

## "ON RECOGNIZING THE NEARNESS OF GOD"

### INTRODUCTION

On the 17th of December in the year 1903, Orville and Wilbur Wright succeeded in keeping their home-made airplane aloft above the hills of Kitty Hawk, North Carolina, for the first time. On landing they immediately sent a telegram to their sister in their home town of Dayton, Ohio. The telegram read: "First sustained flight today - 59 seconds. Hope to be home for Christmas". The sister in Dayton was so excited with the news that she took the telegram to the local newspaper office and next morning, believe it or not, the following headline appeared above the story: "Popular Local Bicycle Merchants Expected Home for the Christmas Holidays".

We smile at the story. One does not have to be a first class journalist to realize that a bungling editor missed the point of one of the great events of recent human history. And yet, perhaps we have a measure of sympathy for the editor for are there not those times when we are guilty of missing out and passing by some of the truly tremendous events of life happening within our very midst. And the consequences of what we are aware of and what we respond to or fail to be aware of and respond to can be decisive for all of life.

History tells us that Napoleon Bonaparte wanted to invade Britain, but could not because of the uncertain winds of the English Channel. One day, an American living in Paris came to Napoleon and told him it was possible to propel boats by steam. But Napoleon did not listen. The American was Robert Fulton. How differently history is made to read because on some seemingly ordinary day some event, some truth, some opportunity which could change and happily re-direct our life, came knocking at the door of some mind and went away unanswered, unrecognized.

So - midst all the exciting events of our time; events rivalling one another for our attention; events seeking to challenge our conscience and to invite our involvement; which of them are worthy of our most serious reflection, deserving of our most disciplined response; what ideas and concerns of our time can and should you and I participate in with our best effort, so that some future age may not be required sadly to say of us: the events of their time were tremendous, but the headlines of their times were trivial!

### RECOGNIZING THE REALITY OF GOD

Now when one considers what we are thinking about in terms of our religious experience the matter can be put as follows: How does one recognize the reality of God in our midst.

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INTRODUCTION On December 17, 1903, Orville and Wilbur Wright succeeded in keeping their home-made airplane aloft above the hills of Kitty Hawk, North Carolina, for the first time. On landing they immediately sent a telegram to their sister in their home town of Dayton, Ohio. The telegram read, "First sustained flight today - 59 seconds. Hope to be home for Christmas". The sister in Dayton was so excited with the news that she took the telegram to the local newspaper office and next morning, believe it or not, the following headline appeared above the story: "Popular Local Bicycle Merchants Expected Home for the Holidays".

We smile because you need not be anywhere near a first class journalist to realize that a bungling editor missed the point of one of the great events of human history. And yet, I frankly confess that my sympathy has always been with the editor. For is there any temptation which threatens most of us more than this: that we, too, let too many hours of our days and too many days of our years come and go without our even being aware of what are the truly tremendous events of life happening within our very midst?

If we are honest with ourselves and with one another we will confess that this is a crucial matter which involves us all: young or old; ordinary citizen, or leaders of state. And the consequence of what we are aware of and respond to or what we fail to be aware of can be decisive for all of life. Napoleon Bonaparte had wanted to invade Britain, but could not because of the uncertain winds of the English Channel. One day, an American living in Paris came to Napoleon and told him it was possible to propel boats by steam. But Napoleon did not listen. The American was Robert Fulton. How differently history is made to read, both among nations and individuals like ourselves, because on some seemingly ordinary day some event, some truth, some opportunity which could change and happily re-direct our life, came knocking at the door of our mind and went away unanswered and unrecognized:

"I follow the Christ with wistful eyes, But not with  
my mind and feet; I mark out the path and in cowardly  
guise Take note of the dangers one may meet, and I  
shrivel and die on my pleasant street"

So! Midst all the exciting events of our fabulous era; events rivaling one another for our attention; events seeking to challenge our conscience and to invite our involvement; which of them are worthy of our most serious reflection, deserving of our most disciplined response; what ideas and concerns of our time can and should you and I participate in with our best effort, so that some future age may not be required sadly to say of us: the events of their time were tremendous, but the headlines of their times were trivial!

### HOW DOES ONE RECOGNIZE THE REALITY OF GOD IN OUR MIDST?

Now when one considers what we are thinking about in terms of conventional religious language the matter may be stated as follows: How does one recognize the reality of God in our midst? Surely no honest or thoughtful person here will want to give a quick or sentimental answer to so difficult a question. Most of us would say Pascal was describing something of our own experience when, despite his devout and disciplined Christian faith, or more accurately because of such faith, he declared: "Every religion that does not affirm that God is hidden is not true". Or listen to that wise and radiant soul, Baron von Hugel, in one of his profound but practical letters to his niece. He says to her:

"Religions is dim - in the religious temper there should be a great simplicity and a certain contentment in dimness... God does not make our lives all ship-shape, clear and comfortable. Never try to get things too clear. Religion can't be clear. In this mixed-up life there is always an element of unclearness. I believe God wills it so. There is always an element of tragedy. How can it be otherwise if Christianity is our ideal".

Again, if any caution were needed about the danger of our claiming to know more than we actually do about the ways of God, listen to the blunt, rugged honesty of the Bible itself in the language of Job:

"Behold, I go forward, but God is not there; and backward, but I cannot perceive Him; on the left hand, where He doth work, but I cannot behold Him; He hideth Himself on the right hand that I cannot see Him".

Job was an honest man. He confronted the world in all its cruel contradictions. He simply could not find God under the circumstances and he was indignant with the silly comfort which others tried to impose upon him with their shallow thoughts of God.

Yet, having said all this, granting "the dimness", sometimes the darkness of our human pilgrimage in relation to God, not one of us here can be either thoughtful or honest unless we affirm also another dimension of our experience with God; an experience with that Presence and Power, not of ourselves that works for wholeness and strength and joy within our lives. Is there anyone of us here who, in the profoundest hours of our gratitude for that divine goodness in which our life was born, is sustained and which, despite all our times of rebellion nonetheless claims our best self; indeed, creates our best self; is there any one of us here, I say, having experiences that, who does not find the psalmist speaking for us when he says:

"....O God, whither shall I go from thy spirit,  
Whither shall I flee from thy presence?

If I climb up into heaven, Thou art there;  
If I lay me down in hell, Thou art there also.

If I take the wings of the morning, and remain  
in the uttermost parts of the sea,

even there also shall thy hand lead me;  
And thy right hand hold me.

If I say, let the darkness cover me,  
Let me day be turned into night,

The darkness is not darkness with Thee,  
the night is as clear as the day,  
darkness and light to Thee are both alike.

Marvelous are thy works, O God  
And that my soul knoweth, right well!

Consider with me, then, some of the ways in which that kind of experience with God has happened to us and may yet happen again.

THE REALITY OF BEAUTY

For one matter we discover the nearness of God whenever we respond to the reality of Beauty and rejoice in it.

Let no one suppose that such emphasis on the reality of beauty is meant to ignore the reality of how much unloveliness there is in our world. And God draws near to us in the ugliness and injustice of the world because He bids us be about its correction and healing. One thinks of Jane Adams in this regard: that courageous and gifted lady whose magnificent life of concern for the poor is remembered with gratitude by many, including Riverside Church here in our own city with its tribute to her, a sculptured figure between two other saints of God - the Apostle Paul and Albert Schweitzer. She deserves to be in such company. Jane Addams once said that her own concern for social justice became a more passionate concern when, giving a party for poor children in a Chicago neighborhood, she experienced the unusual fact of the children refusing candy. They had no desire for it. She was confused until she learned that these same children worked some 12 hours a day in a candy factory. She vowed to rid the land of such child-labor abuse and she helped to do so. The ugliness of life as well as its beauty can bring us near to the reality of God depending on what we ourselves bring to the circumstance of either ugliness or beauty.

But think with me, just now, of the relationship between God and beauty. The nature of God is more than beauty but it is not less. Sit long and quietly with beauty wherever you find it - or wherever it may find you - for in its presence you are very near to God. Matthew Arnold once said a true and lovely thing. He said:

"The night wind  
Brings upstream  
Murmurs and scents of the infinite sea."

Well, that is literally true and we are thankful for it - but in a broader sense each one of us here has felt the night wind of the murmurs and scents of the infinite sea of God. For some of you it has come primarily through music or drama, literature or the arts. For others of you it is perhaps some particular loveliness of land, or mountain, or the sea. For others of you it may be the majesty and order of the universe itself. Scientists feel this. A minister who studied at Oxford tells me he knew a young mathematician there who cried whenever he contemplated the binomial theorem:

"Marvelous are thy works, O God (and beautiful)  
And that my soul knoweth right well!"

Remember Thornton Wilder's play, Our Town. Recall his beautiful, honest portrayal of persons living in Grover Corners, a typical American small town. In the play Emily, a young ~~childlike~~ girl, has married her boyhood sweetheart but in the birth of her second child, she dies. She is, however, granted the permission to return to earth to live again one single day. She can choose any day she wishes and she chooses her 12th birthday and time is turned back for everyone with only Emily knowing that she is dead and has but the one day to be among her family and friends. In words which are actually her thoughts Emily says to her Mother as the day begins:

"OH, Mama, just look at me one minute as though you really saw me...14 years have gone by...you're a grandmother, mam. I married George Gibbs....Just for a moment... let's look at one another".

Then in the realization that people in real life so seldom take time to look at or

There is someone here this morning who needs to be reminded of the generous gift you have received; to be reminded of it and to honor it in your own life; the gift of God's love of you through the love of other persons for you.

Finally, not only does God draw near to us within our experience of whatever beauty we respond to and rejoice in; not only does He draw near to us in the love of persons who, reflecting something of Christ's love, give purpose and strength and joy to our lives; consider with me now, that God draws near to us whenever we desire, above all other desires, to draw near to Him, to be His faithful people, represent His will for His world as made known in Christ our Lord.

What will it mean for us individually, as a nation or as a church, truly to desire above all other desires that we be God's faithful people, representatives of His will for His world as made known in Christ our Lord? My own judgment is that unless the Church is intelligently and increasingly involved in relating its faith in Christ to the crucial issues which are bearing down hardest upon the people of God's world; the issues of war, peace, poverty, racial injustice; unless the Church increasingly demonstrates within its own membership an experience of concern and Christ-like love, a love that is truly redemptive, then the Church is destined for and deserves extinction, just as surely as that which befell the dinosaur in an earlier age. God will raise up other men and means to continue His work in the world, but the church must be converted to Christ or it will perish.

It was Canann Alexander of St. Paul's Cathedral in London who has estimated, by what kind of measurements I do not know, that the Cathedral is actually moving down Fleet Street at the rate of one inch every hundred years. There are many who are convinced that the church must move faster than that. Such a concern that the church be "where the action is" regardless of the controversy, is not only consistent with the spirit of Christ, but puts us in the company of creative people generally. Do you remember that James Conant, during his years as president of Harvard, kept a statement of a single sentence on his desk. It read: "A turtle never makes any progress unless it sticks its neck out".

Now, in order to keep the balance which loyalty to truth requires, it is wise to recognize that in the human heart, in addition ~~at~~ to all our times of reluctance to do what Christ would have us do, there is also a vast yearning to give ourselves to what is really worthy. Let me close with some words of Schweitzer: and then close with a sentence of Jesus:

"Our humaning is by no means so materialistic as foolish talk is continually asserting it to be. Judging by what I have learned about men and women, I am convinced that there is far more in them of idealist will-power than ever comes to the surface of the world. Just as the water of the streams we see is small in amount compared to that which flows underground, so the idealism which becomes visible is small in amount compared with what men and women bear locked in their hearts, unreleased or scarcely released. To unbind what is bound, to bring the underground waters to the surface: mankind is waiting and looking for such as can do that".

Jesus said: "Behold I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to you"....