

"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 of the saints of the church, 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 community (as they say now-a-days) - 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. On one occasion 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 some of 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. I came across this sentence in his biography, and it's a line that sets the tone for what I should like to say this morning: "He may have seemed out of place in the church, but the church was better because he was there".

JESUS IN NAZARETH

To begin with, the sentence brought to mind the account that we read for the scripture - the account of that day when Jesus preached in his home church in Nazareth - and the congregation that came to hear him concluded that he was out of place and so proceeded to get him out of the synagogue, indeed to physically get 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. Luke's Gospel put it this way: "When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with wrath". It's another way of saying that they thought that Jesus was entirely out of place in that church that day.

All of which raises concern in my thought as to what Christ would make of some of our declarations as to what is out of place in the church today. Let's look at some of those declarations in terms, of course, of what they mean to this church.

INDIVIDUALS

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

This next Thursday night I shall be attending a meeting of the Council of Churches of New York City at the Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church. It's one of the great churches here in the city, and has one of the great preachers of America

as its leader - Dr. David Read. I've heard it said that when Henry Sloan Coffin became pastor of that church in the early 1900's that he found a rather exclusive upper-income congregation, and as was the case in many churches at 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.

Early in Dr. Coffin's pastorate a couple who had recently come to the city from Nova Scotia began attending 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. This man was a factory worker and the proposed annual rental was the equivalent of his total earnings for three months! Now - intentionally or not, that church had some subtle ways of suggesting that some people might be "out of place". Dr. Coffin, as fearless a fighter in his time as his namesake nephew of Yale is 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 time, 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. However that announcement is not always matched by real acceptance and enthusiasm of all people. Let someone with a shabby or shady record come into a church and some may wonder what that person is doing in the church. Or let someone of extreme poverty come into a church and some may wonder if there is not another church where he would feel more at home. Let a person with long hair, with a beard, in "hippie" dress come into the church and some may wonder what he's doing in the church and why he doesn't meet our standards of Sunday dress and appearance. Let's face it: unfortunately many there are who still form 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 ever be considered "out of place" in a Christian church.

IDEAS And then in the second place, we sometimes hear it said that certain ideas are out of place in the church. I think that this is really what the members of that congregation in Nazareth were saying in response to the sermon of Jesus 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, and 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: the idea that the pagan Samaritan was a better neighbor to the person in need than the pious priest - the idea that the slum lords of Jerusalem were under judgment because of their rent-gouging - the idea that the Pharisees were a bunch of phonies more concerned about Temple property than the people who came to worship - the idea that there was a higher loyalty than what they gave to Caesar. So many many ideas that the rulers of the state and the church considered "out of place" that they felt it necessary to put him "in his place" which was a hill on Calvary.

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 idea of 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 hospital examination of all ideas in the name and in the spirit of Christ. How many ideas there are clamoring for attention today: ideas about war and peace - patriotism and dissent - race and revolution - poverty and affluence - work and leisure - sex and marriage - ethics and absolutes. 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 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

Moving on to the third point I wish to make, we sometimes will hear it said that certain innovations are "out of place" in the church. Catholics have experienced, as a result of Vatican II, a revision in their liturgy and changes in their order of worship. A young Roman Catholic friend who is a priest related that one faithful parishioner came out of church on the Sunday when some of the changes had been introduced, and shaking her head, said to the priest: "But where is the old church?"

A feeling that many - Protestant and Catholic alike - may share in this country and other countries. On Thanksgiving Eve a number of us worshipped in the Catholic Church on 90th Street - Our Lady of Good Counsel - where two young girls sang and played their guitars in the service. We think of jazz concerts in majestic cathedrals, ministers in nightclubs, priests, ministers and nuns on the picket line, or involved in peace demonstrations and civil rights marches. We think of young men and women going into church services, making their protests and offering their statements as they did here last Sunday. The church is changing and its forms of worship and its involvement in the life of the world are also changing and some people long for the old, the familiar, the safe, the same and are resentful of the new and fearful of the strange. We've come a long ways from the little, brown church in the vale.

But before we condemn every new sight or sound or order of things as "out of place", reflect for a moment. 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 where they lived. His church across the years and centuries has declared an unchanging message in changing forms - with art and architecture and music that has spoken to people in particular times and places. Innovation has never come easily.

It's interesting to note that some of the forms and customs that we revere were regarded as heresy when they were introduced. For instance, when Martin Luther encouraged congregational singing, the traditionalists were shocked, for they believed that singing was the job of the choir and clergy. And no less a

person that John Calvin called the pipe organ the "Devil's box of whistles", and considered that it had no place in the worship of God. Innovations have more often than not met with resistance in the life of the church.

So in our time there are changes taking place and any church that is facing out into this new decade will reflect some of those changes. And perhaps the most 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 performed in Christ. There is no virtue in change simply for the sake of change - or change that merely shocks and shakes - but there is virtue, I feel, in change that makes the gospel of Christ clearer and closer to modern man.

They said of St. Philip Nero: "He may have seemed out of place in the church - but the church was better because he was there". I should like to think that the church of our time will be better because of its openness to people from all walks of life, its willingness to examine new ideas and thoughts, and its adventurous spirit in finding new ways to make God's deed in Christ more meaningful to people.

SUMMARY In all that we have been talking about and thinking 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, however by which the church is rightly judged: its faithfulness to the spirit of 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 revolution. People of traditional beliefs and practices may be in for a good many jolts. Yet--in all of the confusion of action and reaction, reform, renewal and revolution - all may possess that lively, reckless faith which assures them that the merely fashionable will perish, but what is truly of God will endure.

PRAYER 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 the 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