

THE PALM SUNDAY MIRROR

NO ONE KNEW HE WAS COMING

When Jesus rode into Jerusalem on the Sunday before he died, no one knew he was coming. No one had invited him. Neither the Governor nor the High Priest were on hand to welcome him. The people of the city had no time to prepare either themselves or the city for his arrival. A few of the pilgrims who were in Jerusalem for the Jewish Holy Days improvised something of a reception; they cut down branches from the trees to wave as he passed by, and some of them put their garments on the donkey upon which he rode, and even spread them in the way as they would for a king. But the city, as a whole, was taken completely by surprise. Suddenly, unannounced, uninvited, there he was before their very eyes.

It's strange, isn't it, but things often happen this way in life. For instance, you're lost, either literally or figuratively. Frantically, you try to find your way out. You try this door and that door, this person and that person, this doctor and that doctor, this church and that church, all to no avail. And then suddenly, where you least expect it, and oftentimes just about when you're ready to give up, a door opens of its own accord. There is the way out. You're in the clear; you've been found.

This same sort of thing holds true when it comes to finding a mate. Just as you crave food, so you crave companionship, and not only the casual companionship of friends, that come and go, but the life-long companionship of a mate. And so you enter upon a search for the perfect mate. You make dates; you go to parties; you join clubs, all to no avail. And then suddenly, when you're not looking, when you're not even thinking about it, someone appears. There he is. There she is. This happens. I speak here out of my own experiences remembering the way that I met my own wife. I was standing all alone on a street corner in a foreign city, when suddenly there she was, standing a few feet away, an attractive brunette with a southern accent, the girl that I was to marry. I was sure of it the night that we met. The only trouble was that it took me close to a year to convince that I was serious. But these things happen.

Seriously, however, life does work in a strange and mysterious fashion, doesn't it. On the one hand it says to you: if you want me, you have to look for me, work for me, search for me, find me for yourself. But then, on the other hand, life occasionally says to you: here I am. An opportunity, for instance, drops unexpectedly into your lap. Without warning, there it is. You didn't seek it; it just seemed to single you out. A book, for instance, is left on a bedside table in a room where you're spending the night. You open it. Something you read touches you, influences you. The whole course of your life is changed.

This is the way that it happened on that first Palm Sunday. The people were looking for a king - a real king, one with authority, with power, a king who would lead them out of the unhappy situation in which they were caught. They had been looking everywhere, for centuries, for generations they had been searching the scriptures to see where he was to be born. They had even combed the ranks of the royal family to see if he might be there. All of this, to no avail.

And then suddenly one day, when they weren't looking, when they weren't thinking about it, in the streets of Jerusalem, on the steps of the Temple, there stood a King. Of course he had none of the things they normally associated with royalty; he was different from the kings they were accustomed to, but there was something kingly, nevertheless about him, and even the most insensitive of them were aware of it and knew instinctively that he had the right to rule. There he stood, without notice, before their very eyes - plain, young, and imperious.

FREE TO ACCEPT HIM OR REJECT HIM

He made no attempt, as you know, to force himself upon them, no attempt to take the city by storm. He had nothing in common with Alexander, or Napoleon, or Hitler, or any of the other great conquerors who have ridden into cities taking them by storm. He was the king of a kingdom that was as different from theirs as day is from night. There he was! Riding into the city on the donkey, and they were free either to accept him or reject him.

Once again in passing it's interesting to make note of this that this is the way with so many things in life. It is true, is it not, that life allows us an amazingly large amount of freedom. Things, especially the great things in life, are seldom forced upon us. They are presented to us; put before us, and we are free to either take them or reject them. For instance Bach made music, and it was the kind of music that no one had ever made before. People were free to listen to it, or not to listen to it. Some listened to it, some did not. Consequently it lay buried for close to a hundred years. In the next century Abraham Lincoln made music of another kind, the music of words, eloquent words, words in which great ideas went deep into the nature of truth and reality, words of vividness and beauty, words which to my way of thinking, no other American has ever equalled. The people were not compelled to listen to him. They were free to listen or not to listen. Some chose not to listen, but thank God, many did listen and what they heard they never forgot.

Bringing this truth closer to our own lives, think of it this way. An opportunity may stand at your door. You can open the door or you can leave it shut. You can accept the opportunity, rise to the challenge, assume the risks involved, or you can stay locked up in your own little apartment, sealed in your private little shell, safe and sound by yourself. You have the freedom to choose. This is true with so many of the great things in life. When Christ stands before you in any shape or form - in a beggar in need, in a friend, in an enemy, in a lover, in a moral choice, a challenge or a decision - you are absolutely free to take him or leave him.

THE PEOPLE HAD TO MAKE A CHOICE

Going back then to the events of that first Palm Sunday, we find that the people had to make a choice concerning Jesus. And mind you, it was not an easy choice for them. It never is. On the one hand, there was something in them that responded to him. They thought of all he had done for them, and he had done so much. He had healed their sick; opened the eyes of their blind; cured their mentally disturbed; unlocked the heavens for them, showing them things they had never seen before. There were things about him that appealed to them, things that went deep down into their hearts, and spoke to their needs. They knew that he spoke the truth as it had never been spoken before.

But then on the other hand, if they accepted him, they would surely get into trouble. For one thing, they would get into trouble with the Roman Empire, and they were already in enough trouble with Rome as it was. If they accepted him, they would be guilty of treason, and the penalty for this, as we saw last week was the cross. And on the purely local scene, if they accepted him, some of them would lose their jobs, especially those people who found employment in the Temple. To accept him would mean a radical change in their way of living, and this was hard. Looking at these people today, we would say of them, or our psychologists would say of them, that they were the victims of "ambivalence" that is the co-existence of opposite and conflicting feelings about the same person or object. You see, they wanted him. And yet they didn't want him. They were drawn to him, and yet at the same time, they were repelled by him. They wanted his cures, but not his criticism. They wanted to be made well, but not good.

And their divided heart was never so vividly or so dramatically exposed as it was on Palm Sunday when their first impulse was to run out and accept him with open arms, to hail him as their king and deliverer, but then when they stopped to think about, they withdrew. They changed their tune. They began to rationalize along these lines: Is it not better that one man should die, even though he be the best man that has ever lived, than that all of us should get into trouble. That's a good rationalization, isn't it. Good enough for the 20th century. It makes sense. And so they rejected him. They returned him like a manuscript to its author, with a rejection slip on which were written these three words: GOOD...BUT DANGEROUS!

WHERE THIS TOUCHES US

The point, of course, that I've been leading up to in all of this is this: there is something of this same sort of ambivalence within all of us, in one way or another, and I suppose that this is why we come back here year after year to these mighty events; not because we are compelled to, but because we are drawn to them, because in this drama of this one Life the issues of all life are set before us. We find ourselves right in the middle of it, in something of the same sort of conflict that the people experienced on the occasion of that first Palm Sunday. For us, it is something like this: we accept something good in principle, but when it stands before us incarnate in a person, then we begin to wonder, we begin to count the cost, to add up all the "ifs, ands, and buts" - to see the implications, to get frightened and more than once we throw up our hands, shake our heads, and say "no". Thus we reject it.

Let me make this specific for you. It seems to me that there is no point in saying all of this unless I spell it out for you in very specific terms. For instance, you accept the principle of racial integration. I would venture to say that there is not one person in our congregation today who does not accept in principle the principle that all men are created equal, and that no matter what their color or race may be, they should be treated alike, without discrimination. But, you live out in the suburbs and you want to sell your house. The first offer comes from a negro. There the principle stands before you in a person and you begin to wonder. You add up all the factors in the situation; you begin to rationalize and it's not altogether unlikely that you will say something like this: perhaps it's better that one good family suffer than that the whole neighborhood become involved in what could be an unpleasant and troublesome situation. You might not say that, but the chances are that even the best of you might. You refuse to sell your house to the negro.

You accept the principle of disarmament. I would venture to say too that there are not many people who would not say that in principle they believe that the nations of the world should put down their arms, for their arms may ultimately destroy the world and every one in it. Then someone presents a plan for disarmament. The plan has risks, and there are some questions you cannot answer. And when the principle becomes incarnate in a specific plan, then you begin to wonder. You get cold feet. You think of the safety of the nation and mind you we all do this (I do it myself), and you begin to rationalize, only this time you put it the other way around, in an even more horrible way saying that it is better to run the risk of seeing the entire world blown up than that this one nation should lose its security. (Not altogether logical, but emotionally satisfying)

Or you accept the principle of Christian marriage. I would be willing to say that there is not a person in our congregation who does not accept the principle of Christian marriage - a man and a woman living together in a lifelong union with each other in order to fulfill the life of each partner and to provide the maximum degree of happiness and security for the children of that union. But when an unpleasant or difficult husband or wife sits across from you at the breakfast table every morning of the week, when that principle becomes incarnate in a person, stares at you in a real situation, preventing you from finding the happiness and self-fulfillment that marriage should bring, then you begin to change your mind. You begin to back down, rationalize, and perhaps in the long run you travel that painful and discouraging road that leads into the divorce court.

One more example of the ambivalence that you are likely to find in yourself will be enough. You accept the principle of Christian stewardship, the idea that as a Christian you have the obligation or responsibility to give of yourself without counting the cost involved to the work of Christ in the world. You do this through the Church, for as Paul said, "The Church is the body of Christ". You accept this principle until it becomes incarnate in the form of a request asking you to serve the church in a particular area, on a committee, or until you see the principle become incarnate in the form of an appeal for money to help carry on the Lord's work. Then you begin to wonder. You begin to count up the cost. You see you have less time for yourself; less money to spend on yourself. You back down and say "no".

CLOSING As we come around to this particular Sunday each year, I'm always reminded that it's a strange sort of day. There's a sadness about Palm Sunday. This sadness is mingled with joy. It's the deep sadness of something glorious and good being rejected. There they were - on the threshold of life, yet they refused to enter in. So near and yet so far. Wise and yet so foolish. Divided loyalties. And to increase to the strange sadness of that first Palm Sunday, this rejection has continued on down through the years. Person after person and nation after nation have not been willing to make the necessary changes in order to accept the rule of God which is the law of love.

And yet, mingled with the sadness of that day, there is still some of the joy of it, for the royal figure of Christ still goes on before us haunting our memories, probing our consciences, and stimulating our spirits. And after all of these years and all of these failures on the part of men to accept what he offers, he still makes the same offer and I put it to you this morning in the event that there is some one person in our midst who has not yet accepted him, accepted what he has

to offer. If you are willing to submit to the role of God, God will give you new life; but remember that the rule of God is the rule of love, it is the way of Christ, and you cannot have the life unless you are willing to love, to accept him. Will you accept him. Are you willing to take the chance? That is the promise, the offer, and it is up to you to decide.

LET US PRAY:

In these moments of quietness that come at the end of another service of worship, help us to feel thy spirit moving in this place. May some decisions be made here this morning, decisions to accept Thee. Help us to see thy son as he goes on before us, and help us as we try to follow after him. All this we ask in his name. Amen