

## "FINELY AWARE AND RICHLY RESPONSIBLE"

TEXT: "On entering the house of Peter, Jesus noticed that his mother-in-law was down with fever."

(Matthew 8: 14)

### INTRODUCTION

Let the emphasis fall upon the word "noticed". Jesus noticed. Wherever He went His alert eye took in all that was happening. He entered into the lives of people - put Himself in their place, walked in their shoes, saw with their eyes and felt what they must have been feeling. He sensed their needs. He reached out to them. He noticed.

The home of Peter is the scene. The person healed is Peter's wife's mother. The sickness is a fever, possibly of the sudden kind that is prevalent in tropical lands. The story tells that Jesus wrought the cure with a touch of his hand. And the cure was so complete that the fever left no aftermath of weakness: the woman rose and attended her guests at table.

The cure took place because "He noticed". To live in such a fashion is not always easy. To have an understanding heart plus a responsive will is not - as one goes through life - to tread a primrose path. And yet, fellow-feeling and self-involvement are deeply satisfying. It is a great thing to be keenly aware of the people around you...those with whom you work...to notice how things are with them... whether they're up or down, sick or well, sad or happy.

It is a great and a good thing to keep the imagination alive, the capacity for feeling strong and not to allow our sympathies to harden. To borrow a phrase from Henry James and to pick up where the hymn we just sang left off, Jesus is calling us to be "finely aware and richly responsible."

### DEVELOPMENT

Life's a toughening process. We start out as young people with some high ideals, but somewhere along the line they begin to fade. Compromise and cynicism can tear them down and eventually corrode some of those lofty thoughts and ideals. According to a recent article in Guideposts, we're warned that the middle years of life are the testing time, those years from 40 to 60 where so many of us are to be found. It's not uncommon for idealism to fade - idealism about one's marriage, one's profession, one's church, one's politics - to give way to some disillusionment, then skepticism, finally indifference.

Life's a toughening process. A protective shell goes up, no longer are they finely aware and richly responsible. Self-interest becomes the one main-spring of action and the gratification of the senses the chief aim of life.

Alice

A novelist summed up one of his characters in this sentence: "Edith was a little country bounded on the north, south, east and west by Edith". How does that touch you? Or, try this one: a man from the middle west put an ad in the paper which read:

"I am 58 years old. Would like to marry a young woman of 30 who has a tractor. Please send picture..of tractor"

Now what has happened to Edith and to the 58 year old man is obvious. They allowed life to narrow down their interests. They were wrapped up in themselves...and what a small package each made!

JESUS NOTICED

Jesus noticed Peter's mother who was suffering from a fever. The point is that there are many fine and respectable people all around us who have ceased to notice, to care, to feel anything about anyone other than themselves....people in whom imagination has died, ~~ideals-faded~~, sympathies hardened.

He noticed and cured the woman of her fever. May we not rightly say that pursuit of money and pleasure is a kind of fever? Our whole civilization tosses restlessly from its secret imperfections. How this sickness cries for cure! And Christ, the physician, is sovereign over that sickness.

When Muriel Lester was 12 years old and appalled by the sight of the slums of London, her well-to-father, full of solicitude for her said:

"It's all right. They don't feel things the way we do. And if they did, they've only got themselves to blame. They get drunk. That's why they're so poor".

A man you see with a protective shell around himself, trying to put one around his daughter. He meant well, but thank God - he didn't succeed. For Muriel Lester grew up to be a woman "finely aware and richly responsible".

HOW DO YOU MEASURE UP

Finely aware. Richly responsible. Are you? How do you measure up? It has been said that the purpose of the Gospel of Jesus Christ is to not only comfort the afflicted, but also to afflict the comfortable. And therefore, we need to occasionally ask ourselves this question: do we notice, as He did? Are we aware and responsible. And remembering that the Church is a hospital for sinners and not a museum for saints, how are we at reaching out at the hurt and sick and lost of our society. Do we notice? Or are we content to lead our own somewhat selfish, narrow and confined lives? pleasure - seeking lives?

A man made himself famous in the catering business. He established a chain of delis and restaurants across the country. As he lay dying, his relatives and loved ones all gathered by his bedside to hear his final words. His last whisper was "slice the ham thin". And so He was off to meet His maker..."slice the ham thin". In other words, keep your eye on the bottom line...that's all that really counts. Christ can cure that fever and cure it well...if you'll give Him a chance.

Do you happen to know Phyllis McGinley's poem: "Occupation: Housewife"? It's a poem about what happens to a woman in her middle years. Let me read it:

"Her health is good. She owns to forty-one.  
Keeps her hair bright with vegetable rinses,  
Has two well-nourished children - daughter and son,  
Just now away at school. Her house, with chintzes  
Expensive, curtained, animates the caller,  
And she is fond of early American glass,  
Stacked in an English breakfront, somewhat taller  
Than her best friend's. Last year she took a class  
In modern drama at the County Center.  
Twice on Good Friday she's heard 'Parsifal'.  
She often says she might have been a painter,  
Or writer, perhaps, except she married young,  
She diets and with contact she delays,

The encroaching desolation of her days."

The sting is in that last line, "The encroaching desolation of her days". Why do people become disillusioned about life, bored by it. Time again it is because they are hoarding what they should be giving away. Some spend too much time fussing over themselves: health, hair, diet, appearance, their impression on others - when with their background, education and skills they should be spending and devoting what is their's to people and causes. They fail to notice. They are less than aware and less than responsible.

CHRISTIAN'S CALLING

The Christian's calling then is to be "finely aware and richly responsible."

Said Dr. Benjamin Tunney, a Boston surgeon, "It has taken ~~my~~ half of my life to discover that my business in the world is not to try to make something of myself, but rather to find a job worth doing and to lose myself in it". A gentleman, someone once said, is one "who puts more into life than he takes out of it".

Life finds its real meaning and climbs its loftiest levels, not in protecting the self...coddling and shielding it...but in the fullness of our personal human relationships - in self-forgetfulness, in caring for others.

Remember those words of Albert Schweitzer which might have been written expressly for some of us:

"You are happy, therefore you are called upon to give much. Whatever more than others you have received in health, natural gifts, working capacity, success, a beautiful childhood, harmonious family circumstances, you must not accept them as being a matter of course. You must pay a price for them. You ~~must~~ show more than an average devotion of life to life".

And, you ask, what is that price. Remember how our Lord and Saviour, Jesus, "noticed", the answer is in these lines:

"God ☉ let me be aware.  
Stab my soul fiercely with others' pain.  
Let me walk seeing horror and stain.  
Let ~~my~~ hands, groping, find other hands.  
Give me the heart that divines, understands.  
Give me the courage, wounded to fight.  
Flood me with knowledge, drench me in light.  
Please, keep me eager just to do my share.  
God - let me be aware."

PRAYER

Our prayer is a silent searching of our own hearts and consciences. Help us to lay these things to heart. Keep our eyes ever alert to scenes of human need; our sympathies broad and deep, always remembering the example of Him whom we call Lord - how he cared, how he responded...how he noticed. In His spirit, we pray. Amen