

## "A PLEA FOR PERSEVERANCE"

### INTRODUCTION

Due to a thoughtful gesture on the part of one of our parishioners, I received a copy of the Washington Square Journal on Friday. My attention was directed to the following ad that appeared on the editorial page:

"Be With Jesus Every Minute of the Day. Wear the watch on your hand of the Man who stilled the water. Only \$19.95. Our Saviour's likeness beautifully reproduced in crimson, earth brown, sky blue, sun-shine yellow, cloth black, and soft pink on a fleecy white background. Complete with ever-revolving crimson heart to tick off the minutes of the day. The most perfect gift for almost every loved one and church group. Comes with wide leatherette wristband. The original and only true Jesus watch - in 5 colors and with a revolving heart. Order your watch today".

I haven't placed my order for a Jesus watch just yet, nor am I planning to promote its sale here today. But I would like to raise some questions with you this morning regarding your personal comitment to the "Man Who Stilled the Water". If every Christian were your kind of Christian, what then? Where would we be?

### DEVELOPMENT

There are several reasons why I have chosen to make this personal focus today. In part, because we have moved into a new season, and not every one has moved with us. Some are lagging behind. Another reason for this personal focus grows out of a desire to check a drift that finds many Christians going on at great rate about the faults and failures of the church and the glaring injustices of the world, while strangely silent about their own personal shortcoming. But the main reason for today's personal focus is simply because the Scriptures in many places alert us to the danger of falling away and drifting away from the faith, and losing our connection with the body of Christ. Every time it happens, the body becomes weaker. Therefore, some degree of self-examination is appropriate from time to time...in terms of your commitment. You bear his name. Defects--cause is hurt.

It would be difficult to find a more sobering text than these words of the Apostle Paul taken from one of his letters to the Corinthians:

".....I pommel my body and subdue it, lest after preaching to others I ~~find~~ myself should be disqualified....."

It could have happened! The threat here is not simply a rhetorical device. No man is a shoo-in to make it, even a man as distinguished as St. Paul. He had gotten off to a great start. It would be hard for us to imagine a more dramatic entrance into the Christian life than his conversion. Right at the beginning he was inserted into the thick of it, going from place to place planting the banner of the cross, settling disputes, organizing churches, writing, traveling, arguing the case of Jesus Christ. Yet, he could say, following all of this: "...lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified...."

If it could have happened to him, it could certainly happen to any one of us. In a congregation like this, it is likely that it has happened or is happening right now to some of us. Those searchingly honest words of one of history's most influential sons rest on one of life's first principles: nothing stays won!

### NOTHING STAYS WON

First principle that it is, it runs through all of life. Our finest productions must be diligently maintained. I felt a twinge of sadness last Winter upon reading in the papers that the liner, the Queen

Elizabeth was adrift at sea without power somewhere between Cuba and Haiti. She had suffered a boiler breakdown. I remember walking around that ship a number of years ago and thinking to myself that her crew was needlessly large. So many men polishing, so many men painting, so many men inspecting, so many men oiling. It is clear now that when maintenance is neglected disintegration follows close behind. Nothing stays won. It's a rule of life.

The jungle needs to be beaten back - not once, but many times. Civil liberties are never secured once and for all - they must be contended for perpetually. The borders of democracy must be constantly patrolled. When Sir Winston Churchill was asked during World War II what we were fighting for, he replied: "Just stop fighting and you'll soon find out".

Education does not keep. I read recently that a PhD degree has a depreciable life of ten years. Property has to be maintained and what a struggle this is in a city like this to stay on top of things. I think of the bills the church has paid in recent weeks all having to do with the upkeep of our church building - everything from lighting to locksmiths, from plumbing to painting - and the end never seems to be in sight. The jungle needs to be beaten back - not once, but many times. Struggle is built into the very heart of life.

#### YOUR EXERTIONS FOR CHRIST

This principle, of course, figures prominently in our experience of Jesus Christ. Above all else, we need to remember that being a Christian is a process and not a state. It may begin with a decision, but it is essentially a life. In the Christian life there are no absolute victories or absolute defeats. It's like riding a bicycle - you either go on or go off! Stay with it or drop out.

Let me try to bring this closer to home by clothing it in some direct questions. First, how current are your exertions for Jesus Christ? A while ago I was asked to give a character reference for a man who was trying to make a connection with a Christian institution. Most of the questions were routine, but there was one question that made me stop: "In what ways has the applicant demonstrated his Christian discipleship in the last two years?" The past tense is tell-tale here - formerly, used to, once. I have the feeling that the ranks of Jesus followers are crowded with what might be called "scrapbook Christians" - folks who move about from place to place talking easily about what they once used to do or be in terms of Christian discipleship. Scrap-book Christians we call them. Maybe you're one. Throw out the old clippings; get some new ones.

How does it come about? In part, because it's hard to sustain the vision as the years move on! We reach the middle years and begin to ask ourselves: "Haven't I been pushing myself too hard?" "Maybe it's time I let up a little and let someone else have a go with it". "The time has come for me to consider my own needs... let someone else do the chore, teach the class, head the committee...I've got myself to think of".

A Methodist minister who had just been made a District Superintendent went over to the Bishop and said, "Sir, you can count on me to take care of the young ministers". But the Bishop replied, "Don't bother with the young ones, take care of the men in the middle years". The Bishop knew that there is a destruction that wasteth at noon day.

Then, too, I suppose we also tend to become past-tense Christians because back yonder when we tried to apply ourselves to a particular task the results were not that great. Sometimes it's good to remember that a private foot soldier is not

always the best judge of how the war is going.

There is a heroism involved in holding on, hanging in there. And it may very well be that when the history of these decades is written up we will find out that the most heroic figures of all were the ones who were able to maintain their ground, able to hold their own. I was impressed by a statement made by Roger Heyns, the now retired Chancellor of the University of California at Berkeley, who said last November, reflecting on five stormy years at the helm of one of the great universities:

"I guess our main accomplishment was that we stayed open, that we kept giving education, that people continued to graduate with good degrees".

How current then are your exertions for Jesus Christ?

"Since by its fruit a tree is judged,  
Show me thy fruit, the latest act of thine!  
For in the last is summed the first, and all -  
What thy life last put heart and soul into,  
There shall I taste thy product".

#### WHERE DOES CHRIST RANK IN YOUR LOYALTIES

Another question to put before you is this: where does Christ rank in your loyalties? Each of us has many loyalties. Loyalty to family, to region, to nation, to vocation, to party, to "in-group". In a very gradual way as life has moved on for us we have rearranged these loyalties in the interest of getting ahead in the world. Life might very well come to some of us and say, "You've come a long way, baby". Yes - you've come a long way from the church of your childhood years where you made a sincere and total commitment to the primacy of Christ. You're fitting in, grooving, and you feel yourself a part of this city's pulsating and swinging scene. You've come a long way - but have you made it on the strength of compromised fidelity to the one you call Lord.

To come at it differently, is your alliance with Christ the alliance that informs and determines all of your other alliances? Are you a democrat who happens to be a Christian, or a Christian who happens to be a democrat? Are you a teacher who happens to be a Christian, or a Christian who happens to be a teacher? Are you a homeowner who happens to be a Christian, or a Christian who happens to be a homeowner. Are you a black power advocate who happens to be a Christian, or a Christian who happens to be a black power advocate?

John MacQuarrie was right when he observed: "Every cultural mood sharpens our perception of some matters, but it seems to do so only by dulling our awareness of others".

There are some questions that we might ask ourselves in order to see what our priorities really are. For instance, those of us who are conservatively inclined might ask ourselves:

1. Is my loyalty to law and order a device to maintain personal privilege?
2. Is my commitment to old ways at bottom a fear of the new?
3. Is my displeasure with non-violent protest and reform movements a sign that I am really prejudiced against minority groups?

And on the other hand those of us who think of ourselves as liberal might ask:

1. Is my inability to tolerate the transcendent in religion not progress, but a lack of faith?
2. Is my zeal for the under-dog based on love for God and man, or could it rest in part on class hatred?
3. Does my moral elasticity on sex, on drugs, and crime result from a searching of the mind of Christ, or a tendency to naively believe that anything new is better than anything old?

At some point along the way most of us who name the Master's name were sure that we would seek first the King of God and His righteousness, but nothing stays won. We must struggle to maintain His primacy over us, "lest" as Paul put it, ... "having preached to others I myself should be disqualified. Men wouldn't listen to an Apostle whose faith was unsupported by his life.

HOW OFTEN IS HIS NAME ON YOUR LIPS

Finally, this last question: how often is His name on your lips? It's been pointed out to us that one of the basic ways in which the communists were able to take over China was through the tactic of "gossiping communism". They had a hard core of believers infiltrate the bazaars and market places saying, "Have you seen what has happened over here? Do you know why it has happened? It happened because of communism". They went around gossiping their faith.

How often is His name on your lips? "Gossiping the Gospel". If He is truly first in our hearts will he not frequently be on our tongues? Does it sound too simple for those of us who have outgrown the concept of personal witness? Perhaps it's not our style, perhaps we don't feel comfortable doing it, perhaps we say "our deeds speak louder than our words" - but I have the feeling that personal witnessing may make a strong comeback one of these years in the Church. Signs of it are already to be seen and whether it's a trend or just a passing fad - who knows? But in a day when institutions try to persuade by massive, impersonal public relations' schemes, the word of one man to another counts for more and more. If you tell me after this service that you know of a man who makes and seals clothes in this city at a fair price and services what he sells, you can counteract for me a full page ad by another clothier in today's Times.

This may be one of the results of the various credibility gaps. It is hard to always believe when government speaks these days. Hard to believe when industry speaks. But if some man can tell me face to face - not offensively or intrusively - what God means to him his word has the potential of a startling impact! Where you live and where you work - do they know you're a Christian, one of His? The warm, natural, enthusiastic sharing of one's faith with another can do wonders in strengthening the body of Christ. Far more than expensive advertising and public relations' programs. They didn't have them 2000 years ago and they did pretty well.  
by word of mouth.

NOTHING STAYS WON

Nothing stays won. We must work at it. Call this, if you will a plea for perseverance. Our forefathers use to speak of the "perseverance of the saints". It takes a certain herosim to hold on and hang in there. Maybe they qualified as saints because they persevered. It was the Duke of Wellington who said when someone asked him the secret of the English victory over the French forces at Wzterloo: "We were brave five minutes longer!" This is the spirit we need to have!

Nothing stays won. But remember too: nothing need stay lost. Recall that it was Christ who sought out Peter following his base denial and asked, "Simon, Son of John, lovest thou me?" Peter, warming to the opportunity, said: "Yea, Lord; thou knowest I love Thee". Jesus replied: "Feed my sheep." And with that he was back in business again! Nothing stays won, but nothing need stay lost!

LET US PRAY      Forbid it, Lord, that we should be at ease in terms of our  
loyalty and commitment to Thee:

Lukewarm in our affection. Sluggish in our faith. Slow to respond. Seldom at prayer. May our loyalty to Thee be as current as thy faithfulness to us. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen