

EASTER AND THE CONQUEST OF DEATH

Text: "Death is swallowed up in victory"

I Corinthians 15: 54

INTRODUCTION

Where, outside of the Bible, will you find a conviction about death as triumphant as that? For the majority of the human race death is a cruel intruder - an indignity, a horror, the last enemy and the inescapable one, and the language in which it is spoken of is sad, somber, despondent. The contrast, however, when we read the New Testament is tremendous. Nowhere in its pages is it regarded as the despoiler of human hope and love. Everywhere there is the resounding affirmation that Christ by His resurrection has vanquished death and has brought assurance that life is not doomed to end at the grave in futility and defeat.

What a transformation we see in the men of the New Testament. In Christ's victory over death, they believed they had the guarantee of their own victory over it. No longer did they look upon death as closing the vista of their hopes. For them death had lost the character of evil. They saw it as once and for all liberating the spirit from every impediment and burden, as the great transition which set free the hidden powers of the soul, as the beginning of a higher, nobler, fuller life. "Why" a Roman official asked one of the early Christian martyrs, "are you so bent upon death that you make nothing of it?" "We are bent" was the answer, "not upon death, but upon life".

DEVELOPMENT

But, some of you may say, people today are not preoccupied with thoughts about death and immortality. The best of them are concerned as to how life here and now can be bettered, and there are many who feel this to be a worthier concern than preoccupation with personal immortality, and who consider that Christians have made too much of their aspirations and hopes in the next world and not enough of their obligations and responsibilities in this one.

"Religion" said Karl Marx and Lenin after him, "is the opiate of the people". We have to admit that the charge does have some substance. For periodically in the church's history there has been an unhealthy concentration on heaven and a neglect and belittling of earth. We find it reflected in hymns that were once sung in our churches:

"I'm but a stranger here, Heaven is my home.
Earth is a desert drear, Heaven is my home.

See how we grovel here below - Fond of these earthly toys
Our souls how heavily they go - To reach eternal joys."

Little wonder that there were those who protested. This world is more than a waiting room for the next life. The Communist protest is blunter and makes the Christian uncomfortable: "Not so much of mansions in the skies, and more attention to the slums in the big cities".

A PERVERSION

Now such unhealthy preoccupation with the next world, however, is a perversion of the original Gospel. In the New Testament, it is not only thinking about death and what comes after it that is radically transformed - it is thinking about life here and now and what is to be made of it and done with it.

No one, reading the Book of Acts (and note the title of the book) is likely to come to the conclusion that the Easter Faith was an opiate. It is the story of a group of men and women who took a new lease on life, who came to a new sense of their

personal identity and destiny, who received a new outlook on the world and what could be done to save it, who arrived at a profound consciousness of their vocation as servants of God and humanity. They came into possession of new capacities at every level of their being - physical, mental, moral and spiritual. They faced life with zest and confronted hardship with endurance and tackled problems and solved them in the power of a new intellectual endowment. The Easter Faith an opiate? On the contrary, it brought them out from behind closed doors. It made them evangelists and missionaries. They set out from Jerusalem, numerically a small group, to carry the good news of Christ to every land. And in a short span of time it had spread like a great prairie fire from Palestine to the farthest reaches of the then known world.

Certainly the last thing to be said about the Gospel of the Resurrection is that it is an opiate, lulling people to sleep, so obsessing them with thoughts of heaven that they neglect their responsibilities on earth. I have been describing a first century situation, but it has a direct bearing on the world of our day. Easter Sunday confirms our faith in the life everlasting, and when that happens, life here and now, every aspect of it, takes on a new meaning for us, just as it did for the first Christians and has done for Christians in every age.

ITS MEANING FOR OUR PERSONAL LIVES

Think about what the message of this day -
"Death is swallowed up in victory" means for

our personal lives.

We are not creatures whose tenure of existence is a few short years. We are not mere material organisms destined for a brief span to rise in vigor and then sink in to decay. Made by God, made for fellowship with God, we have in us the breath of divine life. This is the day when we recall the great host of Easter proclamations of the New Testament:

"We are children of God, and if children - then heirs, heirs of
God and fellow heirs with Christ."

"Here and now we are God's children; what we shall be has not yet
been disclosed, but we know that when it is disclosed
we shall be like Him, because we shall see him as he is"

The Easter Faith supplies the setting in which life here and now acquires stature, sacredness, high and noble purpose. It inspires a great, guiding, motivating faith for everything that pertains to human existence and to human affairs, a faith that makes character, creates moral drive and issues in the service of mankind.

Many today have either lost this faith or have never had it. They have no sense of human life as invested with imperishable grandeur. In their own thought of themselves, they come from nowhere and are on their way to nowhere. "I came like Water and like Wind I go" - that sentiment runs through the novels and the plays of our time. The temptation is to seize upon the pleasure of the moment, to regard the gratification of the sense as all that matters, to say, "tomorrow we die, therefore let us eat, drink and be merry".

The greatest motive for living, for character, for public service is the sense of having our origin and destiny in God. We see it in Jesus. "Knowing that he had come from God and was going to God...he girded himself". That conviction of divine origin and destiny, the master conviction of His life, the conviction He has imbred in His followers is at the center of Christianity. It meets us at the point where our need is great today - the battle we fight for the spiritual nature of human life, its permanent continuance, its infinite value, its boundless possibilities.

ITS MEANING FOR OUR SPIRITUAL VALUES

Think also of what the message of this day means for our view of the world, for our spiritual values - beauty, truth, goodness and love - the things in life that matter most, that far outweigh any and every material interest. They are not transient and ephemeral; they will never fail and never end. They will abide so long as God and the human soul abide.

"What is excellent, as God lives is permanent!"

This is the certitude that the Easter Gospel undergirds and fortifies. And to lay hold of it is to say with Paul:

"No wonder we do not lose heart! Though our outward humanity is in decay, yet day by day we are inwardly renewed. Our troubles are slight and short-lived; and their outcome an eternal glory which outweighs them far. Meanwhile our eyes are fixed, not on the things that are seen, but on the things that are unseen; for what is seen passes away; what is unseen is eternal."

Our attitude to life depends on the background against which we view it. Each of us has a background of belief in light of which we make our judgments. If a person has no belief in God or in Christ or in a future life, if his view of the world is that it is a mere mechanistic process without spiritual character or purpose, his then is a merely melancholy creed. The dreadful thing about materialism is the pessimism it breeds. If the death of the body is also the death of the spirit, what independence and permanence have our highest values? As someone has said:

"If the valuations perish - all values - truth, goodness, and the rest - go with them into the everlasting night"

What is truth in a mindless world - or goodness in a soulless world? Materialism can be an opiate, but not this Easter gospel. It is full of power and inspiration for the very tasks of life. It heightens all the meanings of existence and pushes out all of our horizons. It is the guarantee that there will never be one lost good, that all that has value in character and service and friendship will be preserved, that the things that are the finest and fairest in life do not fade, but are eternal as God is eternal. This is no pious sentiment to comfort the credulous and hearten the fearful - but rather this is the mightiest of all moral and spiritual dynamics.

CONCLUSION

The noblest life of which we have any record did not come to a full stop at Calvary. The crucifixion was not the last word in that matchless story. God raised up Jesus from the dead, and by his resurrection vindicated the cause of righteousness, endorsed everything for which Jesus stood, demonstrated that the universe is on the side of goodness and truth.

God raised up Jesus from the dead - and by his resurrection took the terror from the grave, broke the power of sorrow and tragedy, inspired the assurance that life is not doomed to end in frustration and futility, that death does not write FINIS over everything, that, on the contrary, it is the door which opens on wonder upon wonder - on life and love and God. ~~God raised up Jesus from the dead, and by his resurrection gave to the world not a dead prophet, but a living Lord.~~

In John Masefield's play, "The Trial of Jesus", the Roman centurion who stood at the foot of the Cross talks with Pilate's wife just after the crucifixion. "Do you think he is dead?" she asks him. "No, lady" he answers. "I don't". "Then where is he?"

And the reply she receives is, "Let loose in the world, lady, let loose in the world where neither Roman nor Jew can stop His truth!" This is not fiction; this is fact. For twenty centuries, this has been the Christian persuasion. His spirit lives and reigns; his power and presence are still available. His promise "Lo, I am with you always" still holds. Hear again the affirmation that makes this day for Christians the greatest day in the whole year, and the stirring call to action that follows the affirmation:

"Death is swallowed up in victory.

O death where is thy victory? O death where is thy sting?

Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore....my beloved brethren - be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain"