of rain, the firmness and truth of the good earth, and the brightness and dignity of gold. Surely, if we are open to the spirit of our forebears we will be filled with a message for our own time.