

## "A FAITH THAT TRANSCENDS NATIONS"

TEXT: "And men will come from east and west, and from north and south, and sit at table in the kingdom of God"  
(Luke 13: 29)

INTRODUCTION Today thousands of Christians throughout the world are coming to the Lord's table observing World Communion Sunday. It is an occasion for the Christian Church to affirm itself as a universal body.

However engrossed in local problems and opportunities; however accustomed to seeing our faith in the trappings of American culture; however skilled in adapting the Gospel to the needs of our own time and place; we are given in World Communion Sunday a forceful and visible reminder that the kingdom of God embraces nothing less than the whole world.

DEVELOPMENT I invite you to rejoice this hour in the global sweep of the Christian interpretation of life, and to be mindful that the purposes of God for men are universal in their intent.

When Abraham was called to be the father of the faithful, it was with the promise that in his seed would all the families of the earth be blessed. The Newbrew nation was to be the center of God's saving action, but not its circumference. The few were chosen for the many.

Time and again in Old Testament times, the prophets of Israel had to sound this universal note against the recurring pressures to domesticate God, and to make of Him a tribal deity. So second Isaiah cries, "The Lord will rise upon you and His glory will be seen upon you and nations shall come to your light and kings to the brightness of your rising".

We find Micah declaring,

"The mountain of the house of the Lord shall be established as the highest of the mountains and shall be raised up above the hills, and people shall flow to it and many nations shall come and say: come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and walk in his paths."

Crossing over from the Old Testament to the New Testament, Jesus came to Israel, but He came for all. On one occasion He said, "Other sheep I have which are not of this fold, them also I must bring". And after He had chased the money changers from the temple, Jesus was heard to say, "My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations". He gave us a glimpse into the "endtime", and likened the kingdom's culmination to a feast to which "men shall come from east and west, and from north and south, and sit at table in the kingdom of God".

Whether the great commission, "Go yet therefore into all the world and make disciples of all nations" is an authentic saying of Jesus, or was, in fact, ascribed to Jesus by the early church, it is plain that those first Christians sensed that their message was for all the nations of mankind. And on the strength of that understanding, they went from Jerusalem to Judea, to Samaria and to the uttermost parts of the earth.

When Paul gave his magnificent defense before Agrippa, he declared to the king that the death to which Jesus submitted had not been "done in a corner". And we might add that it was not done for a corner, either. God loves the world. Christ died for all mankind. God's purposes for men are universal in their intent.

There are some happy signs on this World Communion Sunday that God's intent is slowly being realized. While it's true that churches in the United States have come upon hard times, for reasons both good and bad, we are not to judge the health of the Christian enterprise by our condition alone. We're told that the youth of Japan are turning to the life of Jesus in growing numbers today. In the newly emerging African states, people are discovering again the ancient gospel, and this time without the distortions of European or American culture. The fastest growing church in South America is the Pentecostal church, and in some countries is showing a willingness to grapple with political realities. Imagine, too, an evangelist from Korea coming to the heart of New York City, to Carnegie Hall, to lift up the claims of Christian discipleship. As you know, this happened this week in our city.

While the church is sorely pressed in many places, it is true to say that never in its long history has it been so well distributed among the nations. From east and west, from north and south they come. The church is visibly international. It's enough to gladden God's heart, and it should gladden ours as well.

WHAT SHOULD A CHRISTIAN PRESENCE MEAN

But it is not enough to simply rejoice in the global sweep of the Christian enterprise this day. We need to go a step farther. The question of responsibility comes up as well: what ought a Christian presence to mean in lands where it is found, where it is taken seriously.

Clearly the church anywhere is not to be a mere reflection of the state. The church was never intended to be a handmaiden of established power. We are not called, wherever we are found, to merely sanctify uncritically the programs and ambitions of the state. To cry peace when there is no peace is to displease God and to fail the needs of man.

Pity the chaplain of the Redskins praying in the locker room for victory on the football field, while in the next room another chaplain, equally devout, is asking God for victory for his team.

Just as clearly, the church, wherever it is found, is not to live above the arena of historical reality, which is to say national concerns and priorities in the broadest sense of that term. As though the arena where vested interests clash, and laws are born that govern human life were beneath her. As though her Lord had not indeed come in the flesh and been put to death in the marketplace. As though salvation delivered one from life rather than propelling one into the thick of life.

If we are not to be a mere reflection of the state, and if we are not free to live above historical reality, when then ought we to be about. I believe a primary function of the church - north, south, east, or west - is to point to a reality larger than itself, and bigger than the state - namely, the kingdom of God. This is what is meant when it is said that the church has a prophetic function as well as a priestly function. It points beyond itself.

In terms of geography, the Christian Church is international. But in terms of faith, the church ought to be supra-national. Christians are called to move in the direction of transcending anything in their local situation that is at variance with what they understand the kingdom of God to be.

The place was a cocktail party last Christmas. The President of the United States had escalated the bombing of North Vietnam. The subject came up in conversation and everyone joined in. Finally, one man moved to state his case forcefully. Turning to another man beside him, he stuck out his right index finger and said, "Listen, John, as far as I'm concerned there's just and them". The Christian response to that should be, "There's us - and them - and Him".

I believe we are called to be Christians first, and Russians second; Christians first, and British second; Christians first and Ugandans second; Christians first and Americans second. We are called to work with wider margins than national boundaries allow. It is not enough for us to celebrate the fact that the church is international; we are that by virtue of geography and the faith and labors of heroic men of other times. We are called to be followers of a faith that transcends national lines, to be supra-national, always guarding against the temptation to domesticate God, to make of Him a national deity.

It's a tall order and how slowly the kingdom comes. How distant it still appears, but this is why we are here. We are to witness this day to that kingdom whose banner is love, whose sword is truth, whose emblem is a cross, and whose end is peace for all men.

PRAYER      May the bread and wine which we receive this hour, open our eyes,  
O God, to the presence of Christ among us.

May we see in this sacrament - plainly, clearly, simply stated, the meaning of our existence and of thy purpose for us all thy people everywhere.

Bind us more closely to each other and to Him and lift up our hearts and minds to thee, that we may go out renewed in body and soul, refreshed and nourished, made new. In the spirit of Christ, we pray. Amen