

February

From a series of monthly meditational essays by Eugene Halliday

Our second month of the year was named from Februa, a Roman festival of expiation or purification, held on the fifteenth day of the month. When first introduced, February was placed at the year's end, but in 452 B.C. it was placed after January.

Purification was the process of preparing human beings, individually or in groups, before allowing them to go into contact with things or persons which without prior purification might possibly be dangerous, or lead to undesirable consequences.

Every human society or community, in order to maintain itself in existence, has to make for itself a system of rules. If an individual in an early community broke one or more of its rules in such a manner as to endanger the continuation of that community, he was considered in some way to have been infected with an evil spirit, and thus had to be required to undergo some rite of purification.

In a certain sense all refusal to take part in group activity was considered in ancient times to be dangerous. At a time when human communities were very small, it is quite probable that the breaking of community rules could have endangered the group's survival. Today, when communities are very large and may number millions, the need for obedience to the rules may appear to be less. The very large community might look as if it could survive the breaking of its rules by a number of its members.

But if the "rulebreakers" were to be allowed to continue their "lawless" activities without being made to undergo some "purificatory" rites, there might arise a situation in which the "lawless" would begin to "convert" the others to lawlessness.

Some such situation had arisen in the world before Jesus Christ appeared on the scene. Everywhere the higher law of human community was being ignored, not by lower criminal elements only, but by those whose high positions of authority in principle required them not only *not* to break the law, but also to stand and act as figures of ideal behaviour.

Typical of persons whose high positions required them to set an acceptable pattern of human community behaviour, but who failed to do so, was Herod the Great, King of Judaea at the time of Christ's birth.

With Roman support Herod had become Tetrarch of Judaea. Later he became King. Atrocities and cruelty marked his reign. Every member of the rival Hasmonean family was killed, his wife and two sons also. Alarmed by the news of the birth of a King destined to rule over all other Kings, Herod ordered the massacre of the Innocents in Bethlehem.

Other men in positions of power were not much different in their behaviour.

Everywhere bad example occupied the seats of temporal power. Everywhere despair gripped the people's hearts.

Human societies stood in serious danger of disintegration. Harmonious relations and unity of purpose were vanishing from the world. In the absence of a miracle, men everywhere were threatened with the loss of their real humanity. Mankind stood on the edge of an abyss of possible annihilation.

Human beings are not animals, any more than animals are plants, or plants stones. There is a difference between these forms of existence, a difference not only of quantity but of quality. Human beings are human because they hold in their centre a vision of an ideal possibility.

A cat does not think of itself as an incomplete cat, a cat fallen short of the ideal of "catness". So with all other animals. Animals do not think of themselves as "fallen from grace", as "pricked by conscience" for their failure to attain "ideal animality".

But human beings cannot escape their innermost ideality. Even the most defiant delinquent youth has to justify his defiance by accusing his parents or other members of society of having "messed up" the world. Even the most hardened criminal or enemy of society feels the need to justify his actions by pointing to the evidence of corruption in society's members. Humanity has inside it a conscience that it cannot escape. How was this conscience sealed into man's mind and heart?

The ancient Roman February festival of purification or expiation is evidence that even before Christ's birth men had felt the need to secure the unity of human relationships and make all men at one with each other. But the disintegration of the ancient world, the failure of temporal authority to live up to the expectations of mankind, the threatened loss even of human characteristics in men, showed that something essential was lacking.

Men had become estranged from each other, not merely because they no longer believed in each other's humanity, but also because they no longer believed in humanity's origin. They had forgotten the Fatherhood of God. And they needed more than anything else to have this Fatherhood restated for them.

If men forget their unity of origin, if they forget that they are all children of the One Great Father and Creator of the Universe, they will fall apart, their societies will disintegrate, their civilisations vanish.

But men cannot be convinced by words only. Finally only deeds can convince. There must be action, suffering, pain, anguish and sacrifice, before men finally will be convinced.

For this action, this suffering, appeared Christ. He could see the misery of mankind. He knew the disintegration men experienced, the fear that gripped their hearts.

And He knew the remedy; the re-statement of men's at-one-ment with each other and with God.

And He knew that this re-statement could not become effective by the mere utterance of words. There would have to be sacrifice, visible, physical sacrifice, a sacrifice that would utterly convince men of the reality of human solidarity, the reality of their origin in God the All-Father.

There is no more convincing way of affirming one's solidarity with a friend than by sacrificing ones' life for him.

Christ determined to shake mankind to its foundations so that all the super-structure of self-defensive egotism would collapse. In a world where, apart from a few religious communities, each man believed it necessary for him to preserve at all costs his own life, Christ laid *His* life down for His friends. And He counted all those His friends who had in them this potentiality of willing the solidarity of man with man, and all men with God.

No ordinary man could have made the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, but into a body prepared through many generations by many men and women desiring powerfully to know and to do the will of the All-Father came that Father's spirit. Jesus became Christ. On the Cross the ultimate solidarity of all mankind was demonstrated and sealed. Finally the At-one-ment of men with each other, and of mankind with the All-Father was made certain.

February, the month of Expiation, reminds us of Christ's great deed, and of the community of human souls that will finally, in His love, constitute the Kingdom of the All-Father on earth and in heaven.