

---

***Rutger MEIJER (NL)***

**11/07/2007**

*Translation: John CLARK*

## **RESPONSIBILITY and HELPLESSNESS**

The word, responsibility, has many different meanings. I would like to share my thoughts with you about the two, responsibility and helplessness.

We would like to think about responsibility as it leads to the blossoming of the person. We shall also take into account the responsibility for the development of our neighbour as a complete person. We rely heavily on our neighbour for our well-being and development. In the same way the neighbour depends on us for full development as a person. The word, responsibility, presupposes that one reflects on the outcome of one's acts and also that one has a goal in mind; that we are in fact reasonable. If it is agreed that we are on course to damage our long term interests, it is thanks to a sense of responsibility that we can correct the outcome. The word, responsibility, thus understood, prevents us from thinking only in the short term.

But responsibility is a more weighty matter. I am thinking of our responsibility before God. According to Bonhoeffer, God takes care of his creation by means of our responsibility. Here, we have a link between responsibility and God. The question of responsibility is immediately transformed into a matter of faith; how must I live?

The fact that the Kingdom of God has drawn near is an important theme in the Christian faith. If God engages us to continue his work, to continue the creation and to bring the Kingdom to light, the responsibility places us on God's path. God has given us the liberty to assume the responsibility and to model our lives according to our choice. Responsibility means, in a word, a concern with free individuals who stand in relationship to God, who are, really people. The subject of the conference fits well into the Medicine of the Person where discussion turns on the birth and the development of the person. The question of responsibility, in a Christian context, sets us on a path with our neighbour, a path that travels into the future embracing generations to come.

I have chosen the word, helplessness as part of the title because evil does not disappear as one behaves responsibly. I believe, as an example, that the heresy of plagiarism, the idea that people are basically good, is the most widespread mistake in so called progressive thought since the Romantic Movement. Helplessness is fully sufficient to lead to the ruin of the target that we set before us. Helplessness convinces us that evil is inescapable. We are often compelled to choose between two evils. I offer you some examples that Netty has experienced in her practice. They bring our discussion into dally experience.

### **Example 1**

Everyone is obviously responsible for personal health. In present circumstances, health is often threatened by obesity, a situation that springs from good meals with plenty of wine. Would that we were more frugal. We are not merely bodies. Friendships and good relations are as necessary as food. What choice is to be made when friendship blossoms, at its best, over a good meal? The question is trivial and an altercation between days of abundance and fasting is the appropriate response. But a curious fact remains, the gap between the needs of body and spirit and the problems that one finds in alternating fasting and opulence.

### **Example 2**

Netty has to forbid a male patient to smoke in order not to make his ill health worse. The man agrees and then discovers that he has been deprived of all joy in his life and becomes depressed. Depression encourages him to put an end to life. He plans to hang himself. As he walks to his release, with the cord under his arm, he remembers that his wife loves him and that she would regret his death bitterly. He withdraws from his plan, but henceforth the cigarette comes back. His wife's love and his gratitude are responsible for his rescue. It is certainly better to smoke than to commit suicide. Here responsibility is based on relationship.

### **Example 3**

Netty has an alcoholic patient who, thanks to the love of his wife and sons, overcomes his dependence. A cancer of the oesophagus strikes him; even his tongue is affected and must be partially removed. He is fed through a tube and his speech becomes heavy. His relationship with his wife and his sons remains in tact right up to the decision of the surgeons to operate. They did not choose to leave him by the wayside, a choice, in the light of the seriousness of the situation that would have been completely tenable. The love of his family sustains him. Through love, they express responsibility.

### **Example 4**

A large man, really portly, comes to see Netty. All his distress and illness spring from obesity. To lose weight is vital for him. "Doctor", he says, "say anything that you like except that I must lose weight." His obesity can't be ignored if he wants to be happier and healthier. He wants to accept responsibility for his health, but not by changing his manner of life. His psychiatrist advises him to find a hobby, or a lady friend, as help for his obsession with his stomach. But today nothing has changed. The ground for the impasses is helplessness.

In the examples above, helplessness plays a part. It is avoidable. It results from the weakness that causes confusion in making decisions.

I'd like to take several examples from public health where helplessness is unavoidable, where it is an integral part of the decision.

### **Example 1**

A general practitioner's first concern is the health of patients but it must also take into account the cost to the insurance office. Quite a number of patients want to be sent to a specialist (Holland has a directly accessible level of medical care, known as the first line and other specialist services accessible only by referral, known as the second line). Their complaints are often merely moans. The easiest thing is for the doctor to agree but in doing so one takes part in an abuse of medical care. If one accepts responsibility, a quarrel with the patient ensues. So each decision has its disadvantage.

## **Example 2**

In the course of its activity, medicine develops, and makes available, methods of prevention against the diseases of childhood. The government accepts responsibility. It puts into action vaccination programmes for the newly born and for the old, to protect against measles and winter influenza. The great conflagrations, that Europe has known, are avoided. This is a godsend, made available by science. But there is a down side. Vaccination itself can cause, in extremely rare cases, fatal allergic reactions. The vaccination campaign against influenza caused the death of five patients in Holland in 2006. I estimate the number of people vaccinated at 2,500,000 and the tally of people saved by vaccination at between 1,500 and 2,000. But one cannot say, to appease one's conscience, that the five people who died from an allergic crisis, following an influenza vaccination, would have succumbed to influenza had they not had the inoculation. Statistically the group of people susceptible to the allergy, and those who are weak in health, and who would not survive winter influenza, do not coincide. In this significant case, vaccinations are widely beneficial from the point of view of those whom the statistics show to have been saved. But the more an illness is in the process of disappearing, the more that the percentage of deaths from inoculation is a difficult burden in the decision to continue the campaign. The time may arrive when it must be halted. The unpleasant conclusion is that good is done, and as an integral part of the good, harm is done to a few people. Prevention is valuable and I do not advocate letting it go; but I agree that helplessness is inevitable and compels modesty as far as our role as a benefactor is concerned.

## **Example 3**

Society is, on occasions during the year, shaken by the atrocious murder of a child by one of his parents who, after the terrible deed, hide the body. Everybody is deeply disturbed and usually blame the Social Service for failing in duty rather than place the responsibility for the act on the parents. It is often the case that parents, committing such a crime, are under the influence of drugs or are suffering from mental illness. It is also true that the deed could often have been foreseen and that, if the child had been placed in the care of the state, at the first sign of parental failure, the murder would not have happened. The truth is that few parents are appropriately deprived of the right to be a parent. The right of a parent to bring up children is a natural right only to be withdrawn with a great deal of prudence and reserve. Society has, in fact, to choose between the right of the child to live in security and the right of parents to bring up their offspring. If parents are deprived of parental rights, this may happen only in the case of a child in danger. If later, another child is born into the same family, the parents have again, at their disposal, all their parental rights. I approve of this law. One must always provide a second chance. But one does know in advance that the risk of the newborn becoming a victim of domestic violence is great. The case reveals that the right path is narrow and winding. The conclusion to be drawn is that rational laws and people of good faith are not sufficient to eliminate suffering. The fact is that responsibility alone is not sufficient to prevent violence to children. Our efforts are not capable of transforming the world into Paradise. We may endeavour to avoid hell.

## **Example 4**

If a foreigner asks to be recognized and accepted as a refugee, although he admits that he suffers from Aids, ought his illness to work in support of a favourable opinion? If he is returned to his native land his death is sure and certain. The threat of death does indeed count heavily in a decision to accept refugees. But how can one stipulate in advance that everyone in the world, of the 40 million people with a positive HIV virus, will, in principle, be accepted as a refugee? It is impossible. Apart from any other objection, the burden on public health would be too heavy. If an official, responsible for immigration, has information about the contamination of a candidate, at the time of decision, keeps quiet about Aids and gives a favourable opinion, I agree. Immediately one makes a rule about it, I am opposed to that. But that means that I approve the personal whims of an official, and I reject the same reasoning if fixed by a law. Nevertheless, I prefer a law to relying on the consequences of voluntary action. My conclusion:

responsibility is not blind to the consequences of decisions. Compassion, however, must not go beyond possibilities.

One could clearly add many examples of responsibility colliding against a rough reality. I'm going to stop here in order to think over with you the lessons to be drawn from these examples.

## **Elaboration**

In Bonhoeffer's case, the appreciation of responsibility is closely allied to his Christian faith. In a sermon on Psalm 63, delivered on October 4<sup>th</sup> 1931, entitled, "Personal clemency is worth more than life", he says that God depends on man for the progress of his creation. Personal responsibility amounts to a summons that calls one back to the path already assumed. By the grace of God we are linked into the creation. God makes his creation develop by means of our sense of responsibility. The inference is that we are invited to interpret responsibility as grace. A further implication is that responsibility is indispensable to enable the full development of the person. The view of responsibility as grace, enabling total personal development, is a concept full of meaning. According to Bonhoeffer, our responsibility is based on the forgiveness of God. This means that we have to accept responsibility as a gift, a gift that enables us to become a person. We are astonished to realise that the divine clemency does not lead, in the first case, to a quiet life but actually lays responsibility upon us. I am speaking about responsibility and helplessness. Responsibility is a burden that we are expected to accept and, as I have said, totally indispensable for the development and the flourishing of the person.

This is why I want to think about the question: What are the conditions that lead to responsibility? First, however, I ask another question: Are there external conditions that lead to responsibility or does our responsibility depend entirely on a free choice? I refer to an essay by Arnold Toynbee to answer this question. The historian, Toynbee, discusses, in his book, *Civilization on Trial*, the influence of history on the soul. In brief, he puts his finger on a society in which the soul (our desire for God) has to content itself with the civilization and legal system into which one is born. Toynbee is thinking about the Roman Empire or the Egypt of the Pharaohs. The emperor looks upon himself as divine and he alone has, at his disposal, the empire and his subjects. There is much arrogance and pride in the sanctification of manual work. We must give credit to the Romans and to the Egyptians for pride in their states although these states were not good breeding grounds for the development of the person. The soul could not escape from a life that was bound to the earth and so the person remained underdeveloped. Toynbee calls this type of state Leviathan, after the biblical monster that inhabits the waves and who lives by death. The opposite of this is a state in which religion is cut from the earth. Toynbee calls this kind of state Buddhist. We prefer to speak of a Manichean state, taken from a type of present day Christianity where belief in a heavenly soul is harmful to an earthly life. A part of contemporary Christianity can be described in this way. This applies to the section that has separated the important promise of a new earth and a new heaven from the present life here on earth. A healthy faith is one that influences life through the generations and that takes account of material needs. The penury of one's neighbour amounts to a spiritual failure. Life is a mystery that amazes us. It is not the work of Evil. A healthy faith acknowledges that the body is willed by God, or to use a creedal expression: we believe in the resurrection of the flesh.

Let me return to the question with which we began. Under what circumstances may one best assume responsibility? When, by contrast, ought one to resign oneself to helplessness? In my view, people fair better when they live in a society that ensures personal liberty. Such a society should also have a view of life that does not separate the soul from the earth. This would be a society that does not regard the spiritual as more significant than life in the body. May it be our hope to live in this kind of society and to hang on to it!

I speak under the title, responsibility and helplessness. I turn now to consider the meaning of helplessness. I recall Bonhoeffer's sermon in which he explains that God's forgiveness reaches us through our responsibility. We are led to ask what is the value of helplessness. Has it no other purpose than to allow our good intentions to fail? Are these the good intentions that spring from the will of God?

I draw attention to three causes of helplessness :

**1.** Weakness can mean that we do not accept responsibility. We ourselves are helpless.

**2.** A second cause of helplessness is when the separation between reality and the intended goal is too great. I think, for example, of the refugee with aids. In my view, many projects are ruined because the separation between reality and the ideal is too great. This, I believe, is a real trap for idealists.

**3.** In my third example, helplessness is mixed up with good intentions. I am thinking about the vaccination campaign. The death of a small number of people cannot be separated from the safety of the majority. Helplessness of this kind is a part of life. It is a source of worry. I hope that it does not disable us or lead to an attitude of resignation. I hope that the healthy side of anxiety is that it keeps us vigilant. Anxiety itself, calls to mind Bonhoeffer's sermon. Bonhoeffer speaks of anxiety as grace. Bonhoeffer is not the only person to sing the praise of anxiety. We sing a hymn in church with a similar bearing. "Is our anxiety, O God, your grace?" If Bonhoeffer denounces religion and prefers to speak of faith, perhaps this is because religion makes us feel easy, but faith causes disquiet. This is so because faith is always seeking to lead us a few steps along the path that Jesus has made clear to us. European culture owes growth and sparkle to this disquiet. It has thereby avoided for several centuries both the danger of the Leviathan and of Manichaeism. The success of the person springs from this development. The individual is firmly anchored on earth and also open to God.