

## THE CHRISTIAN'S FANTASTIC HOPE

### INTRODUCTION

The sermon this morning is something in the way of a footnote to the sermon of last Sunday which, as most of you know, had to do with the world situation and the spirit of the Christian in a time such as this. Your response to the things that were said from the pulpit - your comments at the door following the service, and two or three letters that were sent to me this past week - made me realize that something more needed to be said. Perhaps you'll recall that in the closing moments of last Sunday's sermon I said something like this that I personally felt we were not living in the last days of history, that there was a way out of this situation, a way through the complicated events now facing us as a nation and that it was up to Christian people more and more to show the way and to point to the direction in which we should be traveling. I did not however say specifically what that direction was. This is what we are going to think about this morning - the direction in which we, as a Christian nation, ought to be moving more than we are.

### VIOLENCE AND HUMAN NATURE

Several weeks ago there was an article in the Herald Tribune that caught my attention. It was a brief item of news. It was reported to us that during the past calendar year some 3,350 windows in the cars of the New Haven Railroad had been smashed by vandals thus costing the railroad some one hundred and forty thousand of its precious dollars in order to replace them. Apparently there was no provocation at all for the destruction of the windows. I doubt very much whether the people who broke them were unhappy and disgruntled commuters. I would venture to say that they were simply people who had the urge to be violent, the urge to smash things. And I thought to myself at that time that if people are capable of such violence when there is no provocation at all, you can imagine what they will do when there is provocation. As a matter of fact, we do not have to imagine it for we know all too well.

For instance, if someone says something unkind or unfair about you behind your back and it eventually gets back to you (and this usually happens), you know what your response will be - you'll feel your own blood begin to boil and you'll have the impulse or the urge to either strike that person or to say something unkind or unfair about him. Or, if some clever man maneuvers you out of your position in business, or even more tragically, in marriage, you know what your response is apt to be - you'll begin to devise ways and means for putting him out of the way, perhaps not by destroying his life, but by destroying his reputation shred by shred. Or if you feel yourself deprived of certain rights or certain things that are yours, you know pretty well what your reaction will be - you'll begin to take steps in order to get them back and by force, if necessary. The premier of the Russian people insults the President of the American people, and you can almost see every hair on the head of every American begin to bristle.

In other words, what I am saying to you here in the opening moments of this sermon is simply this that this impulse to smash things - windows, buildings, reputations, people and even nations - lies very deep within all of us, even the mildest and tamest of us. In fact, you might even go so far as to say that violence is part of our nature, and that under proper circumstances it is generally accepted not only as a natural activity of human beings, but also a necessary one. We feel that the boy who doesn't strike back when he is struck isn't much of a boy, or the man who hasn't the gumption to give as good as he gets isn't much of a man, or the nation that isn't prepared to fight isn't much of a nation. Violence is part of our nature, and under the proper

circumstances it is generally accepted as a natural activity of human beings and also a necessary activity.

And yet, because of the complicated depths in every situation, and because of the complicated depths in our own humannature, we would have to acknowledge that this is only part of the story, only side of the picture. For instance, if we are to be fair to this subject and honest with ourselves, we would have to acknowledge on the other hand that there are times when violence violates something deep within us; times when we are ashamed of ourselves for having resorted to violence; times when we feel it is beneath our dignity as human beings; times when we feel that there's something degrading about it whether it be in a parent, a husband or wife, an employer, or even a policeman or a soldier.

And another thing that complicates the picture and cautions us against easy, simply and uncomplicated answers is this: there are times too when all of us feel that life, Life with a capital life, is extremely sacred, that every life, no matter whose it is, or what he has done, or how much in the wrong he may be, or how useless he is, that every life is sacred, that because he is alive, we ought not to touch it or mar it. All of us, in our better moments, I think, have this. Call it what you will; call it what Schweitzer calls it "Reverence for life". But all of us in our better moments have this. We cannot make life therefore we ought not to mar it. And then too I think there are times when you and I are drawn to those who have risen above violence, people who have renounced its implicitness in all of their human relationships. They have come in the point in their own lives to where they have curbed this impulse to be violent just as they have curbed the impulse to lie, lust, cheat and steal. Such people may, of course, even go so far as to take an absolute stand. They may renounce violence completely. They may take their stand with the three giants of our 20th Century: Gandhi - a Hindu; Einstein - a Jew; and Schweitzer - a Christian. These three renounced violence completely, and this means of course that they renounced war. And the only one of these three still living is now pleading eloquently for the cessation of the making and testing of nuclear weapons.

#### WHERE ALL OF THIS IS TAKING US

Perhaps you can see where all of this is taking us. Perhaps you can see to what the smashing of the train windows is leading us. It is, in a way, bringing us face to face with one of the great issues of our time. And the issue in plain words is simply this: Shall we continue to prepare for war in order to keep the peace or not? Shall we continue to match the other great power of the world - bomb for bomb, and missile for missile - on the assumption that if we do not accept the risk of war, we will everything we have? Or shall we change our course and risk the loss of everything we have, rather than risk the violence of total war? Will we face the facts of modern warfare and decide that we would rather lose everything we have than lose everything we are? In other words, has the time come when the means of violence have become so completely devastating that they must be completely rejected and renounced? Or shall we go on playing with it as a child fascinated by a gun, unable to keep his hands off of it, knowing full well the dangers of it, but nevertheless goes right on playing with it. What are we to do?

Our answers to these questions, of course, will be determined in no small way by the principles that undergird our lives and give guidance to our thinking. The principle involved here is as clear as daylight to me. The principle in general is this: Life is the gift of God and no man has the right to destroy it, either in himself or in another,

regardless of who he is, where he lives, and to what flag he pledges his allegiance. This is the principle which in general ought to guide us in our thinking as we try to find answers to these questions. Life is the gift of God and no man has the right to destroy it, either in himself or in another person, and as I said last week - a principle is something you accept in cold blood to stand by when the blood is hot.

We find this principle appearing in the Old Testament: Thou shalt not kill. It's really amazing I think to consider how even in those early days men had a glimmering of this great principle, even when they had no real comprehension of the implications of it and went right on through those terrible Old Testament wars killing right and left. But nevertheless, even then, they had a glimpse - an insight into this great principle: Thou shalt not kill.

We find this principle implicit on every page of the New Testament, not only in what Jesus said, but also in what he did. Mind you, when Jesus talked about his enemies, he did not talk about fighting them or getting back at them, but rather he talked about loving them. You and I may not be able to take this in its full scope, but this is what he was saying: "Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that harm you and pray for them that despitefully use you." And never forget the way he met the opposition. No sword in his hand. He rose above violence the same way he rose above cruelty, darkness and even death. He believed in the transforming power of love, the power of love to change men's attitudes and lives. And I cannot help but feel that he is calling us out of violence to the higher ways more worthy of us as human beings. He knew, what the lessons of history are slowly and painfully teaching us: that violence accomplishes very little, that it breeds nothing but more violence, and that it degrades people bringing nothing but tragedy. The principle is perhaps not clear to everyone and I wish it were possible for us to discuss this at greater lengths. We shall not do that now. It is as clear as crystal to me, and I know it is to some of you, if not all of you.

#### APPLYING THE PRINCIPLE

Of course, it is when we begin to apply the principle that we run into trouble and encounter some difficulties. This is so often true with our principles. Somehow this reminds us of Augustine's great prayer: "O Lord, grant me chastity, but not right now". We have difficulties apply our principles, to be sure. This time, we know, for instance, that there are some individuals in society who must be restrained by force. And I do not see the time near at hand when this will not be so. People being what they are, I fear that policeman and prisons will be with us for some time to come. And I suppose the same thing is true for nation. We can see and understand quite easily why it is necessary for us to restrain by force the head of a nation and the people he represents. I can see why when one nation under an insane ruler exterminates six million Jews, the rest of the world cannot sit idly by and let him do it. Incidentally it was fifteen years ago on the last day of April that this man ended his life. Not a very dark day on the calendar of human history, a day we ought not to forget. Nor am I personally prepared to say that in every situation that might arise, war would be the wrong thing. I am prepared to say that in my judgement it would be wrong because I believe that war is evil and therefore always wrong; but it might not be the wrong thing to do under the particular circumstances. It might be the lesser of two evils.

But on the other hand, I believe it is not God's will for human beings to slaughter each other in global warfare. I cannot see it any

other way, and I believe it is God's will for us to do everything we can do in our power to prevent such slaughter. Of course, once it strikes us, we are caught in its evil grip, but before it strikes us, we are in a position to do everything we can to prevent it.

And so this leads me to say this to you and here is where we are coming to the heart of this matter, I think that for the first time in human history there is the possibility that the human race can renounce violence as a way of behavior and settling disputes, and this simply because the violence has become so perfectly instrumented that one bomb could destroy a whole city and several bombs an entire nation. The means of violence have been made so perfect that they have defeated their own purpose. And in this matter of renouncing violence, a great deal will depend upon who takes the lead. The more powerful the nation, the more its leadership will count, and the bolder its leadership, the greater the risks it will run. But nothing risked, nothing gained; nothing dared, nothing done.

I should like to see our own country take that lead. We are in a better position than any other country on the face of the earth to do this. We have Christian foundations, strengthened by the Jewish awareness of the righteousness of God. We have the power, the material strength, and I hope hidden in the secret places of our hearts, the moral and spiritual strength to do it. We are not perfect by any means, but we have no history of aggression behind us, no thirst for power over other nations within us, and a spirit of idealism that has not been singed by either the skeptics or the cynics.

But if our nation is to do this, we will have to do certain things. For one thing we will have to lose some of our fears, or perhaps change them for a different brand. We will have to fear the Russians less and fear the dry rot within our own society more than we are. I think we will have to take a more positive stand than I fear we are now taking, a stand not merely against something, but a stand for something! We will have to be more concerned with those great ideas that are designed to control force rather than with the ideas that are designed to exercise it. As a people we will have to be more concerned with the idea of universal disarmament and the cessation of all nuclear tests with inspection controls than we now are. We will have to find new ideas and greater initiatives and bring these ideas and initiatives into the areas of international law, international organization, economic relations, cultural and scientific exchange, technical aid and assistance to the undeveloped countries of the world, and how our own government, both in the executive and legislative branches will have to seek and find ways to develop more policies and to carry them out more effectively. Our country has a tradition behind it for finding these new ways and ideas: President Wilson and the League of Nations; President Harding and the Naval Disarmament Conference of 1922; President Roosevelt and others initiated the United Nations and proposed the lend-lease program; President Truman offered to put all atomic weapons under international control and with General Marshall initiated the Marshall Plan for European Recovery. It was our present president who initiated the "Atoms for Peace" program. These are only illustrations of past ideas. They can do no more than hint at what is needed now. But more of the same is necessary if we are to break new ground and find our way through these complicated events.

I realize that you and I will never be in a position to make these great decisions or formulate these new policies, and therefore we are likely to say to ourselves: "Well, it doesn't matter a great deal what I think. All I can do is leave it to the men in Washington and trust

to luck that everything will come out well". But you know before I even rem nd you that it is important what you think and do and say on these matters for what you think creates the climate of public opinion in this nation and inevitably though indrectly it influences the leaders of our country.

What do you think? Do you think it is wrong to kill a man or not? For a good reason or not? Do you think it is wrong to prepare to do this, even in self defense, the thing which violates everything that is deep within you. What do you say about these things as you talk to your friends? Do you say things that have little basis in fact and are supported more by your emotions. Are you trying to curb or encourage the urge to be violent. Do you do everything you can to support the peo le who are trying to make peace, or do you mingle with the trouble makers who deal in rumors and work behind the scenes. Are you strong enough to love and ready to leave hate to those who are too weak to love. It makes all the difference in the world you see what you and I think and say and do. We can either keep the kettle boiling or we can bring to it a calm and creative stillness.

These are the things I want you to think about on this Memorial Day Sunday when we pause to pay our tribute of respect and honor to those who in former days - husbands, fathers, brothers and sons - have fallen in battle in order to defend this country and to preserve its glorious ideals. It was Isaiah who said centuries ago:

"And they shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruninghooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn of war any more".

It's a fantastic dream, a fantastic hope, and it is towards this end that we as a Christian nation ought always to be moving.

LET US PRAY:

"God, Our <sup>H</sup>ather, on this day of remembrance, look upon the unrest of our world and help us to complete the work of thy healing hand. Send peace upon the earth, a deeper and a more lasting peace than the world has ever known. Draw all men unto thyself and to one another by the bands of love. And may the great sacrifices of those who have fallen in battle not be in vain, and unite us in a sacred brotherhood where mercy, faith and truth and freedom may flourish. We ask this in thy name. Amen