

## "OUT OF PLACE - IN THE CHURCH"

### INTRODUCTION

There is a saint of the Roman Catholic Church by the name of St. Philip Neri. Like many another saint, he was hardly recognized as such during his life-time. He was an unorthodox, exuberant priest in Rome in the 16th century when the Reformation was taking hold throughout Europe. He might have ended up a heretic instead of a saint had it not been for the combination of his particular talents and the setting of his ministry.

His unusual gifts were an irrepressible sense of humor and an instinctive ability to help people. After his ordination, he joined a company of unattached priests in Rome who were left free to do whatever they could do best within the framework of the church. Philip was most often out on the streets, in the tenements, in the hospitals, ministering to human need and leaving people laughing and looking up. His sense of humor kept breaking through in ways that cheered the poor and shocked the pompous. Once when an ambitious social climber thought to exploit her acquaintance with him by inviting him to one of her afternoon social functions, he came with one side of his face shaved clean and the other covered with a week's beard - a style which might have possibilities for the style setters of today.

Yet this man was not just a jester with the ability to make people laugh. He was a contagiously happy person, who was equally at home sponging sores in the Hospital for Incurables or organizing an impromptu picnic for a thousand hungry children. Most of all, he was a clear channel for the word of God and the spirit of Christ in a day when the church was not noted for that kind of faithfulness. This is the sentence of his biographer which was actually the seed for this sermon: "He may have seemed out of place in the church, but the church was better because he was there".

### JESUS IN NAZARETH

This sentence brought to mind the account that we read this morning of a day when Jesus preached in his home church in Nazareth - and the congregation concluded that he was out of place and so proceeded to drive him out of town. Jesus apparently did not behave that day in the manner expected of a young preacher giving his first sermon before his home town folk. He had the audacity to suggest that often in the history of Israel it had been shown that God's goodness was not exclusively given to those who thought they had a special claim on him, but that it went out to all those who were eager and receptive, including the stranger and the alien. As Luke's Gospel puts it:

"When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with wrath"

That is another way of saying that they thought that Jesus was entirely out of place in that church that day.

All of which raises an intriguing wonderment as to what Christ would make of some of our declarations as to what is out of place in the church. Suppose we look at some of those declarations....in terms, of course, of what they mean to this church.

### INDIVIDUALS OUT OF PLACE

Sometimes we hear it said that certain individuals are out of place in the church.

Last Sunday afternoon some of us worshipped in the beautiful sanctuary of the Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church. It's been said that when Henry Sloan Coffin became pastor of Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church in the early part of this century, he found a rather exclusive upper-income congregation, and as was the case in many churches in that time, a rented pew system, whereby for the payment of a stipulated sum, a family or an individual was granted exclusive occupancy of a particular pew for a year at a time.

Early in Dr. Coffin's pastorate a couple who had recently moved to the city from Nova Scotia began attending the church. Whereupon a member of the pew committee, anxious to make the best possible bargain for the church, showed them a pew for rent on the middle aisle. The man was a factory worker and the proposed annual rental was the equivalent of his total earnings for three months! Intentionally or not, that church had subtle ways of suggesting that some people might be "out of place" there. Dr. Coffin, as fearless a fighter in his time as his namesake nephew in Yale's Chapel in our time, set about to change things - and in time the church gave public notice that "all pews are free and unassigned".

In our day, we have gotten away from that insidious system of pew rentals, and we announce that the church is open to all, and that everyone is welcome. But that announcement is not always matched by real acceptance and enthusiasm of all people. Let someone with a shabby or shady record come into the church and some may wonder what that person is doing in the church. Let someone of extreme poverty come into church and some may wonder if there is not another church where he would feel more at home. Let a hippie come into church and some may wonder why he does not meet our standards of Sunday dress and appearance. We still form our judgments about people being "out of place" in church.

Except when we gauge our judgments against Christ's judgment, we realize that no person can rightly be considered out of place in a Christian Church. Simply because no one was ever out of bounds or out of place as far as our Lord's caring was concerned. Everyone was important - the sick, the sinner, the rich, the poor, the Jew, the Samaritan. If any person thinks himself too poor, or too bad, or too different to find a place in Christ's church today, then either we who speak for the church have muffled the message and distorted the image, or else the person has not really listened. No individual should be "out of place" in the church.

#### IDEAS OUT OF PLACE

In the second place, we sometimes hear it said that certain ideas are out of place in the church. This is really what the members of that congregation in Nazareth were saying in response to Jesus' sermon that sabbath day. They had understood that God was the particular possession of their people, and when Jesus that day preached the idea of a universal God, a God who is the Father of all men, whose worship should widen their sympathies and override their prejudices, they would have none of it!

Jesus was always getting into trouble with the wide range of his ideas in the name of religion - the idea that the pagan Samaritan was a truer neighbor than the pious priest - the idea that the slum-lords of Jerusalem were under judgment because of their rent-gouging - the idea that the money changers in the temple were an affront to right religion. So many ideas that the rulers of the state and the church considered to be "out of place" that they determined to put him in his place, which was a place called Calvary. the idea that their was a higher loyalty than what they gave to Caes.

Too often in church history, the tragedy of Nazareth has been repeated as the church has resisted and resented new ideas as out of order and out of place. What else was it when the Catholic Church read out Martin Luther with his ideas of the sufficiency of the Scriptures and justification by faith. What else was it when the Church of England froze out John Wesley with his idea of both an intensely personal and a socially responsible religion. What else was it when later the rigidity of the Methodist Church drove out William Booth to found the Salvation Army with his idea of a free-roving evangelism for the city? What else is it today when churches rule out issues as too controversial and ideas as too unconventional.

I am not here so much pleading for the rightness of any particular viewpoint on any specific subject, as I am pleading for a hospitable examination of all ideas in the name and spirit of Christ. How many ideas there are clamoring for attention today - ideas about war and peace - about patriotism and dissent - about race and revolution - about poverty and affluence - about work and leisure - about sex and marriage - about ethics and absolutes. Now some of these ideas are disturbing and some of us, like some in the congregation in Nazareth, perhaps would prefer not to be confronted with them. But I can't help but feel that if the Lordship of Jesus Christ has any solid meaning for us, it must mean a relentless seeking to bring all of life beneath his mastery and there is that sense, I feel, in which it must mean that no subject and no field of ideas is out of place in the church.

#### INNOVATIONS OUT OF PLACE

Finally, in the third place, we sometimes hear it said that certain innovations are out of place in the church.

One of the most readily visible results of Vatican Council II has been the revision of the liturgy of the Roman Catholic Church with some pronounced changes in the form of worship. A young friend of mine who is a priest in the Catholic Church, related that one faithful parishioner came out of church on the Sunday when some of the changes had been instituted, and shaking her head, she said to the priest, "But where is the old church?"

That is, I suspect, the complaint of many a church member - Protestant and Catholic - in this country and in every country. Guitars during worship? Clergymen in nightclubs? Jazz concerts in majestic cathedrals? Priests, nuns and ministers on the picket line or involved in peace demonstrations or civil rights marches? The church is changing and its forms of worship and involvements in the life of the world are changing and some people long for the old and the familiar and are resentful of the new and the strange.

But before we condemn every new sight or sound or order of things as out of place in the church, we need to reflect. Within the continuity of the church, there has always been change. This was the great thing about Jesus - that he saved religion from being a relic - breathed life into it and gave it meaning for people and where they lived. So His church across the years has declared an unchanging message in changing forms - with art and architecture and music that has spoken to people in particular times and places. And innovation has never come easily. Some of the forms and the customs that many of us revere were regarded as heresy when they were introduced. When Martin Luther, for instance, encouraged the custom of congregational singing, the traditionalists were scandalized, for they believed that singing was the function of the choir and the clergy. When Issac Watts started writing hymns in his own words, he ran into all kinds of opposition on the part of church fathers who held that only psalms were fit for singing in the church. And no less a person than John Calvin called the pipe organ the "Devil's box of whistles", and considered that it had no place in the worship of God. Always innovations have met resistance!

So in our time there are changes taking place and any church that is facing out into the last third of the 20th century will reflect some of those changes. I commend to you an article in the February Reader's Digest, Are You Disturbed by the 'New Religion'? You may find it helpful. Perhaps the really important criterion in appraising any change in the church is whether or not it reflects in better fashion the spirit of Christ and someone's reverent response to the hunger of the soul to God's deed in Christ. There is no virtue in change for the sake of change - or change that merely shocks and shakes - but there is virtue in change that makes the Gospel of Christ clearer and closer to modern man.

In all that we have been talking about this morning as "in place" or "out of place" in the church - individuals, ideas, and innovations - we have to come back to one standard by which the church is rightly judged - its faithfulness to Jesus Christ. It is this persistent light of Christ that is the only explanation of the miracle of the church. Because of this enduring light, the church is the one historical institution which carries within itself the secret of its own renewal. We live in an age of religious revolution and people of traditional religious beliefs and practices are in for a good many jolts. Yet, in all of the confusion of action and reaction, reform and renewal, change and radicalism, all may possess that lively, reckless faith which assures them that the merely fashionable will perish, but what is of God will endure. What is of God will endure.

The papers recently carried the findings of the latest Gallup Poll with regard to church attendance, and according to the poll, in an average week, 45% of America's adult population worshipped in church or in synagogue and further that this represents the reversal of a downward trend of the last decade. The important thing is not the exact percentage or even the trend, but the important thing is the durability of the church. As I read that report, I marvelled not that the church is disregarded and discounted by some in our time, but rather that the church continues to mean light and warmth to so many.

OUT  
About the same time, I came upon a quotation of a distinguished British historian, Herbert Butterfield, and his words help to explain the persistent meaning of the church. He wrote:

"The ordinary historian, when he comes, shall we say to the year 1800 does not think to point out to his readers that in this year, still, as in so many previous years, thousands and thousands of priests and ministers were preaching the Gospel week in and week out, constantly reminding the farmer and the shopkeeper of charity and humility and honesty, persuading them to think for a moment about the real issues of life, and inducing them to forget their sins. Yet this was a phenomenon calculated greatly to alter the quality of life and the very texture of human history; and it has been the standing work of the church through the ages. Even under the worst of pppes, here was a light that never went out."

As we make our way through this year, can we not paraphrase that last sentence and say, "Even in the worst of times, here in the church is a light that will not go out".

LET US PRAY

We thank thee, O God, for the church that has met in various places down through the ages, sometimes in great cathedrals and sometimes in catacombs and sometimes in the fields. Help us to recover in our own lives the thing that makes the church its real self, and then send us out to carry that spirit of the living Christ into our homes, our offices, our schools, wherever we may be. In the spirit of Christ, we pray. Amen