

My dear Theo,

It is time I wrote to you again, to wish you, firstly, all the best at the start of the New Year. May many good things be your lot and may God's blessing rest on your work in the year on which we are now embarking.

I very much long for a letter from you, to hear how things are going and how you are, and also if you have seen anything beautiful and remarkable of late. As far as I am concerned, you'll be aware that there are no paintings here in the Borinage, that by and large they do not even know what a painting is, so obviously I have not seen anything in the way of art since my departure from Brussels. But that does not alter the fact that the country here is very special and very picturesque, everything speaks, as it were, and is full of character. Lately, during the dark days before Christmas, snow was lying on the ground. Everything reminded one then of the medieval paintings by, say, Peasant Brueghel, and by so many others who have known how to depict the singular effect of red and green, black and white so strikingly. And often the sights here have made me think of the work of, for example, Thijs Mans or Albrecht Dürer. There are sunken roads here, overgrown with thornbushes and gnarled old trees with their freakish roots, which resemble perfectly that road on Dürer's etching, "Death and the Knight."

Thus, a few days ago, the miners returning home in the evening towards dusk in the white snow were a singular sight. These people are quite black when they emerge into the daylight from the dark mines, looking just like chimney sweeps. Their dwellings are usually small and should really be called huts; they lie scattered along the sunken roads, in the woods and on the slopes of the hills. Here and there one can still see moss-covered roofs, and in the evening a friendly light shines through the small-paned windows.

Much as we have coppices and shrubby oaks in Brabant and pollard willows in Holland, so one sees blackthorn hedges around the gardens, fields and meadows here. Lately, with the snow, the effect is that of black lettering on white paper, like pages of the Gospel.

I have already spoken several times here, both in a fairly large room especially designed for religious meetings and also at the meetings they usually hold in the evenings in the workmen's cottages, and which may best be called Bible classes. Among other things, I have spoken on the parable of the mustard seed, the barren fig tree and the man born blind. On Christmas, of course, on the stable in Bethlehem and Peace on earth. If, with God's blessing, I were to get a permanent position here, I should welcome that with all my heart.

Everywhere round here one sees the large chimneys and the tremendous mountains of coal at the entrance to the mines, the so-called charbonnages. You know that large drawing by Bosboom, "Chaudfontaine" – it gives a good impression of the countryside in these parts, except that here everything is coal while to the north of Hainaut there are stone quarries and in Chaudfontaine they have iron.

I still keep thinking of the day you came to Brussels and of our visit to the Museum. And I often wish you were a bit nearer and we could be together more often. Do reply soon, I keep looking at that etching of "A Young Citizen" over and over again.

The miner's talk is not very easy to make out, but they understand ordinary French well, provided it is spoken quickly and fluently enough, for then it automatically sounds like their patois, which comes out with amazing speed. At a meeting this week, my text was Acts 16 9, "And a vision appeared to Paul in the night; There stood a man of Macedonia, and prayed him, saying, Come over into Macedonia, and help us." And they listened attentively when I tried to describe what the Macedonian was like who needed and longed for the comfort of the Gospel and for knowledge of the Only True God. That we should think of him as a workman, with lines of sorrow and suffering and fatigue on his countenance, without pomp or glory but with an immortal soul and needing the food that does not perish, namely God's word, because man liveth not by bread alone, but by all the words that flow from God's mouth. How Jesus Christ is the Master who can strengthen and comfort and enlighten one like the Macedonian, a workman and labourer whose life is hard. Because He Himself is the great Man of Sorrows who knows our ills, Who was called the son of a carpenter, though He was the Son of God and the great Healer of sick souls. Who laboured for thirty years in a humble carpenter's shop to fulfill God's will. And God wills that in imitation of Christ, man should live and walk humbly on earth, not reaching for the sky, but bowing to humble things, learning from the Gospel to be meek and humble of heart.

I have already had occasion to visit some of the sick, since there are so many of them here. Wrote today to the President of the Committee of Evangelization asking him if my case could be dealt with at the next meeting of the committee.

It is thawing tonight. I can't tell you how picturesque the hilly country looks in the thaw, with the snow melting and now that the black fields with the green of the winter wheat can be seen again.

© Copyright 2001 R. G. Harrison

For a stranger, the villages here are real rabbit warrens with the countless narrow streets and alleyways of small worker's houses, at the foot of the hills as well as on the slopes and the top. The nearest comparison is a village like Scheveningen, especially the back streets, or villages in Brittany as we know them from pictures. But you have travelled through these parts by train on your way to Paris and may have fleeting memories of them. The Protestant churches are small, like the one at De Hoeve though a little larger, but the place where I spoke was just a large bare room which could hold a hundred people at most. I also attended a religious service in a stable or shed, so everything it is simple and original enough.

Write soon if you can find the time, and know that you are again and again, indeed constantly, in my thoughts.

Wishing once more that God's blessing be yours in the New Year, and shaking your hand in my thoughts, believe me, always,

Your very loving brother, Vincent

My regards to everyone at the Roos's, and wish them all the very best for the New Year, as well as anyone who may ask after me.

When you write, please address your letter care of M. van der Haegen, Colporteur, à Pâturages, près de Mons, Borinage, Hainaut.

I have just visited a little old woman in a charcoal-burner's home. She is terribly ill, but full of faith and patience. I read a chapter with her and prayed with them all. The people here have something unique and attractive about them thanks to their simplicity and good nature, not unlike the Brabant people in Zundert and Etten.