

## "FROM MOCKERY TO BELIEF"

### INTRODUCTION

"Some mocked, some shook their heads, and some believed!" These words - which describe the reaction of the people to the entry of Jesus into Jerusalem - stick in my memory. Hear them again. "Some mocked... some shook their heads...and some believed". In a way, it's something of a universal experience - felt by all who have ever done, thought or been anything. It was the experience of Jesus, entering Jerusalem amid cheers and hosannas of the crowd, and from this one might well believe that the majority were supporting Him.

### DEVELOPMENT

In actuality, I'm sure that many did mock, that many did shake their heads, and that only a few really believed.

Isn't it true that people have a way of mocking and deriding what they're not use to, what they don't understand. Later on, their attitude may decline to a dubious shaking of the head, a cynical smile, and a brush-off remark, all of which may eventually vanish in unconcern and blankness. They've become accustomed to the thing; they have gotten use to it.

But on the other hand, there will be those who accept the thing upon its first appearance and enthuse over it. Initially stirred and excited, they're carried away by it. But then, after a while, their emotion begins to evaporate, their enthusiasm may reduce itself to an approving nod of the head, a tolerant smile, which may fade into blankness and unconcern. Likewise, they, too, have become accustomed to the thing and take it for granted.

Agnostics do not bother me much - those who take the trouble to mock religion, to poke fun at believers and ridicule my Christ. My chief concern flows more in the direction of the unconcerned. It's for those "unbelieving believers" who have become so accustomed to the claims of Christ that His message no longer has the power to motivate and move them. They become members of the largest denomination in the world, "The Church of the Nominal Believer". If only we could reach some of them and stir them to life.

The Apostle Paul once said, "It is good to be zealously affected always in a good thing". Paul's life certainly exemplified this. Some persons are so constituted that they view life and its issues with complete coolness, detachment, living above it all. Others enter into the arena of life with zest and play their part with zeal and enthusiasm. Paul, himself, was such a person; he belongs to this latter group. Think about Paul for a few moments.

### PAUL'S LIFE

Instinctively, Paul was a man with a cause. He there was no "lukewarmness"; no "cool detachment". No ignorant rabble-rouser, he was educated in both the Hebrew and the Greek cultures. Here there was deep sincerity and zealousness. Trained in Jerusalem under Gamaliel and in the faith of his Hebrew forbearers, he threw himself with all the fervor of his intense, young manhood into upholding the convictions of that faith, keeping its traditions intact. T

Paul had been exposed to the ideas of Jesus, and trying to come to grips with it, thinking pragmatically and intellectually, he simply could not see any verity in the teachings of Jesus. He could see only trouble, only the dangerous, revolutionary potential in their reaction on those who heard and took it to heart. And so Paul steps onto the stage of the New Testament as a committed anti-Christian,

but a change in direction. There was still a long way to go...many steps to take, for the road from "mockery" to "nodding of the head" to real belief is a long one. There are many steps to take in terms of spiritual growth and a conscious effort.

TODAY What of those who merely shook their heads in mild disapproval? Or, who nodded their heads in reticent acceptance. We have their likes in the Church today.

How about Nicodemus? I've often wondered....did he ever forget that night he put aside his work in the Sanhedrin and turned down the lamp and went out under the stars to ask questions of the Galilean? Nicodemus argued that the things Jesus outlined were too much to ask, that no one can live such a perfect life. Remember how Jesus responded, "You must be born again!" And Nicodemus couldn't quite grasp that, for he was thinking of physical birth and how could it occur but once for any individual? But we know that he remembered....for we catch glimpses of him later on, standing up to the Sanhedrin, speaking a good word for the Master of all Life - which took courage. Even so, he was trying to be on both sides of the issue - not denying Jesus, but not actually supporting Him with any real passion...wanting to have it both ways.

And later Nicodemus was present to assist in lifting down the body of Jesus from the cross; he helped Joseph of Arimathea to bury the one who had challenged him to the depths of his being. Yes - he was a good man, righteous, but he was never quite "zealously affected" (to use Paul's phrase). He was never quite "into zealously affected by the power of the Living God as it confronted him in the person of the Nazarene.

RICH YOUNG RULER There were others back there in the time of Jesus, for whom one finds "carbon copies" in today's scene in this city. Think of the rich young ruler who one day approached Jesus wishing to be a disciple. He was told to go and sell all he had, give it to the poor and then come and follow. He could not do this and turned away with sadness in his countenance, "for he had many possessions". There was the initial interest, the sudden burst of enthusiasm. It must have upset him to be told that in effect he had it wrong, that he was relying on the wrong things, that he had loved himself and his position too much. He walked away feeling hurt and bewildered.

Can you not imagine him as the years went by acknowledging how right Jesus had been? How he wished he had accepted the terms of Jesus that day long ago. He probably lived out his life in his heart believing in Jesus and in the great ideas He proclaimed and the values He shared....but only nodding his head in approval, never really becoming "zealously affected".

WHERE DO YOU FIT IN Where do you fit in in all of this? Are you "zealously affected?" Are you "passionately committed?" There are vast numbers of semi-religious people, lukewarm Christians within walking distance of where we sit this hour who fall into this category. Perhaps you're one of them. I've seen them come here from elsewhere across the land, slowly something happens...."drift away"... "drop out"....from being "believing believers" they become "unbelieving believers". One is reminded of that Pogo cartoon, "we have seen the enemy and he is us". He came to Jesus and asked, tell us the most important commandment. And Jesus replied,

"Love the Lord your God - with all of your heart, soul, mind and strength. And your neighbor as yourself".

storming about the Palestinian countryside, ferreting out the Christian believers, bringing them to punishment and even death. In all probability, he was a witness to the stoning of Stephen, the first Christian martyr. Despite the fact that we would not go along with his goals at this stage, we have to give Paul a certain amount of credit. For one thing, he had the courage of his convictions. He was all or nothing at all.

The story of Paul has contemporary meaning, for from time to time, we hear of someone who has been arrested because he or she has been blinded to the spiritual qualities of the democratic way of life, who has taken on a radical ideology...sincerely and zealously working to undermine the democratic process. You would not say that Paul was not sincere in his early work of persecution of the early followers of Jesus, and in the same sense, we would agree that the average, typical exponent of fringe political philosophy is not sincere. Such people are neither cool nor detached; they have a cause and are passionately committed to it.

Again, what causes me concern is not the believer, rather it is the one who merely shakes his head and walks away. How many thousands of citizens of this country have gotten so use to their democratic way of life that they simply nod their approval, failing to be involved, failing to exercise their hard fought privilege to vote. It is my conviction that any of these so-called radicals or whatever - if they continue in their search for truth - will ultimately find the light, even as Paul found the light on the Damascus Road.

BACK TO PAUL      Back to Paul and another look at him. Something happened to him out there on the Damascus Road. He was blinded by a light - an inspiration. It was for the most part an inner experience in the consciousness and the conscience of a sincere, learned man. I do not doubt that the blindness was real, but it was certainly not organic. It served as a lesson for him.

Is it not the blinding experiences of life that are most responsible for our growth. He was led to Damascus, where a man named Ananias touched his eyes, and thereupon, Paul could see again. This is highly figurative. Ananias, who was obviously a Christian, talked to Paul and helped him to comprehend the true meaning of what had happened. When he understood at last the work of God through the person of Jesus, the blindness to truth was obliterated and his vision returned. Paul was really converted on that day, but is his conversion the significant lesson? Perhaps, to some it is, but not in the usual sense of the word.

Someone has said, "You have not converted a man simply because you have silenced him". Conversion is often referred to as professing religion, being saved, getting right with God....but all too often conversion is a matter of switching from one who "mocks" to one who simply "nods" his head.

In later years Paul was to say to young Timothy, "Exercise thyself into Godliness". In other words, train your mind to think about God daily...as a power that can be incorporated into your life as you incorporate strength into your body. The mind, the heart, the spirit develop as do the muscles - by exercise - constant, daily attention. The follower of Jesus, the religious person, the Christian who thinks himself saved when converted will discover that his salvation has only just begun. Paul's great spiritual experience, his conversion was simply the change from not believing in the power of God in Christ to believing in it. But this was