

"HOSPITALITY TO THE HIGHEST"

INTRODUCTION

I'm sure that every biographer delights to discover some event in the early days of his hero's life which may be a suggestion of his hero's subsequent career. But did ever a single incident in any one's infancy suggest so much as is summed up in that line in Luke's account of the birth of Jesus at Bethlehem, "And there was no room for them in the inn".

For this was to be the experience of Jesus throughout his ministry - no room for his teachings in the minds of men, or for his quality of spirit in their lives, no room in the synagogue for his reforming zeal, or in the nation for his prophetic message. The crucial difficulty of his life - which denied him the service he longed to render, that closed the hearts he hoped to change, that eventually took him on that lonely road that ended on Calvary - was something so simple, so familiar, so little recognized as a tragic part of life, and so universal among us all that one almost hesitates to name it - inhospitality. As a loyal disciple, writing in the Fourth Gospel in far-off Ephesus, one hundred years after Bethlehem, put it:

"He came unto his own, and his own received him not!"

"And there was no room for them in the inn". We do not picture ourselves as being a part of the crucifixion scene, but there is something in this line from the Christmas story that is well known to us all, for from how many busy, preoccupied lives and embittered human relationships does the Man from Nazareth ~~whose day of birth we celebrate this coming week~~ hear the echo of those words down the corridors of time and of circumstance: "Sorry....no room, no room"

DEVELOPMENT

Now there's more to all of this than just leading busy, overcrowded, ~~elutered~~ lives with the result that from our limited time and attention the highest and the best in life is apt to be shut out. So often those things in life which hospitably welcomed would enrich us all are apt to be excused by such preoccupation. And I'm not just talking about our religious concerns here this morning. And so it is that great books are not read, great music is not heard, the beauties of the natural world are not seen, those enriching friendships are not formed, and those priceless moments of happiness in family life are passed by. We are preoccupied. No room. Of how much sorry loss of priceless opportunity is not that apt to be our explanation!

And take this matter of trying to keep the Christian interpretation of life alive and strong in a place like this city. Our major adversary, as I see it, is not atheism, but rather it's tied in with secularism. It's not the theoretical denial of Christ and the values he represents, but the practical crowding out of Christ and his claim on our lives. When the hall is filled with immediate and temporal concerns, when every seat is taken and even standing room is crowded, how can anything else get in? It is this which makes difficult the task of all teachers of spiritual truth in the secular city. To be sure, the busy, overfull, impenetrable lives that can say nothing except, "sorry - no room" is not unrelated to the difficulties and discouragements and yes, the diminishing influence of Christian values in our time, in our town.

It seems to me, however, that behind such practical crowding out of the highest and the best of life is a far deeper matter. Spiritual inhospitality to the best - whether in music, books, friendship, art, nature, or in dealing with Christ himself, is not mainly due to our being too preoccupied. If, at the Inn in Bethlehem they had known what the Christ Child would become in the world, some of them, I'm sure,

would have found a place for him. Is it not true that we find places and time for the things we really care about. He was crowded out of the inn because they never guessed who he would be. How could they? But the point is: we know. We have no such excuse.

Have we not come from homes where his spirit made a radiance in the faces we loved best and a fragrance in their lives? Are we not sprung from a civilization where artists like Raphael and Michelangelo have glorified him and musicians like Bach and Handel have written their noblest compositions in his praise. Has not even an agnostic historian, Lecky, said:

"The simple record of three short years of active life has done more to regenerate and to soften mankind than all the disquisitions of philosophers and all the exhortations of moralists?"

We cannot plead that we do not know Jesus. There are many questions about Christianity and about Christ that we cannot answer, but Jesus himself: the essence of his character, the quality of his spirit, the core of his teachings, these we do know!

And we also know that those areas of life where his spirit has been welcomed and enthroned, as we have seen it in some genuinely Christian friendships and families and in some genuinely Christian social attitudes, are the loveliest results our civilization has to show for its centuries of struggle. So when we cry, "sorry, no room for him" - it is not so much because we are so preoccupied (remembering that we find room for those things we really feel important) - as because our lives, our souls, are of such a quality that they are hospitable to something quite different from Christ and his claims.

On this Sunday then before Christmas, as in imagination we stand at Bethlehem's inn and see how easily the highest and the best things in life can be shut out by a little callous inhospitality, we may well say to ourselves that to be hospitable is about as important and a self-revealing act as any we perform.

RICHNESS OF LIFE COMES FROM INWARD HOSPITALITY

Moving on, consider how much of the true richness of our lives comes not from our outward strenuousness, but from our inward hospitality.

I came across a phrase this past week that was used to describe a famous American of another generation. He was referred to as "a steam engine in trousers". Immediately a certain type of character flashes through the mind. Vigor, energy, drive, push, strenuousness - such valuable qualities are there without which no continent like ours could ever have been subdued. But a man who is merely a "steam engine in trousers" - how much less than a man he is and how much he is apt to miss.

On the other side, suppose we had never heard of the poet, Wordsworth (one of my great favorites), knew nothing concerning him save these lines of his:

".....therefore am I still
A lover of the meadows and the woods,
And mountains; and of all that we behold
From this green earth".

Chances are that our estimate of him would instinctively rise. I think we would sense that he is not just a "steam engine in trousers", that he possessed an interior hospitality to some lovely things. There were times when beauty came to his door and he made room for it. ~~In such a life we would expect some richness, radiance, charm, sensitivity that no trousered-steam engine could ever possess!~~

One goes to the city of Milan and finds it a busy, thriving, bustling center. Its streets are crowded, its stores thronged, its industry booming. One can spend many laborious and animated days there. Some of us remember most clearly, however, not our strenuous expeditions, but a quiet room in an old building off a busy street where da Vinci's Last Supper is and where we stood, absorbed, trying to take it all in. That memory goes deeper, reaches higher, lasts longer, is more significant than anything else we brought back from that busy city. Life is like that. Our enrichment comes from our hospitalities to life's highest and best experiences.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR HOSPITALITIES

I think that most of us here would agree that there's a lot that's wrong with our city, that it can be so hard, cruel, difficult and frustrating at times. But, at Christmas, I think, it tends to show something of its warm side, its good side - and perhaps we may be forgiven then this morning for saying some good things about it.

There are many fine and good and uplifting things here after all - opportunities for hospitalities all around us: friendships with people from all walks of life, all races, from all parts of the world to be formed, concerts that enrich to be enjoyed, theater that can challenge minds as well as provide entertainment from life's pressing problems, museums with treasures of the past, art galleries with gifts of the present, church services to attend that can lift man's vision, broaden his horizon, renew his dignity - so many, many things to do and places to go. And these good and gracious things come asking of us only a welcome. Make room in your life for them. restore his sanity

How much of all that is best in the world belongs to us? I press that home upon our consciences. How much of the best in the world belongs to us. Surely it is measured by our hospitality, our willingness to make room for the highest, the best things in life.

And how magical a change a little hospitality can make. A person turns, as it were, the corner of a street and bumping into a new idea, a different perspective, makes room for it and lo - his life is changed. Remember that crusty old miser in George Eliot's novel, his name was Silas Marner. Hoping for the return of his stolen gold, he opens his door as a neighbor bids him and in an unexpected moment of hospitality welcomes the little child who creeps to his hearthside, and lo - his whole character is reoriented and redeemed.

And taking this hospitality to the highest one more step into the area of man's religious and spiritual nature, Peter it was who upon meeting Jesus by the lakeside and feeling so ashamed to welcome such a great spirit, said: "Depart from me; for I am a sinful man, O Lord". But he made room for him at last, and by that not only he, but all the world was altered. One of the deep mysteries of life is a man surprised into unsuspected greatness by a momentary hospitality, like Paul's on the Damascus Road, so that afterward he said, "It is no longer I that live, but Christ who lives in me".

And the thrill of preaching lies in the knowledge that this can still happen today. For Bethlehem is not merely historical. That ancient scene is reproduced in life time and again, as a person makes room for that Christ spirit to wander through the rooms of his soul. For Christ still comes to the in of a person's life. Only we can change the outcome and open the door. Room for him. Room for him.

SOCIAL IMPLICATIONS, TOO

Now were we to say nothing more, our ~~Christmas~~ Christmas message might seem private and subjective, as though in a

troubled time we were content merely to make our personal lives like oases in the midst of a barren land. But this, as most of you realize, is not enough. Our truth goes beyond that. It has broad social implications. For so much of the trouble of our time cannot be understood unless one sees it in terms of inhospitality.

Mankind has often been guilty of repeating that scene in Bethlehem and refused to make room. It has not been kind to the saviors in any realm that have come to it. The saviors have not been lacking - in science, in art, in music, in human relations, in the spiritual life and faith of mankind's history. The saviors have come to us, but with what impenetrable inhospitality has the race refused them. The saviors come and the masses cry, "no room". And sometimes in retrospect this unreceptive inertia of mankind seems ridiculous. Said a school board in an American town of a hundred years ago:

"You are welcome to use the school house to debate all proper questions in - but such things as railroads and telegraphs are impossibilities and rank infidelity. There is nothing in the Word of God about them".

We smile, but when one considers humanity's estate today, this shutting of the doors of our minds to new ideas is no laughing matter. We are being confronted with situations in life today so complex and so unprecedented that the old formulas are as inadequate to save the day as old ox-carts are to handle the transportation of people in and out of this city. And inhospitality of mind and spirit to new ways of dealing with the concerns of our common life in this city, this state, this nation - inhospitality to new ways of thinking about cooperation among the races, the religions, the nations - inhospitality to new ideas can be our ruin.

To be sure, hospitality of mind is too, too important to be loosely given. But when I think of you and of myself in these trying times through which mankind is moving, what I fear most of all is this: that in our time new ideas will continue to come to us, new social outlooks and patterns to which the future belongs will beckon us, and because our minds are filled with old ideas, old prejudices, old mental habits, old class interests, old forms of patriotism, we will end up crying, "no room, no room".

And there are things in our lives, in our society, in our way of doing things which will have to leave if Christ is to come in. Perhaps this is why the world as a whole continues to keep him at a distance. If he came in, war, greed, racism, and many a social evil they have produced would have to go. Let's face it: our lives and our society would have to be changed at so many points.

In the epilogue to Shaw's St. Joan, after Joan has been burned at the stake and subsequently been canonized by those who did her in, she returns in a vision and says, "now tell me: shall I rise from the dead and come back to you a living woman?" The answer from eight different mouths is, "no, no do not come back". Shaw gives Joan the last lines of the play and she prays:

"O God that madest this beautiful earth, when will it be ready to receive thy saints? How long, O Lord, how long?"

SUMMARY

We are not proposing this Sunday an easy thing: to let him in, to make room for him - but, we are proposing a glorious thing. In these next few days we will again brush up against eternal truth. I think a man's best memories when life is closing will be his finest spiritual hospitalities and what

became of them. Make room for those spiritual values which mean the most, that reach the highest, that last the longest, and make life turly worthwhile!

"And there was no room for them in the inn". We have come here this hour to adore him. And that will be all to the good if now we depart, determined to make room for him and for all that he represents in our lives, determined to serve him for ever. They said of the Wise Men, "And they went back by another way". May this be the way it is with us this Christmas.

LET US PRAY We thank thee, O God, for the light that shines in the darkness,
for the Christ who came into our world, and who uses us to be
instruments of his love and service, his joy and glory.

As we rejoice in these days without forgetting the sadness and the sorrow that is abroad in our world, we remember that light which shines in the darkness and which the darkness cannot put out, and which, if we let it, will shine in us.
Amen