

"IS THAT YOUR BUSINESS, PETER?"

INTRODUCTION I often find myself standing in admiration of those employed in the Complaint Departments of our major stores and businesses. What a workout that must be each day: absorbing indignation and abuse, pouring oil on troubled waters, rendering to no man evil for evil, paying lip service at least to the merchant's rule, "The customer is always right!"

But complaints about merchandise and service are child's play compared to man's complaints about life. How many mad looks, desperate prayers and outright curses are directed toward the management of the universe in any given day, only heaven knows.

A contented human being is the rarest of discoveries. All of us some of the time, and some of us all of the time are possessed of a covetous, envious, jealous, complaining spirit. "Why hast Thou made me thus?" is our question. What we take to be the well-being of others can often anger us and unsettle us.

There's an old fable that tells of a time when the devil was stalking the Libyan Desert. He came upon a group of fiends who were trying to tempt a pious, holy hermit. They tried him with the seduction of the flesh. They tried to sour his mind with doubts and fears. They told him that all of his suffering was worth nothing. But this holy man did not flinch. Then said the devil as he moved in to the scene, "Have you heard the news? Your brother has been made the Bishop of Alexandria". And with that word a scowl of malignant jealousy clouded the serene face of this holy man.

PETER ACTS OUT OUR PART The disciple, Peter, acted out our part that day long ago on the beach that fronts the Sea of Galilee. It was after breakfast that the resurrected Christ turned to Peter and asked him three times, "Simon, Son of John, do you love me?" And answering "yes" each time, Peter was recommissioned as an apostle and obviously forgiven for having denied His Lord on Good Friday. He was back in good standing, but there was more.

Jesus went on to indicate what was ahead for Peter. Here it is in the words of the Gospel: "When you were young, you fastened your belt about you and walked where you chose; but when you are old you will stretch out your arms, and a stranger will bind you fast, and carry you where you have no wish to go. Jesus said this to indicate the manner of death by which Peter was to glorify God". Over the years, Peter would gradually surrender his self-will, and eventually die as His Lord had died, on a cross in the city of Rome.

Now this was a heavy word and Peter responded by saying in effect, "Why me?" As he saw John - that most intimate of the associate of Jesus - trailing them, Peter could not resist playing "comparative providence". He turned to Jesus and asked, "Lord, what about this man?" Jesus replied, "If it is my wish for him to stay until I come, what is that to you". Or, as the J. B. Phillips' translation has put it, "If I wish for him to stay until I come, is that your business, Peter? Follow me!"

DEVELOPMENT I think that much of our discontent comes from comparing ourselves unfavorably with others. We often insist on democratizing God's dealings with men, forgetting that while all men are created equal, we are not all created the same. We forget the varied endowments, the gifts and the testings that God sends us to fit us for our several callings.

One is not, in the least, trying to counsel the deprived to a "benign contentment" with their lot. Nor is one suggesting that people of means and of power should not, as a religious obligation, work for a more equitable distribution of wealth and income. The point is simply that even under the best of systems some unevenness in fortune is bound to exist.

Have you ever questioned the right of the 10th Commandment to be there? I mean after all those juicy sins like stealing and adultery and murder. Whoever put those commandments together didn't have much of a sense of climax. He should have started with the throw-away sin of coveting and worked up to the bigger stuff.

And yet it is true that this commandment, "Thou shalt not covet" finds us all at some point or time. Whatever our bag may be - whether we're a hard-hat or a home-maker, an accountant or an actress, whether we work the academic field or the financial field, we can testify from experience that the covetous spirit, the jealous attitude, the envious disposition can render us unable to step up to life and enjoy it for all it's worth!

There's always someone around us that we point to whose lot seems far happier than ours. In a hundred ways or more we plead with God, "what about him? Or, what about her?" And back comes the answer, ever the same, "Is that your business, Peter? Follow thou me!"

OTHERS ARE NOT AS TROUBLE-FREE AS THEY SEEM

Next time you're tempted to lodge a complaint with the management about your lot in life there are a couple of things that you would do well to keep in mind. One is that other people aren't as well off and as trouble-free as they might seem to be. Mind you, appearances can be deceiving.

Albert Camus has found us by suggesting that we are all addicted at times to what he calls "nostalgia for other people's lives". He explains,

"This is because, seen from the outside, they form a whole,
while our life, seen from the inside, is all bits and pieces".

"Nostalgia for other people's lives". For instance, Peter's nostalgia for John's future. The almost incessant desire to swap our providence for somebody else's. To play the game, "what if...." if not, "why me?"

I believe there is some truth, if not a great deal of poetic worth, in these lines,

"If every man's internal care were written on his brow,
How many would our pity share, who have our envy now!"

I recall a number of years ago calling on a rather well-to-do man here in the city who mentioned in the course of our visit his hobby and love for collecting stamps. We vibrated on the same frequency for a while because at one point in my life many years ago I had the same interest. I could appreciate his interest in stamps. But his idea of stamp collecting and mine were poles apart. He reached up to some high shelves and pulled down several expensive, hand-tooled, leather albums to show me sheet after sheet after sheet of perfect stamps. He went on to explain that he had a standing order with the Post Office so that every time a new issue was released he got himself several blocks in flawless condition. I could not help comparing his method of stamp collecting with the one we used to know. With us, if someone got a letter from a friend in France or a grandparent in Great

Britain, even though the stamp was badly cancelled and partly mutilated, we cherished the inclusion of that stamp in our album.

The point is that much is not always better. And all that glitters is not gold. Really, who's to say whether John or Peter had the easier lot. Indeed, it may be more difficult to live for Jesus than to die for him! "Lord, what about him". "Is that your business, Peter?" "Follow me".

HAPPINESS COMES FROM INSIDE OUT Related to that observation is this word. I believe that authentic happiness comes primarily from the inside out, and not from the outside in. This is not a popular word in a day when so many are working hard to alter the external conditions of life. And yet, the fact that it is not popular adds to the urgency to say it. Authentic happiness comes from the inside out, not from the outside in.

In a very helpful book called, Psychotherapy and a Christian View of Man, David Roberts describes a tendency we all have to fix the blame for our unhappiness on outside forces. He writes,

"When an individual is not aware of the seriousness of his conflicts, this may be due to the fact that he has projected them on to people and circumstances outside himself. Then the trouble always lies in his opinion with the wife, the boss, the world situation, the Jews, the communists, etc.. And if these external annoyances could be straightened out, he assumes, everything inside himself would form a serene harmony".

Whatever it is that represent our assignment in life, there are plusses and minuses to it. The big thing, as I see it, is to take this combination of "yesses" and "noes", and make them stand up and serve the glory of God and the needs of others.

Some of you who enjoy chess will remember that in chess the one who has the whites moves first. When some people play, it really doesn't make much difference who moves first. We can lose a game either way. But there is a level of play at which the person who draws the blacks simply plays for a tie. There is no point in trying to offset the initial advantage of white's first move. But I read with a sensation of pleasure an article in Time about a year ago about a Russian Grand Master of the 20's and 30's who would not accept the view that one could at best get only a draw with the blacks. This is how he put it,

"When I am white, I win because I am white. When /
I am black, I win because I am Bogolyubov!" (bogol - yu - bov)

"Lord, what about him?" "Is that your business, Peter?" "Follow me!"

TAKE PLEASURE IN THE BLESSINGS OF OTHERS Happiness is something of an inside job. ~~We need to be reminded of that.~~ And my final word would be this: as mature Christians we must learn to take pleasure in other people's blessings. And I concede right off that this is easier said than done.

I believe a certain sharing of talent and experience belongs to our Christian faith. Those early Christians back in Jerusalem following the resurrection did some experimenting in sharing. It was a form of communism. You'll recall that on Pentecost after the Holy Spirit came those early believers held all things in common. Were they wrong to do this? Were they pre-mature in pooling their physical

wealth? Who knows? But what is clear is that throughout those early churches the attempt was made to have each member enjoy the talents and the blessings of others.

One of the sadder parts of our American legacy is that we so often see each other as competitors. We so often assume that some one else's capacity implies an incapacity on our part. Thus we have a tendency to debunk others in order to shrink the distance between their gifts and our own.

I was talking with a clergy friend the other day whose predecessor two back was a man who personified pastoral care to the nth degree. He established a widely acclaimed record as a beloved shepherd of his sheep. The younger man who is now in that place dismissed the whole achievement with one short comment. He said, "It filled a deep need in his life to do that sort of thing". I thought to myself, "That's cruel". That's the way - a very subtle way - in which we write each other off and put each other down to build ourselves up.

When you find someone who surpasses you in the ability to give, in the ability to sing, in physical appearance, in longevity, in family situations, or what have you - be thankful that we have these gifts in our midst. Build up the other person instead of tearing him down. Paul laid this procedure upon the Christians in Corinth who were seriously divided. They had several "fan clubs" going in that church. There were some who thought that Cephas was the man. Others thought that Apollos was. Some thought Paul was the man. A holier than thou contingent announced that they belonged to the "Christ party". The Apostle pleaded with them saying,

"All things are yours - whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world of life or death, or the present or the future - all are yours; and you are Christ's, and Christ is God's."

CLOSING

"Lord, what about him?" asked Peter. "Is that your business, Peter". Then came the redeeming imperative, "Follow me".

Back in the 16th Century a Polish astronomer discovered that the earth was not the center of everything with all the heavenly bodies rotating around us. Called the Copernican revolution, it revealed the truth that the universe was found to be heliocentric - with the sun at the center and all of us revolving around it.

It may be that the best cure for the covetous, anxious, jealous spirit which occasionally touches our heart is a "copernican revolution" of the soul. We must come to understand that the world does not revolve around our little axis, but that we were made to revolve around the purposes of God. How true it is, too, as someone once remarked, "You can do a lot of 'kingdom building' in this life if you don't have to worry constantly about who's going to get the credit for it!"

Friend, the ultimate question is not the state of our own pleasures, or our own wealth, our conveniences, or the massaging of our own egos, but rather it is the quality of our obedience to Him whose will is indeed our peace, and in whose service we find our salvation.. The words of the Risen Christ to Peter that morning long ago still echo across the centuries, down to us today. "Follow me!"

PRAYER

Let the life that was in Christ Jesus, O God, be in us, and let it be radiated from us and through us to others. Give us the power and the

grace to go out into our world and to live as though Christ were living in us. Help us to follow Him in all we do and say and think, that our world, like Him, may be raised from death to new life. Amen