

## The Millennium Cry

GEOFF RYAN, FROM "SOWING DRAGONS", 2001

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*"The future belongs to those who give it hope."  
(Teilhard de Chardin)*

**T**his is the last spring of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. We are entering a new millennium. This century started so full of promise, optimism, idealism, some would even say naivete. Science was leading the way, the British Empire was at its zenith, things looked good, people were excited as the new century held out promise as the best century yet. Not many people listened to prophets such as Nietzsche who said at the end of the last century: *'If God is dead, and if God has been killed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, then the 20<sup>th</sup> will be the bloodiest century known to man.'*

The spirit of our time does not seem to be one of optimism or of hope and certainly not one of innocence. Rather, it is one of regrets, cynicism, weariness, fear, and anger. If there is a characteristic of the present times I would say our generation has a survivor mentality. It is enough for most people to have outlived the century, enough to be alive. We are like survivors of a bombing, we stumble through the wreckage and the rubble of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, not believing that we are still alive. Survivors are defined by the past, by what they have survived. People are afraid of the future because it does not seem to hold much promise, because they don't know what is going to happen. They are looking into the past to try and find something to hold on to, something to propel them into the new millennium.

People of the two-thirds world are bringing back the past and stirring up old feelings, the conflicts, the hatreds. We have been praying for Kosovo. If we don't understand what happened in 1389 in the Battle of Kosovo we won't understand what is happening now. They have reached back into their past to find something to give them a purpose and a meaning and an identity for the present and the future.

In Russia, President Yeltsin has actually formed a

committee to try to discover a national ideal because the country has lost it. There must be an ideal that will unite the country and take it forward in the future. They have reached no conclusions, but I have a pretty good idea of what it is going to be when I see the neo-fascist groups gathering in the corners and marching on the streets, when I hear the feelings and the rising sentiment of nationalism against the West. When there is no hope there is always hate, which is an old idea, as old as Cain and Abel. Is that all our world can find as they rummage around in the past? The only idea they can find to ride into the millennium are the forces of conflict which run our world.

The forces of globalism have been termed 'McWorld', and the forces of tribalism are called the 'Jihad'. The first world - the affluent West - is riding the crest of globalism, we have enough to meet our needs. When we live comfortably, we live better than any of our forebears ever lived, as the multinationals and the companies driven by economic concerns continue to invade the developing world in order to supply us with goods. As we sit comfortably by the flickering light of our TVs, watching our videos, listening to our music, drinking our coffee, wearing the latest fashions, the rest of the world, the 80% of the world, are gathering by the flickering campfires and telling their children the stories of the old hatreds, loading their guns and sharpening their knives.

'The language of our times is a language of ethnic nationalism,' (Michael Ignatieff) as people splinter further and further apart, as nation states lose their meaning and people congregate around tribal loyalties, and ethnic origins. They say, 'If you do not look like us, if you do not talk like us, if you do not worship like us, then you are not one of us. You are therefore our enemy and we will kill you'.

One of the enduring images I carry in my mind at the close of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is of a very old woman form just outside St Petersburg in Russia, whom my wife

visited as she lay dying. She spoke of the hardship of a life that spanned most of his century, a life lived under a totalitarian regime. This regime made life difficult, it either took your life, crippled it or removed your choices. As she talked she neared the end of a life full of regrets. At one point, she half rose from her bed and clutched the sleeve of my wife's uniform and said, as tears rolled down her face, 'I once wasted a whole week searching for green thread.' Wasted time, wasted opportunities. We waste weeks, months, years, lifetimes searching, not for green thread, but for happiness, success, comfort.

What should the 'children of light', as we are called in the Scriptures, be in the face of this impending darkness? How should we, as the Bible says, 'shine like stars in this present generation?' I believe the voice of God can be heard and I believe he is asking us a question. It is the second question he ever really asked humanity. The first question was in the Garden of Eden just after Adam and Eve had broken their relationship with God. God's question to them was, 'Where are you?' After he had them leave the Garden, the next event was the account of the relationship between man and man – the story of Cain and Abel. The second question, God speaking to Cain, 'Where is your brother?' That to me is one of the most fundamental, seminal and defining questions of history. It is like a drum beat, a constant theme throughout history – 'Where is your brother?'

The relationship between humankind and God is broken, therefore the relationship between people is broken, and the only way back to that relationship with God is through our brothers and sisters.

We broke relationship with God, we shattered relationships with each other and now we must restore that. But it is a voice and a question that has been drowned out in this century, in oceans of blood, in oppression – economic, physical and spiritual.

As we come to the end of this millennium, we can catch our breath before we go on. Will we listen to that voice and that question? As the children of light, as Christians, what hope do we bring into the conversation to give to the world, to usher in the new millennium? The world answers the question: 'Am I my brother's keeper?' with anger and as a curse at God, by ethnic cleansing, by loading guns, by slitting throats. What do we say?

1 John 4 unequivocally says, 'Anyone who loves God and hates his brother is a liar.' It goes on, 'How can you love God whom you have not seen when you hate your brother who you can see?' We are to find God in

our brothers and sisters, and therefore this command – not a suggestion, not a principle, not an idea that you can meditate upon – is to love God and people, end of discussion. God has integrally linked our relationships with our brothers and sisters and the responsibility we have for them to his relationship with us. He will not listen to us, we cannot come into his presence, he will ignore our prayers and reject our praises depending upon our relationships with our brothers and sisters.

Who are these brothers and sisters? The question has been asked in Scripture in the story of the Good Samaritan. By combining Galatians 3 and Colossians 3 we have a pretty good definition – Jew, Greek, Scythian, the religious, the educated, the Barbarians, slave and free, the powerful and the powerless, male and female, circumcised and uncircumcised. Everyone is our brother and everyone is our sister. That is the gospel mandate, that is the Kingdom of Heaven and that is how we are to view the world.

Jesus says to all who play and sing, participate in worship; the acceptance of your worship by God is validated only by the social imperative. The implications of worship are your lifestyle, how you spend your money, who you care for and the attitudes of your heart. You can be with your arms raised, with tears streaming down your face, meaning with every ounce of your being the words that you sing, but if you bring your gift to the altar and your brother has something against you, not you having something against your brother, but your brother has something against you, leave it thee, sort it out and come back, otherwise you are wasting your time. 'There is no holiness apart from social holiness,' Wesley said.

God has given us the ministry of reconciliation and this is an idea whose time has come. In a world shattered with ethnic nationalism, tribe against tribe, rich against poor, a world that is fast fragmenting at the edges, there is no message that is needed more than the message of the gospel, the reconciliation of people one to another, and to God.

We too need to take from the past in order to create a future, but take the right things and leave the wrong things in this century. People are finding reasons to hate, they need a reason to hope. They need God and they need to find him through us.

I want to share with you an image of hope that I will take with me into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. We have planted a corps about 45 miles outside of Rostov, in a community called Kuleshovka, a village of about 12,000 people. The

new district where we have our work was built around a baby food factory built in 1976. Like most industry in Russia, it has fallen apart and people are out of jobs. This is a depressed area. Physically it is very ugly, with Soviet high-rise apartment blocks made out of watered-down concrete and falling apart. This village is known as the drug capital of the Rostov region, which is one of the primary reasons why we opened the corps. Talk to a street cop in Moscow, about a thousand miles away, and when mention the name Kuleshovka he is going to say 'drugs'. Go to the graveyard in Kuleshovka and over half the gravestones are for young people. Everyone it seems is on drugs because there is nothing else to do.

We have a wonderful Salvation Army soldier in Kuleshovka, her name is Tatianna. She is a middle-aged woman who has rarely travelled outside of her community. She has a daughter and she had a seventeen-year-old son, Anton, but he was a drug addict. Two years ago when he was high he climbed to the top of their nine-storey building and, thinking he could fly, jumped off and killed himself. This is not a new story in Kuleshovka, most families have someone who has died or is in jail because of drugs. We had tried everything with Anton up until this point – we sent him to treatment centres, he came and lived with our family, he lived with some of our soldiers, we prayed over him. It didn't work, he couldn't kick the habit.

We got the call on Friday and rushed out to the apartment. When he jumped he landed in a bunch of hedges. His father Sasha, picked up his son and carried him into the house. We don't have funeral parlours, or undertakers in Russia, you prepare the body yourself in your home and you bury it yourself. We walked in and Anton was lying in the living room. His face was caved in on one side, he wasn't recognizable. The women were sitting in the living room around him and I asked where Sasha was.

I have a good relationship with Sasha, who is not a believer. He worked in the factory, he's big and tough, and fairly inarticulate and he is very proud of his years of service in the Soviet Army. He was tremendously disappointed that his son turned out to be such a waste, such a weak person in his eyes. They were constantly in conflict and had actually had an argument when Sasha hit his son just before this incident happened. I walked into the bedroom and Sasha was sitting there on the edge of the bed, staring at the wall. He wasn't crying because he is not a man who cries easily.

I asked, *'How are you doing?'* He didn't look at me, he just said, *'I went and picked him up, Geoff. It was like carrying a sack of sticks because everything inside him was broken and bones kept on falling out of places where they should be.'* It was all he said.

I didn't say anything. I had no right to. Is there any sight more sad than a man who has lost his only son? So we buried Anton the next day. Just before we put the lid on and nailed it shut Sasha walked over and collapsed in a heap beside his son. All he could say was, *'I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry. . . .'* We closed the coffin, put it in the ground and covered it with dirt.

There is a tradition in Russia, after a funeral, to have something called the 'pomniki', the 'remembrance' when, immediately after the funeral, you go back to the house for a sort of party which is sad but it is a time of remembrance. We said to Tatianna, *'So we're going to do the pomniki.'*

She said, *'No. We won't do it now, we do it Sunday.'* In the spring, and summer months our evening service is held on the street.

*'Something good must come out of my son's death. We will do it Sunday. That will be his remembrance and I will speak.'*

*'Are you sure?'*, I asked.

*'Yes.'*

As we gathered on Sunday, word had gone around the community. As you drove in there that afternoon you could feel that the whole community was holding its breath. They didn't like The Salvation Army in Kuleshovka – they still don't, they think we are a cult. Women would sidle up to Tatianna and say, *'See what you get for allowing you son and yourself to get mixed up in this cult.'* (There is a lot of occultism, superstition in the village.)

*'Maybe the Salvation Army pushed him off the building...'*

*'Maybe it was a murder...'*

Gossip, rumours, hurtful, hateful things flying around.

We started our meeting and I think almost the whole village gathered around. In the high rise buildings around the place where we had the open-air meeting people were hanging out of their windows watching, waiting and listening. I will never forget as Tatianna – who had every reason to hate – looked into the eyes of the people who sold drugs to her son; the eyes of the people who said, *'Serves you right for following your God'*; the eyes of people who made fun of her but did not support her in her time

of need. She testified and implored them that her son's death would mean something. She prayed and cried for the young people of the village and for the parents to stop this plague that was killing the village. She is a very strong woman. As she was speaking I saw her husband Sasha off to the side. He wouldn't join us but he stood immobile with his arms folded.

At that time our son, Sasha, was about one year old. Sasha is the Russian short form for Alexander. In Russia if someone has the same name as you, that person is your 'toska', which means that you have a special relationship with them. The Bible says that we will be led by children, and our Sasha toddled over to the father Sasha. I stood and watched as this man who had lost his only son looked at his namesake and took his hand and walked away together while the remembrance service continued and his wife spoke in love, giving hope to the community out of her pain and suffering. Near the end of the service I walked around the corner of the building and there was

Sasha, the older one, standing, staring across the fields. My son was nestled up in his arms asleep.

Tears were running down his face, he turned to me and said, *'He likes me. I remember when Anton was this age.'*

Tatianna chose hope over hate. She heard the question, 'Who is my brother and where is my brother?' And her answer is: 'They are here in my community and I will serve them in love, I will give them hope.' That is the image I will take with me into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Even though the world is falling apart, the gospel is the only hope. The ministry of reconciliation – the answer to that question, 'Where is your brother?' – is the defining question of our time. We need to ask that question with regard to our resource: our time, our money, our lives. I really hope the praises we sing are acceptable in God's eyes. Let us give hope to a world without hope. Let us come against hate with the power of love, in Jesus' name and for the world's sake.