

MYSTERY OF TROUBLE

Consider some of the stages of mystery through which a Christian may go in his discipleship, whether it be Thomas in the first century, or one of us in this century.

First, there are times in life when we encounter the mystery of trouble. There are times when a minister will hear a person say, "I suppose I shouldn't ask 'why'....but". And a minister wants to respond, "Friend, of course you should ask 'why'....if you're human and honest!" "Why?" - "Why, indeed, cancer and cholera, earthquakes and rattlesnakes?" "Why should a vital, needed person be struck down in the prime years of his life?" ~~"Why, in the midst of a busy week should a priest be called out to the parents of a newborn baby, wanted and welcomed, and now suddenly dead, while other children, unwanted and unwelcomed, are either cancelled before birth, or committed after birth to dark, delinquent lives?"~~ "Why does goodness often get crucified, while crime seems to pay off?"

I'm sure that one of the things that endeared the late Harry Emerson Fosdick to so many was an offhand remark about his father that he once made in a sermon. He recalled his father saying that the chief reason that he wanted to go to heaven was that he might get God off in a corner and ask him some questions. Who of us does not know that mood, when we hurl our questions at the Almighty, and there are no clear answers in reply?

It comes as a bit of a surprise now and then to be reminded that this is the way Jesus said it would be. "In this world," He said, "you shall have tribulation". Trouble, tension, suffering - call it what you will. But He did make it clear that it is part and parcel of what we call "life", that it's part of what it means to be human, that Christian commitment does not give a person immunity from suffering, or guarantee complete explanation of suffering.

And if anything more than His word was needed, there was His deed, when He walked up a hill to be placed on a cross and the people who thought they had all the answers, shouted, "If you are the Son of God, save yourself!" Instead, he suffered and at one point the fog rolled in until He cried out in anguish, "My God, my God...why...why...why". That - I submit - is a universal experience, and this side of God's eternity, we shall not be spared the deep mystery of trouble.

MYSTERY OF LOVE

But, there's more to be said than this. Why is it that we so often use the word "mystery" in a negative sense? Mystery is not always painful and oppressive: It is also glad and glorious.

Come along a second step and see how Christ, then or now, would lead his followers to encounter the mystery of love.

I think we catch a glimpse of that mystery on human terms. Why is it that parents' love is often steady - through all of the fumbles and stumbles of childhood and adolescence and even beyond? Why is it that life partners and friends believe in us and love us - when sometimes we are quite unloveable? Why is it that in moments of crisis, friends surprise us and support us with more caring than we thought possible. No sense to it, really. It is just one of those shining, towering, grace-notes of life.

All of this hints to the supreme truth that Jesus communicated to us about God. It's all wrapped up in that little verse that we first learned back in

Magee, as he flew his plane and wrote: "Here in the high untrespassed sanctity of space...put out my hand and touch the face of God". Different times and circumstances for the mystery of assurance.

Jesus never promised anyone clear answers to all of life's questions. But He did promise us something much more important. "In this world" said He, "You shall have tribulation, but be of good cheer, for I have overcome the world. Let not your hearts be troubled; neither let them be afraid. My peace I leave with you; my peace I give unto you".

I had a Christmas card this week from a friend who several years ago left NY and moved to another part of the country. She hadn't been to church very often in recent months and remarked in a note in the card that something had prompted her to go one Sunday back in November. She spoke about some of the things in the service that were meaningful to her and then she added, "It was a great thing to come out of church ~~again~~ with a song in my heart". And I thought when I read that line that really that's what this sermon is trying to say, or more importantly what Jesus keeps saying. He never talked a great deal about giving us answers to all the questions that come to our minds, but in words and in ways that are timeless, He would put a song in our hearts, some strength in our steps and some purpose in our being, and yes - some hope in our future.

These words by Albert Schweitzer about Jesus describe the Christian's experience so well, and in so doing attain, I feel, the stature of the classic:

"He comes to us as one unknown...without a name...as of old.. by the lakeside, He came to those who knew Him not. He speaks to us the same word: 'Follow thou me!' - and sets us to the tasks which He has to fulfill for our time. He commands. And to those who obey Him, whether they be wise or simple, He will reveal Himself in the toils, the conflicts, the suffering which they shall pass through in His fellowship, and, as an ineffable mystery - they shall learn in their own experience who He is".

PRAYER

"How silently, how silently, the wondrous gift is given.
So God imparts to human hearts, the blessings of his heaven.
No ear may hear His coming, but in this world of sin,
Where meek souls will receive Him still, the dear Christ
enters in".

Our Father, if we came into Church this hour perplexed and upset by the mystery of trouble, send us out singing about the mystery of thy grace and love. If we came in, asking for answers, send us out satisfied with a measure of warm assurance, O Thou whose love is forever made clear and personal for each of us in the manger of Bethlehem. In the name and spirit of Christ, we pray. Amen
For in Him our deepest needs are met, and our highest hopes find expression.

Sunday School - God is love. Jesus was that love in action - love incarnate. And it was this that finally got through to Thomas and all his kinsmen - not logic, but love. Not an argument, but a presence.

It was an educator, not a preacher, the man who served recently as President of Harvard, Dr. Nathan Pusey, who one time said, "In the depth of every mystery, Jesus put a face". So often, it was the face of love - in that mystery of a young man's misused freedom, there was a father's face welcoming him home. Another time, in the mystery of an innocent man beaten up and left wounded by the side of the road, there was a foreigner's compassionate face, leaning over him in concern. In the deep mystery of the Cross, there was the face of Christ - conveying forgiveness and love.

A number of years ago Billy Graham made a quest appearance on Rowan and Martin's TV show, "Laugh-In". It seemed initially like some strange mis-casting. There were a few harmless quips by Dr. Graham through the show, but then at the end, the show's two hosts became serious. One of them said, "Dr. Graham, we understand that a good percentage of those who attend your meetings are under twenty-five years of age. We would like to know how you do it.[?] What is your message that brings them and apparently reaches so many of them?" Dr. Graham's answer was simple. He said, "I believe I have the message they want to hear. It is this,

"God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son...
that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish,
but have everlasting life!"

And the man who played the German soldier was then shown, saying, "Hmm...very interesting....and very true!" And then he added, "Think about it".

~~Indeed, think about it for~~ this is really what the Christian Gospel is all about - bringing into clearer focus the steady word that we are not alone, orphans adrift in a empty universe - but there is love - love here that accepts, heals, girds, shares, cares. That's it - incredible and incomprehensible - the love of God, the grace of God - beamed straight at you.

To me, the strongest and most eloquent sermons preached in this Church are not from the pulpit, but in the life of a sizeable number of people who have quietly encountered two mysteries - the mystery of trouble and the mystery of God's love. How blessed we are by such sermons. How contagious that word.

MYSTERY OF ASSURANCE

Come one final step and consider how Christian discipleship can lead to the mystery of assurance. It was this way with Thomas. It was not that all of his questions were answered. It was that he discovered that there was a punctuation sign that was much more important than the question mark. It was the exclamation point - "My Lord and My God!" At last, the assurance counted for more than specific answers.

I'm sure you'll agree that religious assurance is a profound mystery. No one can program it or predict it. It comes on roads and at times not entirely of our own choosing. It came to Wesley in a religious service on a May night in London and he penned that memorable line, "I felt my heart strangely warmed". "An assurance was given me..." It came to Martin Niemoeller in a German prison camp when he could say to his fellow prisoners on Christmas Eve: "We are not alone. We are in the hands of God, who is with us in this dismal and lonely place". It came to that young Royal Canadian Air Force pilot, John

"NOT SO MUCH AN ANSWER AS AN ASSURANCE"

INTRODUCTION Someone once said that "Christianity is not so much an explanation of life, as it is a way of life". The clarity and the strength of that insight appeal to me. How simple and how needed.

People often get "hung up" on the unanswered questions and the unexplained tragedies of life. Often looking for some clear answer, some precise formula in church, or in creed, or in scripture and not finding it, they tend to become skeptical, sometimes even bitter. "How could God do this to me?" "How can you reconcile this disaster with a loving God?" "~~How could God have been in Jesus in a unique way?~~" Sometimes the questions obstruct any significant measure of faith.

For some stalled wayfarer then, there may be light and movement for life's journey in this simple observation that's the springboard for today's message that "Christianity is not so much an explanation of life, as it is a way of life".

DEVELOPMENT Let me say here at the beginning that this accent does not imply that we are to leave our minds and our intellects behind in any kind of faith commitment. ~~We owe a tremendous debt to the finest minds in our Christian heritage, those magnificent minds blended with great spirits to make the faith clear and more credible.~~ When Jesus said, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your mind...." - I take it He meant that Christian commitment meant brain power as well as other kinds of power entrusted to us.

But somehow we have never gotten the basic Christian message if we see the ultimate goal as intellectual tidiness, reducing faith to a set of completely, comprhendable facts. ~~Perhaps this is why I felt such refreshing simplicity in that statement, "Christianity...not so much an explanation, as a way".~~

JESUS - THE WAY When you stop to think about it, wasn't this basically what Jesus was trying to get across to the original 12 disciples? Mind you, they were such a human lot, representing the dominant moods and temperaments that you are apt to find in almost any group of persons.

Remember Thomas, always questioning, always asking, so much so that his name has become wedded to the word, "doubting". With that raised hand and that wrinkled brow, he would ask, "But Lord...how..how..and why?" And there in the Upper Room, as Jesus was talking to the twelve, he spoke about the future.... "I go to prepare a place for you....and you know the way where I am going". But there was Thomas, quick to question, "But Lord, we do not know where you are going and how can we ever know the way". And without any attempt to argue, Jesus replied, "I am the way, the truth, the life".

And not that night, but later on, it was Thomas, ironically enough, his doubts dispelled and his questions no longer of such crucial importance...Thomas who fashioned one of the first creeds, when he cried out to Jesus: "My Lord and my God".

In the end, it was not a web, spun out of philosophical argument that convinced Thomas. Rather it was a way, a way made clear and so compelling by a person - not an argument, but a presence. Thomas would have agreed with that insight around which today's message has been constructed.

"NOT SO MUCH AN ANSWER AS AN ASSURANCE"

INTRODUCTION

I came across a sentence recently that impressed me with its clarity and its strength. I know not where or to whom to give credit for this sentence, but as I recall it, it went something like this: "Christianity is not so much an explanation of life, as it is a way of life".

How simple. How needed. For how many people do get hung up on the unanswered questions and the unexplained tragedies of life. Often looking for some clear answer, some precise formula in church or creed or scripture and not finding it, they tend to become skeptical, sometimes even bitter. "How could God do this to me?" "How can you reconcile this disaster with a loving God?" "How could God have been in Jesus in a unique way?" Questions that obscure and sometimes even thwart any significant measure of faith....all kinds of questions.

For some stalled wayfarer then, there might be some light and movement for life's journey in this simple statement that made its appeal to me and serves as a springboard for today's sermon, "Christianity is not so much an explanation of life life, as it is a way of life".

DEVELOPMENT

Let it be said right here at the beginning that this accent does not imply that we are to leave behind our minds and intellect in any kind of faith commitment. We owe a tremendous debt to the finest minds of our Christian heritage: great thinkers from Paul and Augustine to Tillich and Niebuhr - magnificent minds blended with great spirits to make the faith more clear and credible. We owe much to those who have opened the doors and the windows of our understanding and helped us to resolve our intellectual difficulties. When Jesus said, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your minds...." - I take it he meant that Christian commitment meant brain power as well as other kinds of power entrusted to us.

But somehow we have never gotten the basic Christian message if we see the ultimate goal as intellectual tidiness, reducing faith to a set of completely, comprehensible facts. I think this is why I found such refreshing simplicity in that statement, "Christianity - not so much an explanation....as a way".

JESUS: "I AM THE WAY"

And wasn't this basically what Jesus was trying to get across to the original twelve disciples? Mind you, they were such a human lot, representing the dominant moods and temperaments that you would find in almost any group of twelve people today.

There was Thomas, always questioning, always asking, so much so that his name has become wedded to the word, "doubting". With raised hand and wrinkled brow, he would ask, "But how, Lord....how?" And there in the Upper Room, as Jesus was talking to the twelve, talking to them about the future...."I go to prepare a place for you....and you know the way where I am going". But there was Thomas, quick to wave a hand and ask a question, "But Lord....we do not know where you're going; how can we know the way". And without any attempt to argue, Jesus quietly replied, "I am the way, Thomas - the truth, and the life".

And not that night, but a little later on, it was Thomas, ironically enough, his doubts now dispelled and his questions no longer of such crucial importance - Thomas, who fashioned one of the first creeds when he cried out to Jesus, "My Lord and my God".

In the end, it was not a web, spun out of philosophical argument that convinced Thomas. Rather it was a way....made clear.....compelling by a Person - not an argument, but a Presence. I think Thomas would have said "Amen" to that sentence around which today's sermon is woven, "Christianity is not so much an explanation of life, as it is a way of life".

MYSTERY OF TROUBLE

Consider now some of the stages of mystery through which a person - a Christian - may go in his discipleship - whether it be Thomas in the first century, or one of us in this century.

First, there are those times when we encounter the mystery of trouble. Occasionally a minister will hear a person say to him, "I suppose I shouldn't ask 'why' - but". And a minister wants to respond, "Friend, of course you should ask 'why'.....if you're human and if you're honest!" "Why" - "Why, indeed, cancer and rattlesnacks and earthquakes and automobile accidents?" "Why should a vital, needed person be struck down in his or her prime?" "Why, in the midst of a busy week should a minister be called out to the parents of a newborn baby, wanted and welcomed, and now suddenly dead, while other children, unwanted and unwelcomed, are either cancelled before birth, or committed after birth to dark and delinquent lives?" "Why does goodness often get crucified, while crime seems to pay off?"

I'm sure that one of the things that endeared the late Dr. Fosdick of Riverside Church to so many was an offhand remark about his father that he once made in a sermon. He recalled his father saying that the chief reason that he wanted to go to heaven was that he might get God off in a corner and ask him some questions. And who of us does not know that mood, when we hurl our questions at the Almighty, and there are no clear-cut answers in reply?

It comes as a bit of surprise now and again to be reminded that this is the way Jesus said it would be. "In this world" He said, "You shall have tribulation". Trouble, tension, suffering, anguish, heartbreak - call it what you will. But He did make it clear that it is part and parcel of what we call life, a part of what it means to be human, and that Christian commitment does not give a person some sort of immunity from suffering, or any complete explanation of suffering.

And if anything more than His word was needed, there was His deed - when He walked up to a hill to be nailed to a cross and some of those who thought they had all the answers, shouted, "If you are the Son of God, save yourself!" Instead, He suffered and at one point the fog came rolling in until even He cried out, "My God, my God.....why....why....why?" That - I submit - is a universal experience, and this side of God's eternity, we shall not be spared from encountering the deep mystery of trouble.

MYSTERY OF LOVE

But there is much more to be said than this. Why is it that we so often use the word "mystery" in a negative sense? Mystery is not always painful and oppressive. It is also glad and glorious.

Come a second step and see that then and now Christ would lead his followers to encounter the mystery of love.

I think we catch a glimpse of that mystery on human terms. Why is it that parents' love is often steady....through all the fumbles and stumbles of childhood and adolescence? Why is it that life partners and friends believe in us - and love us - when sometimes we are quite unloveable? Why is it that in moments of crisis, friends surprise and support us with more caring than we thought possible?

No sense to it....really. It is just one of those shining, towering grace-notes of life.

All of this hints to the supreme truth that Jesus communicated to us about God. It's all wrapped up in that little verse that some of us first learned in Sunday School - God is love. Jesus was that love in action - love incarnate, in human terms. And it was this that finally got through to Thomas and all his kinsmen - not logic, but love - not an argument, but a presence.

It was an educator, not a preacher - the man who retired some time ago as President of Harvard, Dr. Nathen Pusey, who one time said: "In the depth of every mystery, Jesus put a face!" And so often, it was the face of love - in the mystery of a young man's misused freedom, there was a father's face welcoming him home. In the mystery of an innocent man beat up and left wounded by the side of the road, there was a foreigner's compassionate face, leaning over him in concern. In the deep mystery of the Cross, there was the face of Christ conveying love... conveying the forgiveness that rests at the heart of life.

I remember once watching Billy Graham on Rowan and Martin's TV Show, "Laugh-In". At first it seemed like some rather strange mis-casting. There were a few innocuous quips by Dr. Graham through the show, but then at the end, the show's two hosts became serious. One of them said, "Dr. Graham, we understand that a good percentage of those who attend your meetings are under 25 years of age. We would like to know how you do it. What is your message that brings them and apparently reaches them. Dr. Graham's answer was simple, right from the scriptures. He said: "I have the message that I believe they want to hear. It is this: 'God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son.....that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life!" And the man who played the German soldier was then shown, saying: "Very interesting....and very true!" And then he added, "Think about it".

Indeed, think about it - for this is really what the Christian Gospel is all about....bringing into clearer focus the steady word that life does have meaning, that we are not alone, abandoned orphans adrift in a purposeless universe - but there is love here that accepts and heals and girds and shares and cares. That's it - incredible, incomprehensible - the love of God, the grace of God - beamed straight at you. That you are a child of God.

The strongest and most beautiful sermons preached in this church or any church are not from the pulpit, but in the life of a sizeable number of people who have encountered two mysteries - the mystery of trouble and the mystery of God's love.

MYSTERY OF ASSURANCE

Come one more step and see that Christian discipleship can lead one to the mystery of assurance. It was this way with Thomas. It was not that all of his questions were answered. It was that he discovered that there was a punctuation sign that was much more important than the question mark. It was the exclamation point - "My Lord, and My God". At last the assurance counted far more than specific answers.

Religious assurance is a profound mystery. No one can program it or completely predict it. It comes on roads and at times not entirely of our own choosing. You'll recall it came to Wesley in a religious service on a May night in London, and he wrote those memorable lines, "I felt my heart strangely warmed...and an assurance was given me". It came to Martin Niemoeller in a German prison camp when he could say to his fellow prisoners on Christmas Eve, "We are not alone....

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Different times. Different circumstances....for the mystery of assurance.

Jesus never promised anyone clear answers to all of life's questions. But He did promise us something much more important. Said He, "In this world you shall have tribulation, but be of good cheer, for I have overcome the world. Let not your hearts be troubled; neither let them be afraid. My peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you".

I had a Christmas card last month from a friend who several years ago left the city and moved to another part of the country. Apparently she hadn't been to church very often in the last year or two for one reason or another, and remarked in a note in the card that something had prompted her to go one Sunday back in the Fall. She spoke about some of the things in the service that were meaningful to her and then she added: "It was a great thing to come out of church again....with a song in my heart". And I thought when I read that line, that really is what this sermon today is trying to say, or more importantly what Jesus keeps saying. He never talks about giving us all the answers to all the questions that come to our minds, but in words and in ways that are timeless, He would put a song in our hearts, some strength in our steps, some light on our path, some purpose in our being, some hope in our tomorrows.

These words by Albert Schweitzer about Jesus describe the Christian experience so well and in so doing attain in my book the stature of the classic:

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PRAYER

Our Father, if we came into church this hour perplexed and upset by the mystery of trouble, send us out of here singing about the mystery of thy grace and love. If we came in asking for answers, send us out satisfied with a measure of warm assurance, To Thou, whose love is forever and forever made clear and personal for each of us in the man of Nazareth. In His name and spirit, we pray. Amen

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MYSTERY OF LOVE But there is much more to be said than this. Why is it that we so often use the word "mystery" in a negative sense? Mystery is not always painful and oppressive. It is also glad and glorious.

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I think we catch a glimpse of that mystery on human terms. Why is it that parents' love is often steady - through all of the fumbles and stumbles of childhood and adolescence? Why is it that life partners and friends believe in us - and love us - when sometimes we are quite unloveable? Why is it that in moments of crisis, friends surprise and support us with more caring than we thought possible. No sense to it, really. It is just one of those shining, towering, grace-notes of life.

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God. It's all wrapped up in that little verse that some of us first learned in Sunday School - God is love. Jesus was that love in action - love incarnate. And it was this that finally got through to Thomas and all his kinsmen - not logic, but love - not an argument, but a presence.

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Some time back Billy Graham appeared on Rowan and Martin's TV show, "Laugh-In". At first it seemed like some strange mis-casting. There were a few innocuous quips by Dr. Graham through the show, but then at the end, the show's two hosts became serious. One of them said, "Dr. Graham, we understand that a good percentage of those who attend your meetings are under twenty-five years of age. We would like to know how you do it; what is your message that brings them and apparently reaches them. Dr. Graham's answer was simple. He said: "I have the message that I believe they want to hear. It is this: 'God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son.....that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life!" And the man who plays the German soldier was then shown, saying: "Very interesting.....and very true!" And then he added, "Think about it".

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The strongest and most beautiful sermons preached in this church or any church today are not from the pulpit - but in the life of a sizeable number of people who have encountered two mysteries - the mystery of trouble and the mystery of God's love.

MYSTERY OF ASSURANCE

Come one final step and see that Christian discipleship can lead to the mystery of assurance. It was this way with Thomas. It was not that all of his questions were answered. It was that he discovered that there was a punctuation sign that was much more important than the question mark. It was the exclamation point - "my lord and my God!" At last, the assurance counted far more than specific answers.

Religious assurance is a profound mystery. No one can program it or completely predict it. It comes on roads and at times not entirely of our own choosing. It came to Wesley in a religious service on a May night in London, and he wrote those memorable lines: "I felt my heart strangely warmed....and an assurance was given me". It came to Marin Niemoeller in a German prison camp when he could say to his fellow prisoners on Christmas Eve: "We are not alone... we are in the hands of God, who is with us in this dismal and lonely place". It came to that young Royal Canadian Air Force pilot, John Magee, as he flew his plane and wrote: "Here in the high untrespassed sanctity of space....put out my hand and touch the face of God". Different times and circumstances for the mystery of assurance.

Jesus never promised anyone clear answers to all of life's questions. But He did promise us something much more important. Said he, "In this world you shall have tribulation, but be of good cheer, for I have overcome the world. Let not your hearts be troubled; neither let them be afraid. My peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you".

I had a Christmas card this week from a friend who several years ago left the city and moved to another part of the country. Apparently she hadn't been to church very often in recent months, and remarked in a note in the card that something had prompted her to go one Sunday back in November. She spoke about some of the things in the service that were meaningful to her and then she added: "It was a great thing to come out of church again with a song in my heart". And I thought when I read that line, that really is what this sermon is trying to say, or more importantly what Jesus keeps saying. He never talks very much about giving us answers to all the questions that come to our minds, but in words and in ways that are timeless, He would put a song in our hearts - some strength in our steps - some purpose in our being - some hope in our future.

These words by Albert Schweitzer about Jesus describe the Christian experience so well and in so doing attain the stature of the classic:

"He comes to us as one unknown.....without a name....as of old... by the lakeside, he came to those who knew him not. He speaks to us the same word: 'Follow thou me!' - and sets us to the tasks which he has to fulfill for our time. He commands. And to those who obey him, whether they be wise or simple, he will reveal himself in the toils, the conflicts, the suffering which they shall pass through in his fellowship, and, as an ineffable mystery - they shall learn in their own experience who he is."

PRAYER

"How silently, how silently, the wondrous gift is given.
So God imparts to human hearts, the blessings of his heaven.
No ear may hear his coming, but in this world of sin,
Where meek souls will receive him still - the dear Christ enters in"

Our Father, if we came into church this hour perplexed and upset by the mystery of trouble, send us out singing about the mystery of thy grace and love. If we came in, asking for answers, send us out satisfied with a measure of warm assurance, O Thou whose love is forever made clear and personal for each of us in the manger of Bethlehem. In the name and spirit of Christ, we pray. Amen