

"EASTER - THE SIGNPOST OF CIVILIZATION"

One of the most moving dramas of the last days of Jesus, is the play entitled, "The Terrible Meek" by Charles Rann Kennedy. The action at the foot of the cross is confined to conversations between Mary, the mother of Jesus, and the captain of the soldiers who crucified him. It is the night following the terrible death. The stage is in darkness. As the play ends, we see Mary, at the very bottom of her grief, bewailing the death of her son. And then the captain, in a rather strange voice begins to tell her that her son is not dead. To her amazement, he makes an unbelievable speech which includes the following words:

"I tell you, my good woman, this dead sons of yours...
Disfigured, shamed, and spat upon,
Has built a kingdom this day that shall never die.
The living glory of him shall forever rule it.
The earth is his and he made it.
He and his brothers have been molding and making it
Through all the long ages.
They are the only ones
Who ever really can possess it.
Not the proud, not the idle, not the wealthy,
Not the vaunted empires of this world.....NO!
Something has happened here upon this hill today,
Something that will shake all the empires and kingdoms
Of this world into the dust.
The earth is his, the earth is theirs and they made it.
The meek, the terrible meek,
The fierce, agonizing meek,
Are about to enter into their inheritance."

And so it is that across the centuries of time, East has been the signpost of civilization. For the very heart of Christianity and its great source of power is found in the meaning of Easter.

It is well for us to consider the deeper meaning behind the celebration of this great day.

THE PRESENCE OF GOD IN HUMAN HISTORY.

Easter, in a very real sense, is a signpost pointing to the presence of God in human history. On that first Easter morn, the victorious spirit of Jesus burst all the bonds with which men had tried to control it. From that great event, the triumphant procession of the Christian faith began to flow like a mighty stream along the highways of human history. Its leaders were stoned and burned and thrown to the lions. Its program was challenged by armies and empires. And yet nothing could stop the steady procession of the ever expanding host of those who sang the praises of a God who had broken into history and revealed himself in the person of Jesus of Nazareth.

IT WAS BECAUSE of what happened on that first Easter morning that the faith spread quickly into Asia Minor, Greece and Rome. Within two hundred years, it had found its way into every city and town of the European world. It swept forward as the most powerful movement that history has ever seen. In the 5th century when the Roman Empire crumbled to the ground before the barbarian invaders, only one movement survived. It was a movement led by one who had been put to death by the soldiers of that great empire, the living Christ himself.

Napoleon once said:

"Alexander, Caesar, Charlemagne, and I have founded great empires, but upon what did these creations depend? FORCE! Jesus alone founded his empire on love, and to this very day, millions are willing to die for him. None else was like him. I am a man, but he was more than a man!"

The words of Napoleon remind us that Jesus was no ordinary man. When we see him, we are seeing the very face of God.

And so in the 5th century, the Roman Empire crumbled to the dust. The DARK AGES fell across Europe, but the Christian movement persisted in the monasteries and in the hearts of men. It kept alive the learning of the past and it fostered the seeds of brotherhood and religion that eventually gave birth to the Renaissance. It shed light in the lives of men like Francis of Assisi, and Bennard of Clairvaux.

With the coming of the Renaissance, the Christian Church was ready, and it led in the upsurge of art and learning. There was Bach, and Palestrina. There was Michaelangelo, and da Vinci, all very much within the Christian tradition. There were the great Gothic cathedrals of Cologne, York, and Notre Dame, giving voice in stone to the faith of men in the risen Christ. There was the Reformation with its burst of new life, power, and freedom. There followed the great missionary activity with men carrying the cross to far distant shores together with education, healing and hope. There was the industrial revolution, the Wesleyan Revival, and the rise of the democratic idea with its emphasis on the dignity and worth of every individual. And not far behind was the vision of world cooperation and brotherhood. You see.. we're part of a great tradition that knows no end.

During Woodrow Wilson's last illness, his friend Raymond Stannard Baker visited him in the hospital. They talked together concerning the future of the League of Nations. Baker expressed his doubt whether the League would survive. But Wilson showed great optimism and faith and said:

"Don't worry, Baker, it may be stopped for a while, but they can't stop God"

Easter reminds us of the presence of God in human history. God was there on that first Easter morn, and from that great event a force was set in motion that cannot be stopped. Easter reminds us that Christianity survives its enemies, adapts itself to the changing aspects of civilization and moves steadily on to victory.

Back in the 18th century, Voltair said that the church was a dying institution. He predicted that it would not last over fifty years. At the end of that time, the very house in Paris where he made that prediction was being used as a center for the distribution of the Bible. Skeptics often predict the funeral of the church, but the cynics die and are buried while the church keeps marching on. And if we may predict the future from the past, it will outlast every institution of our day.

Easter is a signpost pointing to the presence of God in human history. It was from that event that the triumphant procession began.

THE SPIRITUAL AND DEATHLESS
QUALITY OF HUMAN LIFE.

Easter is a signpost pointing to
the deathless and spiritual quality
of human life.

A little girl was asked the question, "What does Easter mean to you?" And she replied, "Why it means the Easter bunny and lots more candy". A boy of sixteen was asked, "What does Easter mean to you?" He replied, "It means, according to what I've been taught, that Jesus rose from the dead". A young lady of 26 was asked, "What does Easter mean to you". She replied, "Easter means a new outfit, a corsage, and a trip to church." In searching for a more satisfactory answer to this question, a man of sixty was asked, "What does Easter mean to you?" He replied, "When I think of Easter, it means that I've only begun to live?" His answer reminds us that Easter stands for the spiritual and deathless quality of life.

In the final analysis, our chief reason for daring to believe in immortality is our faith in God. This needs to be said that even when we are making Jesus our starting point, we are harking back to God, for it is God who gives us the victory of life over death.

I like to think of it in these terms. We begin with the faith that God is our Father, and we are his children. If he is our Father, then he cares for us. If he truly cares for us, his concern lasts, not just a few years, but for always. Not even death can take us out of the Father's house, or beyond the reach of his care. It would be a rather heartless and cruel Father, who would make us in his own image, allow us to grow into self-conscious sons and daughters, develop in 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 years, snuff us out as one blows out a candle.

The point is this - that God cares for us, and we may believe that he cares for us until the end of time. Nevin Harner adds this thought:

"Our universe has lavished endless time and patience on the production of what we call 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? If you watched a skilled craftsman spending twenty years in fashioning a fine watch, would you expect him to let it run five minutes and then crush it to bits under his heel?"

Sometime ago I attended a dinner given in honor of a man who had just reached his 80th birthday. The man, a good Christian, arose and said:

"In my long life, I have had many exciting adventures. I have crossed the ocean numerous times, and have been around the world. But now I am awaiting the greatest adventure of all, the journey into that land from which no traveler has ever returned."

It is this spirit, and in this faith that a Christian should face the end of this life. For the end of this life is nothing more than a birth into another life....a life far more glorious than this.

Easter reminds us that life itself is essentially spiritual and timeless. That life is not to be interpreted simply in terms of things, but in terms of values and ideals. Easter identifies life not with

decay and destruction, but with continuance and creation. It is a signpost pointing to the deathless and spiritual quality of life.

HOPE ON THE HORIZON
OF THE FUTURE.

And finally it made be said that Easter is a signpost of hope on the horizon of the future.

Many people today are burdened with fear and weighted down with anxiety. People are in need of more than just financial security, food, and freedom. These are needed, but they need hope and reassurance far more often. When people quit, and say it can't be done, then they're facing a kind of spiritual death. Easter brings a cure for this. It brings above all else, the eternal message of hope.

A typical English weather bureau report runs something like this: "Today there will be rain, showers, fog, mist, disagreeable weather, and several bright intervals." Thank God for the bright intervals. There is hope, even when things look dark.

Leslie Weatherhead, one of England's great preachers, tells of the time he talked with a doctor during the war, whose practice on Harley Street had been destroyed for the time being. Quite discouraged, the doctor told him how his two little children dashed into the room from the darkened streets and said:

"Daddy, until the streets were
darkened, we never saw the stars"

The stars continue to shine even when the night is darkest. The stars of hope and truth and kindness will forever shine. And in times of darkness, we often see the stars much better.

Easter brings to us the assurance that there is hope on the horizon. The hope comes not from Wall Street, the State Department, the White House or the Kremlin. The hope comes from the cross, and the empty tomb. The Easter hope is no flimsy make-believe. It is rooted in the very nature of the universe. In the words of David Barnwell:

"The strutting parades of the dictators who promise power, but provide enslavement, will pass, like the parades of Roman legions and the arrogant strut of the Caesar....but the Christian program moves on. Undaunted, it has faced Calvary before and knows that the future belongs to that man who rode into the city where evil waited to do its worst to him, and when all was done, moved on, the leader of the victorious procession that mounts the bastions of time to the city of God"

We must never mistake the big parade for the long procession. The hopes of those who wait upon the Lord are not in vain. His truth will never perish. It is for us to resurrect our faith out of the tombs of indifference, doubt and fear.

On one occasion Elizabeth Barrett Browning slipped a manuscript into the pocket of her husband. She left the room, half embarrassed, as he took the manuscript from his pocket and began to read. It contained some of the most beautiful love sequences ever written. Hidden on one of these sonnets were the words:

"The face of all the world is changed,
since first I heard the footsteps of Thy soul"

The footsteps of the very soul of God were heard on that first Easter morning. The face of all the world has been changed.

God grant that we may hear his footsteps on this Easter morn, and

"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."

SHALL WE PRAY:

Our Heavenly Father, may the Easter hope and joy reign forever in our hearts. Help us to see that with Thee there is no death. Help us to put our trust in Thee and live for Thee, not only in this life, but in the life to come. In thy name. Amen