

"A NEW IDEA OF GREATNESS"

TEXT: "And during supper....Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, rose from supper, laid aside his garments, and girded himself with a towel. Then he poured water into a basin, and began to wash the disciples' feet, and to wipe them with the towel with which he was girded."

INTRODUCTION It's questionable whether in all the Sacred Books of the world's religions there is a passage similar to this one I just read to you. The uniqueness of these lines rests in the fact that here in this one scene are divinity and humanity, royalty and humility. Jesus....well aware of having come from God and that He was going back to God - yet taking a towel and a basin and washing the feet of the disciples.

DEVELOPMENT This extraordinary scene presents us with an important thought for consideration. It was taken for granted in the time of our Lord that anybody with authority, certainly anybody with divine authority, would lord it over his subordinates and use the authority to promote his own interests. Those of you who are familiar with the Bible will remember the saying in the Gospel record of the Roman centurion: I am a man "with soldiers under me. I say to one, 'Go', and he goes; to another, 'Come here' and he comes; and to my servant, 'Do this' and he does it."

This was typical of the prevailing attitude in antiquity. If you had rank and status you did not soil your hands or stoop to manual labor. The clothes you wore were evidence of this - the flowing garments, the loose sandals. Aristotle's ideal man was a gentleman of leisure who did not need to bend his back or flex his muscles other than in the stadium, at the games. Work was a disability, an indignity, disgracing a man and - so it was thought - cutting him off from God. Work was the lot of the slave and the sign of social inferiority. I recall reading some place that Chinese mandarins allowed their finger nails to grow long and curled in order to demonstrate to everybody that they were not artisans. If by chance a nail was broken a goldsmith was summoned at once to restore this badge of gentility.

JESUS CHANGED ALL THIS All this Jesus revolutionized. He turned the prevailing social custom upside down. The Jews expected the Messiah to be a prince and to arrive trailing clouds of glory; instead he was a carpenter. The Son of God when He appeared was not a monarch or statesman or philosopher or military general but the lowly servant of His fellows. He introduced into the world a new idea of greatness - the greatness of self-forgetful service. All the way up to Jerusalem His followers had been bickering about status and awards. And in the Upper Room not one of them would perform the humble hygienic task that after a long, hot journey had to be performed. He did what they each refused to do - laid aside his garments, took a towel, tied it round himself, poured water into a basin and began to wash their feet. Perhaps as He did this they began to remember then what He had said on the way up to Jerusalem, that He had come to serve, not to be served.

The context of the saying you may recall. A jealous dispute had broken out among his followers. Who among them should rank the highest? And He had silenced them with the words: "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them and their great men exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you; but whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave; even as the Son of man came not to be served but to serve."

OUR IDEA OF GREATNESS

Now this is not a way of life that has won wide acceptance. Let me put this question before you to think about. What type of person does our culture hold up for respect, almost for veneration? We think of the successful person as the person who outstrips his fellows and becomes wealthy, prominent and powerful. In America and the West generally we think of life as a pyramid with the powerful at the peak and the ambitious striving and scurrying to achieve a position where there are fewer equals and more and more subordinates to whom they can say, "Do this" and they do it. We are a democratic people, but we are far from having freed ourselves from flunkeyism. We treat almost with adulation those who have push and pull. We are literally hypnotized by rank and social caste and titles and millionaires. The goal of ambition generally is to make money. The recurring question is, "What salary does he earn?" "What model of car does he drive?" "What clubs does he belong?" This status seeking urge is in all of us. To be talked about - to be prominent, to be recognized, admired, fawned upon - this is taken for greatness.

I remember a young man several years ago telling me in one of our prayer groups what his ambition was. He was trying to make a go of it in show business. He said that he would like to make such a name for himself in show business and become so well known that when he walked the streets of this city with his dark sun glasses on people would turn and stare at him and say, "There goes...so and so".

These are attitudes embedded in our culture in America and the West and wherever the white man has gone he has carried his status symbols with him, and they have been envied and emulated. Take what Dr. Schweitzer jotted down in his diary:

"In the middle of September we get the first rains, and the cry is to bring all building timber under cover. As we have in the hospital hardly a man capable of work, I begin, assisted by two loyal helpers, to haul beams and planks about myself. Suddenly I catch sight of a Negro in a white suit sitting by a patient whom he had come to visit. 'Hullo, friend' I call out, 'won't you give us a hand?' 'I am an intellectual and don't drag wood about' comes the answer. 'You're lucky' I reply. 'I too wanted to become an intellectual, but I didn't succeed.'"

Why do we hail as essentially great a man like Schweitzer, Schweitzer who at once fascinates and rebukes the well-fed, comfortable, flabby all over the world. Whether we realize it or not, we are applying the criterion of Jesus.

JESUS AND GREATNESS

Jesus, too, thought of life as a pyramid, but He turned our status symbols upside down so that the first are last and the last are first. According to Him, the nearer the peak the greater the burden of service and sacrifice. To be near the peak is not to have other people waiting on you; it is the other way around; you put yourself at their service. All our accepted standards of greatness He reverses. It was not status that He cared about but self-denying service. In His eyes the badge of nobility was not prestige but usefulness. He never asked about any man: how does he rate? what is he worth? What He wanted to know was: does he deny himself? Is he sensitive to human needs? Over and over again His counsel to people was: don't let your life revolve around your interests and ambitions; get out of your own light; escape from the prison of self; find yourself in a cause bigger than yourself. No one has achieved statue who has not felt in some degree that his life was not his own to do with as he pleased, but belonged to God and his fellows, and that what God had given him in native ability and talent was given for mankind.

Especially in the churches we ought to follow his lead. The only distinction conferred by Jesus on his followers was that of humble service. Yet the churches

have their hierarchies, their orders, their status symbols, their power plays. The churches, too, adore success, itch to be prominent, to have the biggest building, the biggest budget, the biggest membership. Many people want to be identified with the prestige churches, the prestige pulpits. I remember some one saying to me at the beginning of my ministry: "Remember this that you can get a lot of kingdom building done if you don't have to worry about who's going to receive credit". And how true. And isn't it true, too, that so much of what we have in buildings and budgets we devote to our own use. So much of our work goes on inside our own doors, though outside the needs are clamant - better housing, better schools, better community relationships, an attack on America's hidden and hideous poverty. And we spend endless time talking. Talk so easily becomes an easy substitute for action.

For several years now at the beginning of the Lenten Season, our Christian Social Concerns Commission puts before the congregation of this church a listing of various areas for volunteer service in our community. This, I feel, is a worthwhile thing to do. The need is so great. This list will be ready for distribution next Sunday. I would encourage you to make time in your busy life for some area of service - additional service - during this Lenten Season. Fill your life with something that has meaning.

In the next few minutes you will be coming forward to receive the sacred symbols - bread and wine - symbols of a broken body and life poured out in sacrificial service. Think again of what Jesus did during the first communion - the communion that established the Sacrament in which we share today. Well aware that He had come from God and was going back to God, He rose from the table, laid aside his garments, took a towel, tied it round his waist, poured water into a basin and began to wash the feet of the disciples and to wipe them with a towel. When it was over, he said to them, giving to Christians in every age their first order of business: "I have set you an example. You are to do as I have done for you".

"The Kingdoms of the earth go by
In purple and in gold;
They rise, they flourish and they die,
And all their tale is told.

One Kingdom only is Divine,
One banner triumphs still,
Its king a servant and its sign
A gibbet on a hill"

LET US PRAY "Guide us, O God, as we try to follow Jesus into the wilderness during these forty days of Lent. Take away all sham and hypocrisy and help us to make this season a period of growth - growth in our own understanding of ourselves and in our usefulness to others.

And help us, Our Father, to see Jesus of Nazareth with new eyes and new understanding, and to find in him that which makes him unlike all others who ever lived. Help us when we see him to follow him and to show him to the world we live in.

All these things we ask in his name."