

"BEING A CHRISTIAN IN THE MEANINGFUL SENSE OF THE WORD"

INTRODUCTION

What I have to say today was suggested by Robert Bolt, the author of the play ~~and now a movie~~, "A Man For All Seasons". The play, as you know, ran on Broadway a couple of years and the film version opened here in the city just before Christmas and the NY City film critics rate it as the best movie of the year.

Bolt, the author, explains how he, a modern playwright, went to the 16th century for a subject and chose as his central character and hero a Christian saint, Thomas More, esteemed alike by Protestants and Catholics, a man of character and principle who suffered martyrdom rather than go against his conscience. You might suppose that Bolt himself is a staunch churchman. Not at all. "I am not a Catholic" he writes, "nor even in the meaningful sense of the word a Christian". He provides a clue to what he has in mind for he goes on to make the point that for Thomas More, though a loyal subject of the King,

"the English Kingdom, his immediate society, was subservient to the larger society of the Church of Christ, founded by Christ, extending over Past and Future, ruled from Heaven"

Bolt then adds this comment: "There are still some for whom that is perfectly simple, but for most it can only be a metaphor. I took it as a metaphor".

DEVELOPMENT

Suppose we think about this. Those of us who take Christianity seriously had better think about it. Bolt after all is not discussing a minority attitude, but rather a majority attitude. Christmas is just behind us. In Europe and America, partly because of the commercialization of the Festival, everybody was aware of it. But how was it regarded? How meaningful was it?

The Incarnation - the Word become flesh, God sending His Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved - to be sure, there are those for whom this is "perfectly simple". They have no skeptical questions to ask. The doctrines of the Christian Faith they accept on faith or on authority, the authority of the Mother Church. But isn't Bolt correct in his observation? For more and more people it is all taken as a metaphor, a myth - poetic, perhaps, but remote from the reality of everyday life in a competitive and combative world. I think Bolt is putting into words what many people might feel could be said about themselves, "I'm not a Catholic....nor even in the meaningful sense of the word - a Christian".

INDIFFERENCE

At this juncture, I want to broaden our frame of reference. I shall come back to Bolt and the attitude he takes later on, but it is important to bear in mind that there are other attitudes which have the same end result.

Some are not Christians in the meaningful sense of the word because of indifference. They're not really interested in Christ. He doesn't count for much with them. For the most part, they are taken up with the here and now, with the visible, tangible world, with material concerns and creature comforts. Their names in many cases are on the membership rolls of churches, and they put in an appearance at church at intervals, but their church membership like their commitment to Christ is nominal. How one wishes one could break down that wall of indifference. I haven't seen the movie, "A Man For All Seasons" yet, but I'm wondering whether seeing it might do something of this sort. To be confronted with a real Christian in any century - Thomas More in the 16th - is always a conscience disturbing experience and is always a spur to self-examination.

As I think of the church and its needs, it is not better church buildings that we need. We have the buildings. And it is not stream lined organization that we need. We have this. It's true that preaching and teaching could be and should be more relevant and effective. But for the shattering of an almost granite like indifference what the churches require is better Christians - Christians of the caliber of Thomas More.

HIGH COST There is another fact to keep in mind. Some are not Christians in any meaningful sense of the word because they are not prepared to pay the cost or toe the line. They may not know much about Christ, but one thing they do know - they realize that He is a Person who makes rigorous demands on his followers. They turn away from Christ for the same reason that the rich Young Ruler did - the sacrifice called for is greater than they are prepared to make.

For the past few days the World Journal Tribune has been running a series of articles about Jackie Gleason. As I have read them, I was reminded of a television interview that David Susskind had with Jackie Gleason not too long ago. There was more discussion of religion than I for one anticipated. Gleason told how, brought up a Catholic, he had turned away from Catholicism. He was looking, he said, for an easier religion - a religion with fewer demands, taking less toll on time and money, less stringent where self-discipline and personal morals are concerned. He makes no claim now to be a good practicing Catholic, but he sees now as he did not at the time that his break away was an evasion of moral duty, moral obligation.

Can there be any doubt that time and again lapses both from Protestantism and Catholicism are due to this factor - the rigorous moral demand. To be sure, there are those who have intellectual difficulties with Christianity, but sometimes, however, the moral difficulties run deeper and then the question to be faced is: do I have difficulty, for instance, keeping the Ten Commandments? Do I have difficulty with the imperatives of the New Testament? "Seek ye first the Kingdom of God?" "Turn the other cheek?" "If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross and follow me?" We have too many Christians holding membership on their church rolls who are not willing to deny themselves - even a little bit to help the church of Christ. We're just completing the Financial Canvass here in our church and it's so disappointing to see how many there are on our rolls who are not willing to deny themselves even a dollar or two to give to the support of their church.

BACK TO BOLT Let us come back to Robert Bolt, author of the play and the film script of "A Man For All Seasons". Consider the person who is his hero - Thomas More - a Christian saint - courageous in withstanding oppresion, sacrificing the welfare of his wife and daughter to the demands of his conscience, dying for what he believed to be right, for what he believes to be the law of God.

As I meentioned earlier, the film critics are unanimous in reporting that this is the best film of 1966. Here's a movie that doesn't owe its success to sex; it has deplorable characters - Thomas Cromwell can match for decadence any lost soul in Tennessee Williams gallery or Edward Albee's gallery - but its central character is a man of God - a saint of God. Life magazine, in reviewing the movie in this week's issue, says this about More:

"When More, in the severe Tudor setting, elects to keep silent and die rather than betray his faith, it is the kind of silence that modern ears ache to hear - a silence that rings like a hosanna to God and a shout of victory for the human spirit"

Nevertheless while drawn to him, while making Thomas More his hero, the author Robert Bolt finds he cannot believe what More believed, and takes the conception of "the Church of Christ, founded by Christ, extending over Past and Future, ruled from Heaven" as metaphor. And he adds, "I am not a Catholic nor even in the meaningful sense of the word a Christian".

And those of us who are seeking to be Christians in the meaningful sense of the word would do well to reflect over such an attitude. We go on talking about God and Christ and the Church and the Kingdom of God as though they can all be taken for granted, and accepted by all without question. They are not being taken for granted. For some they can only be taken as metaphors; for others they are without meaning. There is an impression on the outside that we on the inside, in the churches, are not completely honest about what we actually believe, about our sincerity in putting it into practice, that for us, as well as for non-church-goers, much of Christian theology is metaphor, that we pay lip-service to New Testament categories of thought and ethics but fail to relate them to the world of today, in short that we are not in any meaningful sense of the word - true Christians. Is this true? It's a question that each of us must ask of him self.

PEOPLE WE KNOW Think about these people now - we all number them among our friends and associates - who feel they cannot fit into the traditional, conventional structure of church life as we've known it, people for whom the current presentation of Christianity has little or no appeal, who are neither interested in it nor challenged by it. There are scores of them, all around us in this city. They ought to be a concern to us. It should trouble and disturb us that they see no vital connection between the church of Christ and what matters most to them, that they cannot relate their highest and best convictions about life to institutional Christianity. There are great numbers of them - mentally alert and socially sensitive. About one such person Florence Allshorn wrote, "I have met one big person lately who isn't a Christian, though her belief in God is bigger than anything we could ever attain to - I mean the conception she has". We all know such people. We respect and admire them, and we need to listen to what they have to say.

I'm sure those of us who are members of the church can learn from those who are not members of it and who tend to be critical of it. ~~Many suggest that they find more essential Christianity outside the church than in it.~~ I was talking with a ministerial friend on Friday who has a church in a rural area and who for a number of years has had a group of people, none of whom are members of the church, meeting for one evening every two weeks in his home. It is his belief that what has been happening in the minds and lives of those in the group is every bit as important as what has been going on in his congregation. You may be thinking if those people have been meeting for so long in the home of a minister, isn't it to be expected that some of them would join the church? The answer is - and we may not like the answer - but we have to face it - that unless there are striking changes in the life and record of our churches, and that means striking changes in the life and record of church members, many will feel no call to join them. In other words, we in the church have really got to get with it - or else there won't be a church around in the next generation.

WHERE TO BEGIN What about those for whom Christianity, especially on its theological side - incarnation, atonement, salvation, redemption, resurrection, kingdom of God - is taken as metaphor. Shouldn't we begin with them where Christ began. When he enlisted followers He did not insist on subscription to a creed. "Follow me" was the sum of all that He had to say to men and women. "Follow me".

The scene at Caesarea Phillippi described in the scripture lesson this morning was typical. With death facing Him, the question which Christ regarded of supreme importance was neither some theological doctrine or some ethical principle. It was purely personal: WHOM SAY YE THAT I AM? In other other words: "What do you think of me?" "What is your attitude toward me?" This was the important question. And everything else is secondary. Everything else for belief and behaviour grows out of that.

And when I sense the impact that More made on Robert Bolt, I ask myself what the impact would be were he to face himself with the person of Christ: His selflessness, His magnanimity, His courage, His salae of values, His faith in God, His faith in people. The church's chief task, as I see it, is to present Christ. To present the person of Christ to people, to call them to a decision concerning Him - to present the Christ who challenges us just as he challenged men and women of the 1st century, and men like Thomas More of the 16th century. "Whom say ye that I am" "What is your attitude to Him" "What do you think about Him".

PRAYER O God, who hast revealed thyself to us in Jesus - our Lord and Master - help us to turn to him in simplicity - in sincerity - in truth - that we may always be conscious of the highest possibilities of life as we find them in Him and in His ways, and let us never rest until we have come near Him and brought others to Him - to Him who is the way - the truth - and the life. In the spirit of Christ, we pray.