

We think of ourselves as living in the Twentieth Century, and for most of us here this evening, the simple, unthinking use of that expression conjures up the picture of a modern, streamlined, industrial society, - basing our assumptions on the kind of progress we have achieved and the patterns of society we have developed in the countries of Western Europe, North America and Australasia.

But we must not forget that the Twentieth Century means different things to different peoples; and that well over half of the world's peoples today in mid-century live under conditions of poverty, illiteracy, ill-health and underdevelopment which we of the western world could not possibly recognize as characteristic of our Twentieth Century society. We who live in the western countries of Europe and in North America are all too prone to think of others as having been created in our own prosperous image. We do not stop to realize that at least so far as the material things of life are concerned, we are the fortunate few among the peoples of the world.

We think of poverty, pestilence, illiteracy, of famine, starvation, and epidemic as vanishing phenomena hovering obscurely along the fringes of our prosperous society. Many of us bask in the genial warmth of the illusion that this attractive situation is general. Only occasionally, through our visits to foreign lands or through some fleeting glimpse of the hard facts of life in the continents of Africa, Latin America and Asia, do we begin to become aware that for the majority of its inhabitants this earth is hazardous and forbidding.

The actual picture of the world we live in is reflected in the first United Nations Report on the World Social Situation. This report shows that millions of human beings are ravaged by diseases which modern medical science could readily control. It shows that all too little progress has been made throughout the world as a whole in the struggle against illiteracy and ignorance, despite some notable advances recently in certain areas. It shows that for many of the less-developed countries the principle of universal education, - which we in the western world have long since taken for granted, - is tragically beyond the financial means of the governments and peoples concerned.

The report shows all too clearly how uneven has been the progress that has been made against poverty, how wide the gap between the rich and the poor nations in the general levels of production and consumption, - a gap that has widened, not narrowed, in the years since World War II. It reveals also that the disparity between the well-fed and the poorly-fed populations of the world has also widened, and that food production has increased less than population in many parts of the world.

The obstacles and difficulties in the way of dealing with these problems could be massive under ideal conditions. But the gigantic task confronting the less-developed countries as they struggle to improve themselves must be accomplished under the tremendous conflicting pressures of the cold war; under the fear of domination from abroad, and of subversive movements designed to make nationalist and social-reform movements the creatures of totalitarian imperialism.