

As a result he predicted seven years of good crops and seven years of famine and consequently was made minister of Food.

The next flash back shows us the triumph of Joseph when his policy of grain storage during the fat years puts Egypt in a position of comparative affluence during the famine. Among the applicants for foreign aid at the court of Pharaoh appeared eventually a delegation from Israel - and Joseph immediately recognized his brothers. This flash back contains fascinating by play between Joseph and the brothers who had not recognized him. In the end he revealed who he was, and sent them home to bring the whole family, including his father Jacob, to Egypt. This looks like the happy ending but there was the final scene to come.

Jacob the father died. And the brothers were panic-stricken. Their consciences had caught up with them. Joseph would now surely take his revenge. This is the law of the desert - an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth - in the sorry circle of crime and retribution that makes so much history an absurdity of violence and cruelty.

But what happened in this final scene? Listen- "And his brothers also went and fell down before his face; and they said Behold, we be thy servants. And Joseph said unto them, Fear not: for am I in the place of God? But as for you, ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good, to save bring to pass, as it is this day, to save much people alive. Now therefore fear ye not: I will nourish you, and your little ones. And he comforted them, and spake kindly unto them." "Ye thought evil against me, but God meant it unto good...."

You might say that this is the first mention of God in the whole story. Yet it could be told today in a book or a movie without a word about God from beginning to end. But in the Bible perspective God is in this story from beginning to end. He is not in it as puller of strings behind the scenes, or as the one who intervenes to prevent the crime in the desert, or to explain the crazy events in Pharaoh's palace. The record of good and evil, success and disappointment, fear and hope, crime and punishment is as we know it - strange, chaotic, unexplainable. Yet this one phrase of Joseph sends the light just where we need it. "You planned evil... But God meant it unto good." The God the Bible reveals to us is one who lets human freedom work its way through order and confusion, light and darkness - but is always in the story, always ready to bring good out of evil.

The curtain comes down on a new play. As the lady in the seat in front of you is struggling into her coat you over hear her say to her neighbor: "I haven't the slightest idea what that was all about." More comments are to be heard on the way out to the street: "What was the point of the play?" "That's just the point - that there is no point, in the play or anywhere else."

The kind of play I am talking about is representative of what has been called "The Theater of the Absurd." This is serious drama. We have always had the absurd, in books and plays and movies in the form of farce, or crazy nonsense like the vintage Marx brothers comedies. But this new Theater of the Absurd is serious, sometimes agonizingly serious drama. It reflects a point of view that is more prevalent than many of us like to imagine. It is a revolt against the simple philosophies that offer a tidy picture of our human life. It is a protest against the illusion that men and women think clearly and act rationally. It is also a deliberate rejection of the conventional religious belief that God is in his heaven and therefore in the long run everything makes sense.

Those of us who have been trained to find some kind of shape and meaning in life, who likes stories with definite plots, paintings that tell us what they are about, music with a recognizable tune, and dances with grace and beauty of movement, are naturally uncomfortable with a great deal of modern art and irritated by the contemporary cult of the Absurd. But, if art - forms reflect the age we live in, we must expect the artist of integrity today to reveal to us something of the confusion, the dissonance, the craziness that ordinary people sense in our world today. This is not a time of calm and order and peaceful progress, so we should n't be surprised if paintings take odd shapes and violent colors, if music sometimes sounds harsh and discordant, if poems and novels are often rough and untidy, and plays become absurd. Nor should we be surprised if the younger generation indulges in odd clothes, jungle-type dances, sick jokes, and mad magazines.

If you ask me what the Church has to say to a generation for whom life seems unceasingly chaotic and who therefore feel an affinity with the crazy and the absurd, I have to begin with two negatives. First, religion should not simply stand on the sidelines deploring everything and everybody and praying for a return to some legendary "good old days." But, secondly, religion should not simply surrender to the current mood and set out to be crazy too. What I mean is

that the Christian Church in our day should be neither damning all modern culture and pleading for a return to the nineteenth century, nor should it be trying to outdo the modern world in scepticism, cynicism, and absurdity. It's not a Christian duty to offer our contemporaries a simple answer that ignores the tensions and the absurdities, but still less are we called on to offer them the ultimate absurdity - that God is dead.

What then do we say? We might begin with a fresh look at the books of the Bible, realizing that they did not come out of a sober, quiet, orderly world. Lots of religious books are written about ideal people in an ideal world, but not the Bible. Lots of religious books offer a simple picture of reasonable behavior in a reasonable universe - but not the Bible. It's writers lived in times which were often as chaotic and confusing as ours and they were not afraid to reflect the chaos and confusion in their books. In the Bible the raw edges of life are not smoothed over; problems of justice and goodness in the universe find no easy solution; human stories do not have a standard; happy ending. Men and women love and hate, rise to heights of nobility, and sink to depths of savagery, seek order and peace and lapse into anarchy and strife, exactly as we see the picture today. The absurdity of life is revealed as well as its glory.

But there is something else. Always, everywhere, in order and confusion, in light and in darkness, in glory and in confusion, in light in glory and in absurdity, there is God - God not as a distant ideal, or a vague something to hold on to, but as the living creative and recreative Spirit who comes to us in the chaos, who lives with us through the confusion, who speaks to us in the experiences of every day, and who imparts a meaning at the very point of absurdity. This God isn't presented as a quick solution to our problems, but as a participator in the struggle. He is to be found, not by looking away from the trials and absurdities of human experiences, but right in them. The ultimate peace and goodness of his presence, the perfect order of his kingdom, is reached through our engagement with events here and now in which a pattern and purpose is hard to find.

One of the most entrancing stories of the old Testament conveys this sense of God's involvement in the absurdities and misadventures of life in a remarkably vivid way. Writers, artists, and movie directors have been fascinated by the story of Joseph. Let me remind you of the final scene in this story, which is in the last chapter of the book of Gene-

sis: then we can light it up with a series of flash backs to the earlier events.

The scene is an audience chamber in the palace of the Egyptian Pharaoh Joseph, the ex-foreign slave, now Minister of State, Secretary for Agriculture and Food Production, Confidential Advisor, Press Secretary - and almost any other title you like to imagine - sits on a regal throne, holding audience. Before him in a nervous semi-circle stand a group of suppliants who clearly realize that one word from Joseph will dispatch them to the dungeons or the executioner. And they are his brothers. How did they get there, miles from the Land of Israel? And how did he get there in this position of pomp and power?

The first flash back takes us to a bleak stretch of desert country years before, where Joseph as the youngest and favorite son of Jacob his father came to bring a message to his brothers who were herding the sheep. As they were insanely jealous of this boy, who had been foolish enough to tell them his dreams of future glory, they decided to do away with him. One of his brothers, more soft- peruses the others to drop Joseph into a hole in the ground, suggesting that he will seem to have met with an accident when his body is found, but really intending to return and pull him out. Meantime a cloud of dust on the horizon announces the arrival of a caravan of merchants on camels making their way to Egypt. So the brothers quickly decide ~~their way~~ to put Joseph in the hole and sell him as a slave. That's how Joseph got to Egypt in the first place. And we could pause here with time to reflect on the bitterness, the unfairness, the absurdity of life. Here he was, his father's favorite son, with a bright future opening up for him, condemned in a few moments to trudge across the desert spurned, beaten, and despised to be sold again on a slave- block in Egypt.

The second flash back tells us what happened there. This one is a gift to the movie director - for it has a palace, a prison, a butcher, a baker, sudden promotion, an execution, a seduction scene, and almost everything that makes for spectacle and drama.

Joseph was brought by the Captain in charge of Pharaoh's household and soon rose to be overseer in the palace. Then Potiphar, the Captain's wife, tried to seduce him and when he refused her advances, denounced him for attempted assault. In prison he won fame as an interpreter of dreams and was finally released to interpret a dream of the Pharaoh's.