

Thoughtful Christian people now
for some time have been actively
engaged in this struggle.....seeing
to it that the right thing, the
Christian thing is done. However,
there are too many Christians
that have been on the wrong side of
this whole thing...

On the side-lines..
the fence...
wrong side...

"BUILDING BRIDGES IN 1965"

INTRODUCTION

It was on Saturday afternoon, the 21st day of November at three o'clock, that the longest bridge in the world was opened to the public. This bridge, as you know, is swung from Brooklyn to Staten Island and it spans the harbor of this city. It is named the Verrazano Bridge, named for the Italian navigator who, under the French flag, is believed to have been the first explorer from the Old World to sail into New York Harbor. That was in the year 1524.

A FEW THINGS ABOUT THE BRIDGE

I don't know how many of you have yet to drive across it. I see according to Friday's Times that already 1,860,000 vehicles have paid nearly a million dollars in tolls thus far. I remember reading at the time it was opened that each of its two towers is taller than Rockefeller Center. And did you know that the four main cables each consist of 143,000 miles of steel wire, enough to go six times around the equator, and more than half way to the moon. Inside the towers are ladders, which if placed end to end, would stretch up for 16 miles, three times as high as Mount Everest. This bridge which looks so light and graceful is actually quite heavy. It weighs 1,265,000 tons. By comparison, the Empire State Building seems like a lightweight. It weighs only 365,000 tons. The final coat of gray paint took 36,250 gallons, enough paint to paint three thousand three bedroom houses.

DEVELOPMENT

All of this, as you know, is to facilitate the movement of people. First, it makes it possible for us to get around the streets of Manhattan a little bit better by keeping out of the city all of the cars and trucks that want to go to southern New Jersey from Long Island. Traffic is supposed to be lighter in our city streets, but I haven't noticed it yet. The bridge makes it possible for people who want to go to Staten Island and southern New Jersey to go more quickly than they could before. It is said that the time is reduced by ninety minutes. We live in an age of mobility and speed, and this bridge was built to facilitate both mobility and speed.

But there is something else about this bridge. It is useful, to be sure, but it is also beautiful. The chief construction engineer said to one of the reports covering the opening:

"To us, she is THE bridge! She stand alone.
And when she puts her necklace on..."

And he said no more, but simply pointed to the string of lights that went on when darkness fell. And another engineer said to the same reporter: "She's so pretty....so slim, so gentle, and yet - so strong!"

WHAT HAS THIS BRIDGE TO DO WITH US?

What has this bridge to do with us this morning.

Well, it presents us with several thoughts to consider as we start another year.

AGE OF TECHNOLOGY

We live in an age of technology, an age of science and machinery. And there are many things that we deplore about the age we live in, not least of which is the very obsession with bigness which this bridge itself exemplifies.

Science often seems to make God unnecessary; and machinery actually makes men unnecessary, for the more automation increases, the fewer things there are for men and women to do. Machines pick the cotton, operate the telephones, do the laundry, wash the dishes. We deplore the gradual depersonalization of life by this rapid mechanization of our daily existence. But this bridge is evidence of the fact that in this technological age we can still make things that are not only useful, but beautiful. And it is worth remembering that the very technology which we sometimes deplore and are frightened by, provides us with good things which enrich, enhance and make life better.

ANOTHER REASON

However, there is another reason why we think of this bridge this morning. We know that the bridge that we need most is not the bridge between two places separated by great bodies of water, but the bridge between two people, or two groups of people, separated by hostility because of mistrust, fear, jealousy, and misunderstanding. I feel if we can build a bridge from one place to another, we ought to be able to build a greater bridge from one person to another. We know we can because we have already begun.

1964 saw a bridge begun between Catholics and Protestants. We have swung the first cable from pier to pier. This bridge is not yet completed, and it will take a long time to finish it, to unravel the theological differences of centuries that have kept us apart. But that bridge, thank God, has been started. Five years ago no one could ever have believed that the gulf between Protestantism and Catholicism could be shouted across by the human voice, let alone reached across by human hands.

The headlines before Christmas of the Roman Catholic entrance as a full member into the New Mexico Council of Churches is a dramatic case in point. Only yesterday we were saying we must do together only those things we cannot do effectively as denominations. Today, it is our conviction that we may do separately only that precious little which in conscience under God and in the name of Christ, we are forbidden to do in concert. By tomorrow, if we fail to catch up with our own times, the world will be seeking another structure of unity and mission. 1965 presents us with opportunity to strengthen the bridge already being built.

What about the bridge between the Christian and the Jew. 1964 saw the Vatican Council dismiss the charge of deicide against the Jewish people. Thoughtful persons have long since ceased to feel hostility to the Jews as a people because of the Crucifixion of Christ. This document of the Vatican Ecumenical Council was long overdue. The evils which led to the cross pervade all peoples down to the present time.

Dr. Sockman, preaching several weeks ago at Riverside Church, touched on this matter in his sermon and in so doing praised the Vatican Council for this long, overdue document. He went on to say this:

"Just as Roman Catholics and Protestants are now entering a new era of cooperation so Christians and Jews should develop a more serious program of dialogue to clarify what we have in common". "It is now high time for the Christian Church to go further in its relations with Judaism and to re-study more deeply its rootage in the Jewish faith. We need both the New Testament Gospel of love and the Old Testament emphasis on law as we face the issues of our time".

1965 presents us with opportunity to build a stronger bridge between the Christian community and the Jewish community.

Then, too, we have already swung some strong cables between the white man and the colored man. This bridge is well under way; it is not yet finished. It will be some time before it is completed. However, 1964 saw the construction of that bridge move ahead in a significant way as the strong and sturdy cables of the Civil Rights Bill were swung. Eventually this bridge will carry increased traffic of understanding and communication between the white man and the Negro.

As you know, it is much harder to build this kind of bridge than it is to build a bridge across the Narrows of New York Harbor. Old forms and old patterns are not easily shattered. Traditions and prejudices and old loyalties are not easily overcome. But this bridge has been begun and twenty years ago we might not have thought it possible to conceive of such a bridge.

IT IS NOT EASY It's interesting to reflect upon this thought that when you leave New York City by ship for Europe, you sail down the harbor and before you reach the open sea, you pass through the Narrows under the newly built bridge. The Narrows is a distance of about one mile with Long Island on one side and Staten Island on the other side. It reminds one of something Jesus said about life - "For the gate is narrow and the way is hard, that leads to life....." We must pass through the narrow gates of discipline - the discipline of patience, the discipline of perseverance, the discipline of justice, the discipline of goodness, and goodwill, the discipline of Christian love and tolerance - before we shall enter into the great sea of human progress, peace and fulfillment. It is not easy. New forms require the steady work of master architects, persons well versed and deeply schooled in the Christian ethic, the teachings of Jesus.

A line from an editorial that appeared in the NY Times on January 1st comes to mind: "The people of these United States can determine to make 1965 a year of better understanding between races and religions". Each of us can personally endorse and encourage efforts to broaden areas of agreement and understanding in order to

strengthen the bridges now being built.

ONE MORE THING

One more thing about this new bridge. I remember reading in the paper the Monday after the bridge was opened this line: "New bridge - new traffic jam". The article went on to say, "New York has a brand new bridge and a grand new traffic problem". When I read that I thought to myself - it's a perfect illustration of the fact that there are no unmitigated blessings in life, at least not many. Every forward step we take, presents us with a new set of problems, new dangers that must be met and handled. In a sense, every forward step is a challenge to take another step. However, when it comes to progress in human relationships, let us not regard the new situation as a problem but rather as an opportunity. An opportunity to put into practice some teachings given to us close to two thousand years ago. Do not look back wistfully to days that are gone, but look forward to the opportunities that are unfolding. Look ahead to new bridges that can be built between peoples.

For instance, as our community becomes a more inclusive type of community with peoples of all backgrounds and nationalities mixing together, undoubtedly there will be problems in housing and schooling. Regard them as opportunities to put into practice your Christian convictions regarding the brotherhood of man and the fatherhood of God. Reach out and build bridges.

TEXT

If I were to give this sermon a text, I would turn to Luke's Gospel the 10th chapter and direct you to the Parable of the Good Samaritan. The Samaritan, says Lesley Weatherhead, built a bridge that day. He saw a person in need and went to him and had compassion and helped him. Jesus of Nazareth who told this story was always doing that very thing. He was a great bridge builder. He made so many bridges that people soon forgot to which race he belonged. It mattered not to Him whether it was a sinning woman, a leper, a despised tax gatherer, a rich young ruler, a dying thief, a person of another race. He built bridges across which the traffic of love and understanding could pass. And by the same token, it should make no difference at all to those who are his followers whether it be a Catholic, a Jew, or a Protestant - a black man or a white man, a rich man or a poor man - for all, all are God's children and all are precious in his sight!

PRAYER

O God and Master of us all, help us to put into practice in our daily lives these things that we believe and think so sincerely and so seriously; and as we go about our way, help us so to live that we may be more nearly measured by the character of our Lord and Master, Jesus Christ. Amen
Show us the way of light and love. We know what we ought to do. Teach us how to do it. Amen

"But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was; and when he saw him, he had compassion... and went to him"