

"DO YOU THINK THAT I HAVE COME TO GIVE PEACE?"

INTRODUCTION

Anyone who is wise in the ways of the world knows full well the importance of reading the small print. Whether it's an insurance policy, a warranty, an apartment lease, that fine print should never go unexamined.

This is the case because, human nature being what it is, we like to show the roses and hide the thorns. What a product can do, we shout; what it cannot do, we whisper. What a policy covers is widely proclaimed; what it excludes is for the company to know, and for you to find out!

Many of those who promote the Gospel of Jesus Christ resort to a similar strategy. "Christ Is the Answer". "Attend Church For Peace of Mind". "Faith Will Enrich Your Life". Such claims, however well intentioned, contain an element of deception; they distort by omission. For Christian faith has to do also with being persecuted for righteousness sake, with taking up the cross and following Him, with suffering the offense of the Gospel, with being in a war.

DEVELOPMENT

Let it be said to the everlasting credit of our Lord that He never falsely represented His cause.

In His opening message to the newly recruited disciples He made quite clear what lay before them. To these recruits, he said:

"I send you as sheep among wolves. Men will deliver you up to councils and flog you in their synagogues. Brother will deliver up brother to death. You will be hated by all for My name's sake."

(Matthew 10: 16-22)

In that same vein He went on to put to them the question, "Do you think that I have come to give peace? No, I tell you, not peace, but division." Or, as Matthew puts it in His Gospel, "Not peace, but a sword." And this division would appear in the most intimate of human relationships - the family.

Said Jesus (in Luke's Gospel):

"In one house there will be division, three against two and two against three. Father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law."

Interesting...that this division would be along generational lines. Not peace, but a sword. Not peace (or wholeness) but division. It's one of the enigmas of religion that the Peacemaker Himself would become the occasion of conflict.

A CONCERN EMERGES

A serious concern emerges: was this conflict that Jesus predicted to be a temporary thing, or is it an abiding aspect of the Christian faith? It's true that a new enthusiasm in any field generates conflict. Sides form. Decisions are made. Inertia is threatened. Geniuses always trouble the waters. Is then, this conflict that Jesus anticipated only the conflict of the new as it sets in against the old?

I think not.

The Christian faith inherently offends. It is destined to arouse opposition and provoke resistance. This is so because Jesus came to personify and announce the reign of God. The coming age (the reign of God, that is) and the present age will always relate to each other in tension. Jesus went to the cross not because He comforted the afflicted, but because He was afflicting the comfortable. Conflict for the Christian is unavoidable.

Jesus is the perennial disturber of the status quo when He is rightly freed and understood. A while ago a pamphlet carrying these words was circulated in a Seminary in Portugal:

"Relevant information is requested that might lead to the arrest of Jesus Christ accused of seduction, anarchistic tendencies and conspiring against the State.

Special characteristics: scars on hands and feet. Alleged profession: carpenter. Nationality: Jewish. Aliases: Prince of Peace, Son of Man, Light of the World. No fixed address.

This wanted man preaches the equality and freedom of all people, represents Utopian ideas and must be described as a dangerous agitator. Members of the public are asked to report any relevant information to their nearest police station."

Remember that Sunday School hymn we use to sing, "Stand up, Stand up for Jesus". Yes, some "standing up" for Jesus is required of genuine Christians in any age or generation. "Do you think that I have come to bring peace?"

PUZZLING WORDS TO AMERICANS

Now I think that many fine Christians in this country find these words of Jesus puzzling. We do not recognize ourselves within that prophecy of conflict. We suffer, to be sure, from many things. We suffer from inflation. We suffer from environmental pollution. We suffer from crime and the like. But what do we suffer for the sake of our allegiance to Jesus Christ?

We do not suffer any embarrassment for Him, any inconvenience, any ridicule, any disapproval, any loss - material or otherwise.

Ah, but we argue in our own defense - the Gospel has been so effectively disseminated and received in America that this tension has been eased. The differences between world and Kingdom have here been shrunk. But, is this really the case? Has the nation become Christified, or have we lost the will to witness and to resist? Gilbert K. Chesterton wrote:

"We are not altering the real to suit the ideal.
We are altering the ideal: it is easier."

Have we? "Do you think that I have come to bring peace?"

PRESS CLAIMS OF HIS KINGDOM IN SOCIETY

Let me suggest two actions on our part that would restore a measure of this tension that ought to exist between ourselves and the world.

The first would be to press the claims of the Kingdom on society at large with greater fervor and urgency. And here, I believe, the key word is disarmament.

In the Old Testament Reading this morning we heard that cry from Micah for men "to beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks." We need to hear that word and to translate that vision into reality by pressing with greater urgency for an end to the arms race. We pray for peace but we pay for war.

For Protestants, Catholics and Jews, disarmament is becoming the most prominent social issue for the decade ahead. Religious groups are speaking out against the arms race between the United States and the Soviet Union. From Jimmy Carter's First Baptist Church in Washington to a small Christian community in Missoula, Montana, to Riverside Church in this city, religious groups are speaking out against the arms race. Praise the Lord, for this.

We share the common Biblical conviction that the survival of God's creation is at stake and His resources are being sinfully diverted from human need to military production. We must learn to wage peace, not war.

According to an article in today's NY Times by Kenneth Briggs, "much of the grist for the cause is supplied by recent United Nations figures on the cost of the arms race, an estimated \$400 billion in 1978." At the same time, the United Nations has estimated that 400 million people live on the brink of starvation in various countries.

"To put this figure in understandable terms" writes Joseph J. Fahey, head of the Catholic Peace Group, Pax Christi, in a recent issue of the Jesuit magazine America, "imagine that Jesus was given one-fourth of that sum for programs of social service. If He spent that \$400 billion in allotments of \$100,000 a day, He would have spent it throughout His lifetime, past the year 1,000, past 1978 and still have some 760 years left to spend that \$100,000 a day".

It has reached the point for many people "that the more arms we have, the more insecure we actually are". The Church's involvement in the cause of international disarmament belongs there. "Blessed are the peacemakers" said our Lord, "for they shall be called Sons of God".

WITNESSING WITH LESS EMBARRASSMENT / MORE ASSURANCE

The other action on our part that would restore some healthy tension between ourselves and the world has to do with "witnessing" with less embarrassment and with more assurance to the life-changing power of Jesus Christ in the hearts of individual men and women.

It's not the most "in thing" today to believe that Jesus or anyone else can make all that much difference in a human life. We've become so drugged by an over-dose to claims for hereditary influence, and we have become so enamoured by the possibilities of environmental change, that we have stopped believing that when Christ enters into a human heart, life is always changed.

When you read the memoirs of Jerry Rubin, one of the movers and shakers of the sixties, you come to a noteworthy piece of confession. While he and his colleagues were busy drafting the new order, they gave no thought to the inner person. Thus they became the victims of every swami, guru, medicine man and therapist who came down the road. We're almost ashamed to make a reference to Christ in our statements on our personal and social life.

How can a Christian talk about death and dying without any reference to the resurrection of Christ and the hope of Eternal life. How can a Christian talk about sex and marriage without reference to the Christ who hallows all relationships. How can a Christian talk of aging without referring to the will of God and His supporting love.

SKEPTICISM There's skepticism in our land about the power of God in the life of ordinary men and women. It almost seems that in order to win the friendship of an indifferent age, we have entered into a conspiracy of silence with regard to His name. It's shocking how skeptical we have become about what God can do in the life of someone in public office. This bit of skepticism comes through clearly when the press reports on politics.

Jimmy Carter takes his faith seriously and feels that he is in touch with the love of God. The press occasionally will poke fun at this. Or when Edmund Brown, Jr. disavows the Governors Mansion in California and elects to live a more modest life-style, he actually befuddles those who interview him. What is the political significance? What is the framework for this. All the man is saying is that somewhere in the past, Jesus touched his life and changed his sense of values. Wasn't he in a Jesuit seminary at one time?

Charles Colson claims that God has transformed him. One of our columnists, Mary McGrory, writing in the Post a few years ago and still bitter about Colson's so-called "dirty tricks" of the last administration complained, "If he has been washed in the blood of the lamb, there still are signs of ring around the collar". We laugh at that. But fundamentally it is a laugh of cynicism. I believe that any man or woman, boy or girl, who wishes to begin again with God deserves the support of our highest expectations.

If Jesus Christ can't make a person new, who can? And who of us is so perfectly converted that he or she can stand as an example to the world? When Jesus touched a man who had been blind and gave him back his sight, He asked him, "What do you see?" The man said, "I see men as tress, walking". He wasn't rightly focussed yet. That would come later.

It's one thing for the world outside to demean the possibilities of grace, but something else again when within the Church, we fail to believe that God can make all things new. Have we carelessly given in to the assumptions of a world that does not believe?

CLOSING I am not saying that we ought to see how obnoxious we can be. Some of us don't have to work on that anyway. I'm not saying that we should develop a form of ecclesiastical paranoia and measure our effectiveness by our hate mail. I am saying that there is something sadly missing when our conformity to the thought of the age is so complete that no significant differences remain. This troubles me.

Merve Griffin had some one on his program two or three weeks ago who has written a book dealing with the decline of Harvard University. Entitled, "Harvard On the Way Down", the young author (whose name I cannot recall) is convinced that this distinguished institution is beginning to slip. In trying to put his finger on the reason for this state of affairs he suggested that "Harvard today seems somehow to lack clarity of outline, energy of purpose and distinction". Even a University, when it becomes like everything around it is in danger of losing its reasons for life.

Jesus did not say, "Go ye into all the world and 'blend in' with what you find". H said, "Ye are the salt of the earth...the light of the world." "Go ye into all the world and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age."

ACT LIKE
IT

(Matthew 28: 19 - 20)

PRAYER Lord, forasmuch by nature we prefer the comfort of numbers and the ease that goes with popular positions, we pray that Your spirit may embolden us to assume the offense of the cross and to bear willingly the cost of genuine faith, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen