

DARE I BELIEVE IN LIFE AFTER DEATH?

INTRODUCTION

We come today to the last in this series of seven sermons all of which have been cast in the same form. Together we shall be attempting to answer this great question: "Dare I Believe in Life After Death?" I think that all of you realize right here in the beginning of this sermon that the answer to this question is certainly going to be in the affirmative. And yet, speaking personally, I don't feel it's quite enough simply to say "Well.....yes.....you can believe in life after death" and to say nothing more on this subject. It's good for us to think about this question just like we've thought about some of the other great questions of life during this Lenten Season, and perhaps in the course of things something will be said that will shed some measure of light on a question that may have been for some person here today a very baffling mystery. At least I hope so....

DEVELOPMENT

I'm going to suggest something to you here in the opening moments of this sermon, something which I have no way of proving, and something with which some of you will not agree. But I have the feeling that generally speaking people today are a little uneasy in their minds about this belief of life after death. They're not at all sure in their convictions regarding it. As a matter of fact, if you and I were to conduct some kind of a poll here this morning asking this question: Do You Believe in Life After Death? and this question too, What Do You Believe About Life After Death?, we might be a little surprised and perhaps somewhat shocked at the results that would be indicated. As I said, I have no way of proving this. I may be wrong, and I hope I am, but by and large, it does seem to me that people are uneasy in their minds about this belief. They're not at all sure in their convictions. We don't disbelieve it entirely. We just don't know what we think about it. I think we want to believe in it, and we do - officially and provisionally. But we have difficulty in our minds picturing it. It doesn't fit easily into any of our normal patterns of thought. We're not accustomed to this idea of a person dying and then coming back to life again; and we just hope and pray that our children don't ask us any questions about it.

I suppose there are different reasons for this feeling of uneasiness. Modern science has done its part to create some of this uncertainty. We've been raised in the scientific age. The old cosmology of the Bible has been removed from our minds, ie, the old idea of a heaven up here and a hell down here with earth squeezed somewhere in between. Unfortunately we have had difficulty in replacing this old idea with a new picture. And then this too, I think that God is less real to us than he was to our grandparents. We find it difficult to visualize a God who knows and cares for each one of these two and a half billion two legged creatures that run around the globe, and who when they die takes them back unto himself. We find it difficult to believe that all of these creatures are destined for eternal life. One could go on and mention other reasons, but since this isn't the main purpose of this sermon, and since our time is limited, I won't attempt to do this. I've introduced all of this into your thinking in order to establish the fact in your minds that this question: "Dare I Believe in Life After Death" is a real and honest question in the minds of many real and honest Christians.

A little over a year ago I preached a sermon entitled "How Do We Know There is A God". In that sermon I suggested to you this idea that when it comes to the existence of God we should always look for pointers and not for proofs, the idea being of course that the existence of God is something that cannot be reduced to the level of scientific formulas and mathematical proofs and propositions. It seems to me that something of this same idea applies to the subject of this sermon, something of the same thought is involved with this idea of life after death. We ought to look for pointers and not for proofs for one cannot reduce this idea to the level of scientific formulas and mathematical propositions. In other words, we are dealing here with something that falls within the experience of faith. But even here within the framework of our Christian faith, we can identify and locate some pointers that will establish beyond any measure of doubt the fact of a life after death.

JESUS AND HIS VICTORY OVER DEATH...

To begin with, the first pointer, the pointer that speaks to the hearts of most Christians rests in the fact that Jesus somehow was mysteriously triumphant and victorious over death. And for nineteen hundred years, we have taken comfort from this conviction that Jesus did not die a natural death, and that he proved conqueror over every enemy of the human spirit. This conviction, as you know, was born in the hearts of his disciples on that first Easter morn, and it has never let up. In this radiant hope the early Christians found their answer, and because of this hope they lived, suffered and died. Let me say this that experiences of this nature are always difficult to put into words, and sometimes the words are less than satisfying to our minds. But this much we know - his friends claimed that they saw him. They had contact with him. They felt his presence. Life flowed between them. And somehow in all of the great mystery of God, he gave them the assurance that this life we live is not hemmed in by time and space, and that death as we know it is not the end, but only the beginning. We don't for sure just what happened, and we shall never know exactly what took place. But in this great event which give birth to our faith, in this great event that changed the lives of some common ordinary fishermen who were greatly discouraged, in this great event, the life of the world to come was brought that much closer to us.

E. A. Robinson, one of the great American poets once said this: "I like to leave a poem with a fringe around it. In real poetry you find that something has been said, and yet you find also about it a sort of nimbus of what cannot be said". It seems to me that if this is true about a poem, it is even more true of the great mysteries of life, including the mystery of the resurrection of Christ. There is a nimbus around it of what cannot be said.

OUR FAITH IN GOD

Now as we pursue this matter, and go a little deeper into the subject, we find this to be true that in the final analysis our chief reason for daring to believe in immortality rests upon our faith in God. Even when we make Jesus the starting point, we are in a very real sense harking back to God, for it is God as St. Paul pointed out who "Gave us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ".

Think of it, if you will, in this fashion - that God is our Father and that we are his children. If he is our Father, then he cares for us. And if he cares for us, his concern lasts not just a little while but it lasts for always. Not even death can take us out of our Father's

house, or beyond the reach of his continuous care. I realize that this is putting it in rather simple terms, but it seems to me that it would be a rather heartless father who would create us in his image, rear us into self-conscious sons and daughters, develop within us personalities capable of thinking high thoughts and planning noble deeds, permit us to dream dreams of a life that has no end, and then after a few short years snuff us out as one blows out a candle. If we are deceived concerning him and he is not the kind of God that Jesus revealed, then we have very little reason to hope for immortality. But if he is what we have believed him to be, then the age old assurance of life after death rests on a firm foundation. It is still not a proven fact; it is faith, but a faith strong enough to live by and to die by.

And so to sum up this point just made: God cares for us deeply, and therefore we may dare to believe he will care for us to the very end. Human personality is his most priceless and precious creation. Even the language of science lends weight to this belief. The fossils of the rocks, and the various animal species tell a story of countless ages devoted to the process of creative evolution. This process seems to be going somewhere. It looks as though it had a purpose. The end result is man - human personality. Our universe has lavished endless time and patience on the production of human personality. Does it make sense to suppose that the universe after all this effort would suddenly turn around and blot out its most delicate creation. Think of it if you will in this fashion: if you watched a skilled craftsman spending twenty years fashioning a particularly fine watch, would you expect him to let it run five minutes and then crush it to bits under his heel. And so it seems to me that this universe in which we live, in spite of all that man has done to it, does make sense. It acts as though it were up to something. And if it's gone to so much trouble to create human personality, it's likely to take lasting care of what it has made. This then is the second pointer: our faith in a benevolent God whose purposes are eternally good and trustworthy.

WHY DO PEOPLE GO TO CHURCH
ON EASTER SUNDAY.....WHY

Early in this sermon I introduced this thought to you that a great many people, both in and out of the church, are a little uneasy in their minds concerning this belief in life after death. Some of you might raise this question: "If what you say is true, then why are the churches filled on Easter Sunday? After all Easter is the occasion when we go to church and give witness to our faith in life after death. Why are the churches filled on this Sunday like no other Sunday of the year".

Well I suppose different reasons could be mentioned. As you know there are some people who go to church on Easter Sunday out of habit. They were brought up always to go to church on Easter. Their parents always went to church on Easter, and their grandparents before them. It's been done for generations, and sometimes habits that are this deeply rooted are hard to break. Others go to church on Easter because they want to hang on to the ritual and ceremony and quaintness of the day, and while they don't take too seriously the indications which these things provide, at least they want to hang on to them. They like to hear the music, and they like to see the flowers. Some people attend church on Easter because of the prestige that's involved. It's difficult for us to conceive of this taking place within the church, but I'm realistic enough to know that there are some people who attend because of the thrill and excitement that's involved. Socially, you might say, it's the thing to do.

But frankly I'm not satisfied with any of these answers. I think that perhaps the reason goes a little deeper than you and I might realize. I'm not at all sure just how to express this to you, but it seems to me that deep down in our hearts all of us want the reassurance that this day offers. We feel the limitations and frustrations of this life, and our spirits grope, perhaps unconsciously, for that ageless assurance that death as we know is not the end of everything. And so in a sense people may be drawn here because for a few brief moments they may catch a glimpse of this great assurance. There are suggestions, and intimations, and convictions of the heart. They may see it in the flowers for flowers are a thing of beauty and while their beauty is transient and fading, they nevertheless speak to us of a beauty that is not fading and transient. They may hear it in the music for music comes from that other world where things are changeless and eternal. They may see it in the empty cross for the cross openly proclaims the triumph of Christ over death.

And perhaps here in our own inner desire, our craving, and our need to believe in a life beyond this, we have something of a pointer. Some would say that because we have this need and desire to believe in a future life, it therefore must be true, else God would not have fashioned this desire within our hearts in the first place. You'll recognize this to be the thinking of the pragmatic philosopher. It was William James, I believe who when asked this question: "Do you believe in God? Is it that you have experienced his presence?" replied "No, I haven't experienced his presence, but rather I need him so therefore he must be true". Something of the same idea is involved here. We need to believe in life after death. Life makes more sense it seems when we do.

These then are some of the pointers, mind you not proofs which speak to the hearts and mind of those who have wrestled with this question. First: the victory of Jesus over death. Second: the faith in a benevolent God whose purposes are eternally good and trustworthy. And third: our own deep need to believe in life after death.

CLOSING SECTION

Let me say this to you in these closing minutes.

I think you can appreciate that we've been moving ~~anne~~ again through some deep waters. There are no easy answers to these great questions regarding the future life, and one certainly cannot expect to plumb the depths of this great mystery here in 20 minutes on a Sunday morning. But I hope that at least something has been said that will add at least one ounce of content to one's person's appreciation of life after death.

Science as you know says that all the physical in us is ninety-eight cents worth of chemical matter (At least that's what it was a few years ago before inflation took hold). Is that the last word about us. There are some who would believe that it is. And when you and I lift our thoughts to Him through whom the Divine so gloriously shone, can you believe that that's the last word about him - ninety-eight cents worth of chemical matter, and when that dissolved, all was gone? I for one cannot. It seems to me that it's more difficult not to believe in life after death than it is to believe in it. This mortal must put on immortality. Let that faith this Easter day dignify your life, ground your character on unshakable foundations of his abiding truth, and together let us -

"Sing with all the sons of glory,
Sing the resurrection song!
Death and sorrow, earth's dark story,
To the former days belong.
All around the clouds are breaking,
Soon the storms of time shall cease.
In God's likeness, man awaking
Knows the everlasting peace."

LET US PRAY:

God our Father, as the world kneels once again before this moving ~~event~~
of that first Easter morn, open our eyes to the great truth it proclaims
that death as we know it is not the end of life, but only the birth
into a greater and far more glorious existence. Help us always to
trust thee, and to commit ourselves to thee until the day break and
the shadows fæe away. Amen