

## "PUBLIC LIFE AND PRIVATE ALTARS"

TEXT: "They went each to his own house, but Jesus went  
to the Mount of Olives" (John 8: 1)

### INTRODUCTION

Somehow at first glance these words suggest an element of pathos. The people that had flocked around Jesus all the day long scattered to their homes as the shadows of the night began to fall. All alone, Jesus made His way to the Mount of Olives. However the important thing to note here is that He did not head to the Mount of Olives because the door of every home was closed to Him; many there were who would have gladly had Him as a guest in their home. Rather, he had a greater need at the end of the day than human companionship and a bed on which to sleep. Purposely He went off alone - to pray, to be in communion with God, to open His life and spirit to the life and spirit of God.

He set up a private altar on the Mount of Olives. It was not a brick and stone type of thing, but rather it was a shrine of the spirit built of the sturdy stones of discipline, devotion and dedication. And time and time again He returned to it. Back of His public life was this private altar. There can be no accounting of the one without the other. From the one, He derived the inspiration and the strength for the other. It was impossible even for Jesus to live continually in the limelight, always in the pressure of public affairs, without losing vitality and inner strength. He needed solitude and privacy for reflection and thought. His important decisions were always prefaced by this quiet time. Back of his public life there was this private altar. For Him it was an imperative, an absolute necessity.

### DEVELOPMENT

Someone has suggested that the world's redemption will never come from the noisy centers of civilization, but from the quiet, lonely places. So many of the great reformers who have left their mark on history came from the wilderness. Whatever of vision, of power, of strength, of insight, of genius there was in their life's work was wrought in the wilderness. Think about it - Moses going out to his life's work from the back of the desert, Amos from the hillside, Paul from Arabia, Luther's from the monk's cell, and chief of them all - Jesus, from the quiet seclusion of Nazareth and direct from forty days and nights in the wilderness.

Public life and private altars. Does it touch your life? Does it carry any weight with you? Do you feel that back of your public life - if it is to count significantly for goodness and God - there has to be this private altar? In order to do justly and to love mercy, is it necessary to walk humbly with God? I suspect that our parents and our grandparents spent far more time in private prayer and meditation than we do. It was an essential part of their day - daily communion with God....they felt it gave them the power not only to preserve their personal integrity, but also to serve their day and their generation worthily and well.

Abraham Lincoln, President-elect, leaving Springfield for Washington and the enormous responsibilities of the Presidency said to his friends who gathered at the railway station to see him off:

"I now leave, not knowing when or whether ever, I may return, with a task before me greater than that which rested upon Washington. Without the assistance of that Divine Being who

ever attended him, I cannot succeed. With that assistance, I cannot fail. Trusting in Him who can go with me, and remain with you and be everywhere for good, let us confidently hope that all will yet be well. To His care commending you, as I hope in your prayers you will commend me, I bid an affectionate farewell."

Back of the public life, the private altar. It was so also with William Gladstone, Prime Minister of England a hundred years ago - faithful in his attendance at the public worship of God, no less faithful in his observance of private prayer and of the relationship between his personal religion and his public life and work. Spurgeon once said this about Gladstone:

"We believe in no man's infallibility, but it is restful to feel sure of one man's integrity".

FEW PRIVATE ALTARS As I see it, few people today have these private altars in their lives - altars built of the sturdy stones of devotion, dedication, and discipline. Those moments of quiet prayer during the week are apt to be rare. Emphasis is placed more on action - on getting things done. Among us, the kneeling man, even the kneeling minister is rare. We are promoters, organizers, fund-raisers, talkers, doers, and we rely more on what can be accomplished by committee work than by God.

All of which reminds me of a short-story that appeared in the New Yorker a number of years ago entitled, "Answer to Prayer". Its insight seems no less valid today than it did when it was published, perhaps even more so. It told of an archbishop of the church who came to the close of a day strangely disturbed in spirit and weighted down with so many institutional concerns involving the churches of his diocese. Things had not been going well. And remembering how often he had advised others to pray things through, to seek an answer to their problem through prayer, the archbishop decided to take his own counsel. And so he went into his private chapel, knelt down on the altar stairs, folded his hands in the accustomed manner. When he began to pray, however, his voice had an unusual sincerity and quietness. He began, "O God". Upon the speaking of those words, there came from behind the altar a boyish voice neither friendly nor hostile, saying, "Yes" "What is it?"

They found the archbishop the next morning at the foot of the altar stairs. It was said that his sudden death must have been due to some unexpected shock or great surprise.

Even a moment of fiction can be a mirror in which we see ourselves.] I fear that a whole dimension is slipping out of our lives.] Henry Sloane Coffin in speaking of modern churches and the people in them put it this way in a book:

"Instead of praying, the plan; instead of trusting with child-like confidence to a Power outside themselves, they resolutely push their own way; instead of opening their spirits to intercourse with one another, they think hard. Instead of casting their burden upon Him, they throw it over their own shoulders".

There is something about present day church life with all of its emphasis on activities, organizations and good works that reminds me of this simple story of a spider who dropped from a branch by a very slender thread and at the end of it spun a glorious web. Looking around at this beautiful web he had spun - this

beautiful domain - he caught sight of the narrow thread holding it and thinking it was no longer useful and necessary, bit it through - whereupon his whole web fell into ruins. This is what happens when we mistake the scaffolding for the foundation and discard it. Our personal relationship to God brought to life through private altars and public worship is the lifeline of our souls. Our good works both in the church and outside in the community where the need is so great will soon collapse if that lifeline with God is neglected and discarded.

My friend and colleague, Dr. David Read, over at the Madison Avenue Presbyterian church said recently to his people in a sermon:

"A church that sets out to do the works of God, spreading into every area of life, yet neglecting the living center of belief is doomed not to renewal, but decay. The passion to do the works of God must be inspired and controlled by a stronger and deeper belief".

AND WITH US Most of us are conscientious about our public duties, our social obligations, our theater engagements, our sporting events - but somewhat lax when it comes to our private altars. We fall short in meeting so many of our spiritual appointments.

I'm reminded of something that happened a number of years ago. We had announced the reception of new members on a certain Sunday in late November. A young man who had been so enthusiastic about the church was planning to join. He called up during the week to say that something had come up and he just couldn't be there. Very regretful and hoped that I would understand. But then he called back on Saturday afternoon and let the cat out of the bag. Said he:

"I can be there after all. I made a mistake. The Jets are playing in Oakland tomorrow and not at Shea stadium. I'll be there.....you can count on me".

Such a promising member. [Unfortunately, like a few others we have known over the years, he was always promising, but never going beyond the promises.] I fear we are drifting and not realizing it. And then we wonder what's happening....why life has lost sanctity and dignity, why our faith is weak instead of strong and vibrant, why church life is conventional and hum-drum, why the moral fibre of our land appears to be somewhat soft. We wonder....but we do so little personally to reverse the trend.

CHALLENGE Back of Christ's life there was the private altar. For Him, an absolute necessity. From the one, he derived strength, inspiration and a renewal of perspective.

Think on these things while you worship quietly in this place....and take the cup and bread which bring to mind his life - his words and ways. And as we share together in this Sacrament - may we through God's spirit be renewed and strengthened "for the living of these days". Then we may rise, depart with high resolve to build a private altar behind our public life.

PRAYER Teach us, O God, how to withdraw from the pressures of life - not in self-interest or self-indulgence - but to find the quietness and strength we need to handle well the gift of life, and to meet the problems that confront us in the coming days.

Bless all who gather in worship this hour in this church. Speak to each the

word he needs to hear. Help us always to remember the great example of Jesus, and how in his coming and going, in his withdrawing and returning, He fulfilled thy law and in so doing made His life great and great and rich for others.

In His name and spirit, we pray. Amen