

## "HOW DO YOU TELL A CHRISTIAN?"

### INTRODUCTION

An old college song honoring the founder of Dartmouth College begins with these words:

"Eleazer Wheelock was a very pious man. He went into the wilderness to teach the Indian".

A picture which very often goes with that song shows a man in a long black coat, buckled shoes, and a large black felt hat. Bursting from under the hat is flowing white hair and from under the hair a stern, uncompromising face. Eleazer looks very pious. He reminds us of the classic picture of 18th and 19th century Quakers, Shakers, Moravians and Mennonites: these people of stern personal codes, with their King James language, frequent church services and vigorous Bible reading.

Unfortunately, however, our illustration of Eleazer Wheelock breaks down because, as a typical college lyric, it goes on to relate that along with a Latin grammar, a Bible, and a drum, one of the prime elements in the founding of Dartmouth College was 500 gallons of New England rum. Apparently Eleazer, for all his piety, spent a good portion of his time, not only educating the Indians in that upper Connecticut wilderness, but mixing their drinks as well.

We honor him even though his piety broke down on occasion. I think we could say that it had strong religious motivation, and that it was undoubtedly reinforced by church associations and life commitments. You could tell he was a Christian by his piety.

And really, isn't that how we frequently tell who or what people are: by their pieties, by their life styles? We tell a hippie by his life style: his mode of dress, his habits, his manner of speech, his associations and concerns. We tell members of the jet set by the signs of their piety or life style - their mode of dress, their habits, their priorities, how they spend their money, where they spend their time. The hippies and the jet set have a piety and a style all their own and some of them are as extreme in their piety as Eleazer Wheelock was back in the 18th century. Most of us, however, share bits and pieces of various life styles: we have a little bit of our parents and grandparents mixed in with a dash of hippies. We add a touch of the jet set, a pinch of the commuter and the city dweller, and top it off with a generous portion of rural nostalgia.

The question before us this morning is: how, in the time in which we live, do you tell a Christian. How, as Paul admonishes us in the passage read this morning, do we give ourselves to God, as men and women who have been brought from death to life, and surrender our whole being to him to be used for righteous purposes. In answering this question, I would like to suggest three books of the Bible which do not necessarily provide particulars, but which do, I feel, give us some good clues for a framework of a contemporary, 20th century sense of piety.

### EXODUS: A PILGRIMAGE

The first of these is the Old Testament Book of Exodus.

One of the prime dynamics of Israel has been that of a pilgrimage, of a people moving from the bondage of Egypt through a wilderness of tests, trials and struggle toward a land of promise. Ours is a faith in One who is always out there ahead of us, beckoning us to join him in conquering some new frontier, inviting us to join him in acts of liberation and renewal. One of the striking Biblical images is that of a people who live in tents and refuse to settle down in any one place. Exodus, as a framework for piety, suggests a people in the process of exercising their power to become, joining the march from slavery

to freedom.

A life of "Exodus" is not easy. Just as the Hebrews, overwhelmed by the struggles in the wilderness, began to whine again for the security of Egypt, we are often tempted to yearn for the good old days when things seemed so much simpler. Some of you may have read the article in the paper back in mid-July which described Mayor Lindsay's trip upstate. The headline indicated that he revealed his secret political ambition: to be the mayor of Cooperstown, New York. He rode through the streets of tree shaded Cooperstown with his eyes on the second story windows of the main streetshops, because in most small towns that is where lawyers have their offices. The mayor was quoted as saying that he was looking for a bold, gold, second-story window sign which read: "John V. Lindsay, Attorney at Law". As the day drew to a close, he is reported to have remarked to his entourage, "We had better get back to the 'real world'".

Cooperstown is to John Lindsay's urban wilderness experience, what Egypt was to Israel's Sinai wilderness experience: security, simplicity, the good old days. When the teachers are on strike; when the stock exchange threatens to leave for Newark; when traffic brings the city to a standstill; when kids are demonstrating for money and jobs in front of City Hall; when the nurses threaten a work slow-down; when the garbage doesn't get picked up due to a sanitation strike; when the police threaten to rebel against the administration's orders; when the subways threaten to make things difficult for us all again; one can almost hear John Lindsay yearning for the "fleshpots of Cooperstown". Well, we all have our Cooperstown just as the Jews had their Egypt. But we dare not settle there, for we are faithful to one who keeps calling us from our "Cooperstowns" to broader responsibilities and to greater challenge. We follow one who demands that we find our freedom and lead others to their freedom, in the real world where men live and work.

"Where cross the crowded ways of life, Where sound the  
cries of race and clan, Above the noise of selfish strife,  
We hear Thy voice, O Son of man!"

We are people, then, of the Exodus, on a pilgrimage, venturing out, following our God into and eventually through the wilderness to a "promised land".

PSALMS: JOY            How do you tell a Christian? The book of Psalms, I think,  
                              provides us with a second clue. Who can forget the early  
Hebrews rejoicing:

"O sing unto the Lord a new song. Sing unto the Lord all  
the earth; Sing unto the Lord, bless his name, show forth  
his salvation from day to day".

Just as those early Hebrews sang and rejoiced in the world, so we too are called to do the same. The Christian is one who celebrates those events where God is working out his reconciling, liberating purpose.

Something of the mood I am talking about was suggested by Vice President Humphrey when he announced his candidacy for the Presidency. He was roundly criticized by some of his opponents, and yet he expressed a little of what the Hebrews were talking about in their Psalms. Before some 1700 people in Washington, you may recall, Mr. Humphrey said:

"Here we are, the way politics ought to be in America.  
The politics of happiness, the politics of purpose and the

politics of joy. That is the way it's going to be, too, from here on out."

When an opponent chided him for his "politics of happiness", Humphrey reminded him that the idea had come originally from that most dour of our presidents, John Adams. Adams is reported to have written a letter to Thomas Jefferson in the later years of their lives discussing the "spirit of public happiness". He writes:

"It was this spirit that possessed the American colonist and won the revolution before it was fought, a spirit which is reflected in delight in participation in public action; a joy in citizenship, in self-government, in self-control, in self-discipline and in dedication".

Now I do not necessarily carry any brief today for Vice-President Humphrey, but in pursuit of his mission I do commend and appreciate the kind of enthusiasm and joy which he emphasizes. Like the Psalms, it exudes the "spirit of public happiness".

One evening earlier this week I was confronted on the street with a young man who is working in the political campaign of Richard Nixon. He is about 19 years of age and is attending college in Massachusetts. His enthusiasm, his commitment, his interest in politics, as well as his belief that Richard Nixon, so to speak, "is the one" to lead us into the future, provided, to say the least, more of a lift for me than the recent convention in Miami. Now again, I carry no brief for Richard Nixon this morning, but just as Jesus commended an unjust steward, not for his injustice, but for his shrewdness, so I commend this young man, not necessarily for his choice of candidates, but for his enthusiasm, his joy in the fray, and for his commitment which is growing daily through involvement. I celebrate his joy in an effort to make life in this country more human through political channels. "The spirit of public happiness" as John Adams once put it, is the spirit that runs through the psalms of old. The excitement which the Hebrews felt in their mission, as well as their gratitude for God's action in their behalf breaks through time and again.

To be sure there is a great deal to be unhappy about in this world of ours, but there is a joy in the struggle and the success which the struggle brings. There is joy in being continually challenged to a greater degree of excellence; there is a joy in the mission of bringing "release to the captives, sight to the blind, freedom to the oppressed, good news to the poor", of being a sign of hope in a weary and broken world.

We can never forget that ours is a resurrection faith, a faith which proclaims that the battle which turned the tide, has been won by Christ over the powers of evil and separation. To be sure there are battles still to be fought, but that does not prevent us from celebrating the signs of hope and faith, of love and commitment which continue to break in upon us.

How do you tell a Christian? You can tell him because he is not only a part of a marching people, but of a singing, celebrating people.

REVELATION: A VISION We march. We sing, and lastly, we have a vision!

In the Book of Revelation, we find the content of that vision. The author of Revelation, John of Patmos, was deeply influenced by the infinite possibilities of the great urban center of his time - Rome. With its cosmopolitan population, its economic power, and political hegemony, Rome was the model for the destructive diversity

as well as the glorious constructive possibilities for men living in great community. There is no doubt that Christians and many others were being systematically destroyed in John's time, but though he felt the brutality of the city, he also saw its great possibilities. And thus, out of the turbulence of a city, he wrote these glorious lines in Revelation:

"Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth. I saw the Holy City, New Jerusalem (a new Rome, a New York), coming down out of heaven, prepared and ready, like a bride dressed to meet her husband. I heard a loud voice speaking from the throne: 'Now God's home is with men! He will live with them and they shall be his people. God himself will be with them, and he will be their God. There will be no more death, no more grief, no more crying, or pain. The old things have disappeared. Behold, I make all things new'".

Revelation suggests that we are headed towards a new city, and whether or not one wants to chalk it up to Providence, a central fact of our time is the rapid urbanization of this planet. Even now, metropolis is too small a word, megalepolis is the reality of our living. Scientists, like Buckminster Fuller and the Greek architect Dexiondaes, are dreaming, along with John of Patmos, the dream of the cosmopolis. Dr. King has called it "the world house", that universal community where the human race is transformed into the human family; where our diversity is not threatening, but mutually supportive. It is a "house" of justice and service for all men - not just a few; where the emphasis is not on greatness, but rather on goodness; a dream where men may rejoice in their common humanity, fulfill their common needs and put at the service of Christ their unique strengths.

You ask what is the dynamic of the world house? Of the City of God? Perhaps these youngsters from East Harlem who one night last winter shared in an evening with the youngsters of our church and who shared a vision in song at the close of that night when they sang so beautifully:

"We are one in the Spirit, we are one in the Lord,  
And we pray that all unity, may one day be restored,  
And they'll know we are Christians by our love.

We will walk hand in hand, and together we'll spread the news,  
That God is in our land.

We will work with each other, and will work side by side,  
And we'll guard each man's dignity and save each man's pride,  
All praise to the Spirit who makes us one,  
And they will know we are Christians by our love,  
Yes, they will know we are Christians by our love".

How do you tell a Christian? What are the marks of a contemporary piety. We can be sure of this, in the final analysis, it includes a love and a compassion for all people. You can tell him by his love.

PRAYER: Grant, we beseech Thee, Almighty God, that the words which we have heard this day with our outward ears may, through thy grace, be so grafted inwardly in our hearts that they may bring forth in us the fruit of good living, to the honor and praise of Thy Name, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen