

Dear Theo,

It is more than time for you to hear from me again. Thank God you are recovering. I am longing so much for Christmas – that time will be here perhaps before we know it, though it seems long now. Theo, your brother has preached for the first time, last Sunday, in God's dwelling, of which is written, "In this place, I will give peace."

Enclosed a copy of what I said. May it be the first of many.

It was a clear autumn day and a beautiful walk from here to Richmond along the Thames, in which the great chestnut trees with their load of yellow leaves and the clear blue sky were mirrored. Through the tops of the trees one could see that part of Richmond which lies on the hill: the houses with their red roofs, uncurtained windows and green gardens; and the gray spire high above them; and below, the long grey bridge with the tall poplars on either side, over which the people passed like little black figures.

When I was standing in the pulpit, I felt like somebody who, emerging from a dark cave underground, comes back to the friendly daylight. It is a delightful thought that in the future wherever I go, I shall preach the Gospel; to do that sell, one must have the Gospel in one's heart. May the Lord give it to me.

You know enough of life, Theo, to understand that a poor preacher stands rather alone in the world, but the Lord can increasingly rouse in us the consciousness and belief in "... yet I am not alone, because the Father is with me."

Ik weet aan wien ik mij vertrouwe
Al wisselen ook dag en nacht,
Ik ken de rots waarop ik bouwe,
Hij feilt niet, die mijn heil verwacht.

[I know to Whom I commit myself;
Though day and night may alternate,
I know the rock on which I build;
He Who awaits my salvation will not fail me.]

But, boy, how I am longing for Christmas and for you all; it seems to me I have grown years older in these few months.

Yesterday evening I was again at Richmond, and walked through a large grassy field surrounded by trees and houses, over which the church spire rises. The dew was lying on the grass and the twilight was falling: on one side the sky was still aglow from the setting sun, on the other, the moon was rising. Under the trees an old lady with beautiful grey hair was walking, dressed in black. In the middle of the grass plot the boys had lit a bonfire which one could see flickering from afar. I thought of the lines: "Once at the evening of my life, tired from care and strife, I'll bring Thee praise more loud and fair, for each day given to me here."

à Dieu, a handshake from

Your loving brother, Vincent

Thursday week I hope to preach on John and Theogenes in Mr. Jones's church. Your brother was indeed deeply moved when he stood at the foot of the pulpit and bowed his head and prayed: Abba, Father, in Thy name be our beginning.

Regards to Mr. and Mrs. Tersteeg and all at Roos's and to Van Iterson and to anybody you may see whom I know.

[Enclosed was Vincent's Sermon, in English, which he gave on 29 October 1876, and wrote down for Theo]

Psalm 119 : 19. 'I am a stranger on the earth, hide not Thy commandments from me.'

It is an old belief and it is a good belief, that our life is a pilgrim's progress – that we are strangers on the earth, but that though this be so, yet we are not alone for our Father is with us. We are pilgrims, our life is a long walk or journey from earth to Heaven.

The beginning of this life is this: there is only one who remembereth no more her sorrow and her anguish for joy that a man is horn into the world. She is our Mother. The end of our pilgrimage is the entering in Our Father's house, where are many mansions, where He has gone before us to prepare a place for us. The end of this life is what we call death – it is an hour in which words are spoken, things are seen and felt, that are kept in the secret chambers

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of the hearts of those who stand by, – it is so that all of us have such things in our hearts or forebodings of such things.

There is sorrow in the hour when a man is born into the world, but also joy, deep and unspeakable, thankfulness so great that it reaches the highest heavens. Yes the Angels of God, they smile, they hope and they rejoice when a man is born in the world. There is sorrow in the hour of death, but there is also joy unspeakable when it is the hour of death of one who has fought a good fight. There is one who has said: I am the resurrection and the life, if any man believe in Me though he were dead, yet shall he live. There was an apostle who heard a voice from heaven saying: Blessed are they that die in the Lord, for they rest from their labour and their works follow them.

There is joy when a man is born in the world, but there is greater joy when a spirit has passed through great tribulation, when an angel is born in Heaven.

Sorrow is better than joy – and even in mirth the heart is sad – and it is better to go to the house of mourning than to the house of feasts, for by the sadness of the countenance the heart is made better. Our nature is sorrowful, but for those who have learnt and are learning to look at Jesus Christ, there is always reason to rejoice.

It is a good word that of St. Paul: as being sorrowful yet always rejoicing. For those who believe in Jesus Christ, there is no death or sorrow that is not mixed with hope – no despair – there is only a constantly being born again, a constantly going from darkness into light. They do not mourn as those who have no hope – Christian Faith makes life to evergreen life.

We are pilgrims on the earth and strangers – we come from afar and we are going far. The journey of our life goes from the loving breast of our Mother on earth to the arms of our Father in heaven. Everything on earth changes – we have no abiding city here – it is the experience of everybody. That it is God's will that we should part with what is dearest on earth – we ourselves change in many respects, we are not what we once were, we shall not remain what we are now. From infancy we grow up to boys and girls – young men and women – and if God spares us and helps us, to husbands and wives, Fathers and Mothers in our turn, and then, slowly but surely the face that once had the early dew of morning, gets its wrinkles, the eyes that once beamed with youth and gladness speak of a sincere deep and earnest sadness, though they may keep the fire of Faith, Hope and Charity – though they may beam with God's spirit. The hair turns grey or we lose it-ah-indeed we only pass through the earth, we only pass through life, we are strangers and pilgrims on the earth. The world passes and all its glory. Let our later days be nearer to Thee, and therefore better than these.

Yet we may not live on casually hour by hour – no we have a strife to strive and a fight to fight. What is it we must do: we must love God with all our strength, with all our might, with all our soul, we must love our neighbours as ourselves. These two commandments we must keep, and if we follow after these, if we are devoted to this, we are not alone, for our Father in Heaven is with us, helps us and guides us, gives us strength day by day, hour by hour, and so we can do all things through Christ who gives us might.

We are strangers on the earth, hide not Thy commandments from us. Open Thou our eyes that we may behold wondrous things out of Thy law. Teach us to do Thy will and influence our hearts that the love of Christ may constrain us and that we may be brought to do what we must do to be saved.

On the road from earth to Heaven
Do Thou guide us with Thine eye;
We are weak but Thou art mighty,
Hold us with Thy powerful hand.

Our life, we might compare it with a journey, we go from the place where we were born to a far-off haven. Our earlier life might be compared to sailing on a river, but very soon the waves become higher, the wind more violent, we are at sea almost before we are aware of it – and the prayer from the heart ariseth to God: Protect me O God, for my bark is so small and Thy sea is so great. The heart of man is very much like the sea, it has its storms, its tides and its depths; it has its pearls too. The heart that seeks for God and for a Godly life has more storms than any other. Let us see how a Psalmist describes a storm at sea. He must have felt the storm in his heart to describe it so. We read in the 107th Psalm: They that go down to the sea in ships that do business in great waters, these see the works of the Lord and His wonders in the deep. For He commandeth and raiseth up a stormy wind, which lifteth up the waves thereof. They mount up to Heaven, they go down again to the depth, their soul melteth in them because of their trouble. Then they cry unto the Lord in their trouble, and he bringeth them out of their distresses. He bringeth them into their desired haven.

Do we not feel this sometimes on the sea of our lives? Does not every one of you feel with me the storms of life or

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their forebodings or their recollections?

And now let us read a description of another storm at sea in the New Testament, as we find it in the Vith chapter of the Gospel according to St. John in the 17th to the 21st verse. "And the disciples entered into a ship and went over the sea towards Capernaum. And the sea arose by reason of a great wind that blew. So when they had rowed about five-and-twenty or thirty furlongs, they see Jesus walking on the sea and drawing nigh unto the ship and they were afraid. Then they willingly received Him into the ship and immediately the ship was at the land whither they went." You who have experienced the great storms of life, you over whom all the waves and all the billows of the Lord have gone – have you not heard, when your heart failed for fear, the beloved well-known voice with something in its tone that reminded you of the voice that charmed your childhood – the voice of Him whose name is Saviour and Prince of Peace, saying as it were to you personally, mind to you personally: "It is I, be not afraid." Fear not. Let not your heart be troubled.

And we whose lives have been calm up till now, calm in comparison of what others have felt – let us not fear the storms of life, amidst the high waves of the sea and under the grey clouds of the sky we shall see Him approaching, for whom we have so often longed and watched, Him we need so – and we shall hear His voice: It is I, be not afraid. And if after an hour or season of anguish or distress or great difficulty or pain or sorrow we hear Him ask us: "Dost thou love me?" Then let us say: Lord Thou knowest all things, Thou knowest that I love Thee. And let us keep that heart full of the love of Christ and may from thence issue a life which the love of Christ constraineth, Lord Thou knowest all things, Thou knowest that I love Thee; when we look back on our past we feel sometimes as if we did love Thee, for whatsoever we have loved, we loved in Thy name.

Have we not often felt as a widow and an orphan – in joy and prosperity as well and even more than under grief – because of the thought of Thee. Truly our soul waiteth for Thee more than they that watch for the morning, our eyes are up unto Thee, O Thou who dwellest in Heaven. In our days too there can be such a thing as seeking the Lord. What is it we ask of God – is it a great thing? Yes, it is a great thing, peace for the ground of our heart, rest for our soul – give us that one thing and then we want not much more, then we can do without many things, then can we suffer great things for Thy name's sake. We want to know that we are Thine and that Thou art ours, we want to be Thine – to be Christians – we want a Father, a Father's love and a Father's approval. May the experience of life make our eye single and fix it on Thee. May we grow better as we go on in life. We have spoken of the storms on the journey of life

But now let us speak of the calms and joys of Christian life. And yet, my dear friends, let us rather cling to the seasons of difficulty and work and sorrow, for the calms are often treacherous. The heart has its storms, has its seasons of drooping but also its calms and even its times of exaltation. There is a time of sighing and of praying, but there is also a time of answer to prayer. Weeping may endure for a night but joy cometh in the morning.

The heart that is fainting
May grow full to overflowing
And they that behold it
Shall wonder and know not
That God at its fountains
Far off has been raining.

My peace I leave with you – we saw how there is peace even in the storm. Thanks be to God, who has given us to be born and to live in a Christian country. Has any one of us forgotten the golden hours of our early days at home, and since we left that home – for many of us have had to leave that home and to earn their living and to make their way in the world. Has He not brought us thus far, have we lacked anything, Lord we believe help Thou our unbelief. I still feel the rapture, the thrill of joy I felt when for the first time I cast a deep look in the lives of my Parents, when I felt by instinct how much they were Christians. And I still feel that feeling of eternal youth and enthusiasm wherewith I went to God, saying: "I will be a Christian too."

Are we what we dreamt we should be? No, but still the sorrows of life, the multitude of things of daily life and of daily duties, so much more numerous than we expected, the tossing to and fro in the world, they have covered it over, but it is not dead, it sleepeth. The old eternal faith and love of Christ, it may sleep in us but it is not dead and God can revive it in us. But though to be born again to eternal life, to the life of Faith, Hope and Charity, – and to an evergreen life – to the life of a Christian and a Christian workman, be a gift of God, a work of God – and of God alone, yet let us put the hand to the plough on the field of our heart, let us cast out our net once more – let us try once more. God knows the intention of the spirit. God knows us better than we know ourselves, for He made us and

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not we ourselves. He knows of what things we have need. He knows what is good for us. May He give us His blessing on the seed of His word, that He has sown in our hearts.

God helping us, we shall get through life. With every temptation he will give a way to escape.

Father we pray Thee not that Thou shouldst take us out of the world, but we pray Thee to keep us from evil. Give us neither poverty nor riches, feed us with bread convenient for us. And let Thy songs be our delight in the houses of our pilgrimage. God of our Fathers be our God: may their people be our people, their faith our faith. We are strangers on the earth, hide not Thy commandments from us, but may the love of Christ constrain us. Entreat us not to leave Thee or refrain from following after Thee. Thy people shall be our people. Thou shalt be our God.

Our life is a pilgrim's progress. I once saw a very beautiful picture: it was a landscape at evening. In the distance on the right-hand side a row of hills appeared blue in the evening mist. Above those hills the splendour of the sunset, the grey clouds with their linings of silver and gold and purple. The landscape is a plain or heath covered with grass and its yellow leaves, for it was in autumn. Through the landscape a road leads to a high mountain far, far away, on the top of that mountain is a city wherein the setting sun casts a glory. On the road walks a pilgrim, staff in hand. He has been walking for a good long while already and he is very tired. And now he meets a woman, or figure in black, that makes one think of St. Paul's word: As being sorrowful yet always rejoicing. That Angel of God has been placed there to encourage the pilgrims and to answer their questions.

And the pilgrim asks her: Does the road go uphill then all the way?" And the answer is: "Yes to the very end." And he asks again: "And will the journey take all day long?" And the answer is: "From morn till night my friend."

And the pilgrim goes on sorrowful yet always rejoicing – sorrowful because it is so far off and the road so long. Hopeful as he looks up to the eternal city far away, resplendent in the evening glow and he thinks of two old sayings that he heard long ago – the one is:

"Much strife must be striven
Much suffering must be suffered
Much prayer must be prayed
And then the end will be peace."

And the other is

"The water comes up to the lips
But higher comes it not."

And he says: I shall be more and more tired but also nearer and nearer to Thee. Has not man a strife on earth? But there is a consolation from God in this life. An Angel of God comforting man – that is the Angel of Charity. Let us not forget her. And when each of us goes back to the daily things and daily duties let us not forget that things are not what they seem, that God by the things of daily life teacheth us higher things, that our life is a pilgrim's progress, and that we are strangers on the earth, but that we have a God and father who preserveth strangers, – and that we are all brethren.

Amen.

And now the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God the Father and the fellowship of the Holy Ghost, be with us forever more.

Amen.

(Reading: Psalm 91.)

Once more, a handshake in my thoughts. Yesterday evening I went to Turnham Common to take the service for Mr. Jones, who was not well. I walked there with the oldest of the boys, he is 17 but as tall as I am and has a beard. He is due to go into business later, his father has a large factory. He has an honest, good, sensitive heart and a great need of religion. His hope and desire are to do good among the working people when he is older. I recommended Eliot's Felix Holt to him.

It was beautiful in the park with the old elm trees I the moonlight and the dew on the grass. It felt so good speaking in the little church – it is a wooden church.

Bye, Theo, bye, my boy. I hope I have written this so you are able to read it. Keep your spirits up and get better soon.