

## "RESISTING MELANCHOLY"

### INTRODUCTION

I owe the suggestion of today's sermon to Alan Paton. An article of his under the title Beware of Melancholy appeared recently in the journal Christianity and Crisis. When asked by visitors what lay ahead for South Africa, he wrote that he did not know. He suggested that it was possible that nothing would change, that South African nationalism would never consent to any change of policy that threatened its own position of power, and that those who oppose apartheid would have to suffer more - not less. Inevitably they would start to ask: how long can we last? Is it worth trying to last? Should we leave the country? Should we withdraw from politics? Should we stick to our course, regardless of the consequences to ourselves and our families? This was Paton's answer:

"Stand firm by what you believe; do not tax yourself beyond endurance, yet calculate clearly and coldly how much endurance you have. Don't waste your breath and corrupt your character by cursing your rulers.....don't become obsessed by them, keep your friendships alive and warm, especially those with people of other races. Beware of melancholy, and resist it actively when and if it assails you....."

### DEVELOPMENT

I think it is not only in Africa (South Africa) that melancholy is assailing the servants of the common good. I feel the mental and emotional climate of this country is being assailed by it, too. Certainly the United States has long been noted for "its immense and indomitable optimism". Winston Churchill, back in the early 1940's when welcoming our nation as an ally, quoted two lines of poetry in describing this nation:

"In front the sun climbs slow, how slowly....  
But westward, look - the land is bright....."

Yet, writing from Washington recently, James Reston in his column reported that a marked change is coming over the discussion of public affairs in America and that the old optimism is giving way to a new pessimism. The mood is gloomy. There is a sense of depression. The frustration of the war in Vietnam; the crisis and war in the Middle East. Officials in the Capital seem to be saying that we have taken on so much in the world, in the cities, with the races, that we have raised expectations beyond our capacity to fulfill. The vision of the Great Society, the war on poverty, and a compassionate and vigorous nation fighting for law and order, for decency and goodness have faded. The melancholy is not confined to Washington and the Administration, but it is being felt throughout the land. Writing from Yale, Reston reports that some of the leaders of this year's graduating class are exhibiting a melancholic acceptance of military service, and that among many of the undergraduates in our colleges and universities a spirit of anxious dissent is being felt.

With this the situation, perhaps a sermon on melancholy is in order. "Resisting melancholy" - how, in these troubled times, do you do it.

To begin with, for many, melancholy appears to be constitutional. Just as there are some who are sanguine and optimistic by nature, so there are others who are despondent. As a rule, the more sensitive the soul, the greater proneness to dejection. The case that comes to mind, puzzling to his friends and to all of his biographers is that of Lincoln. They say that melancholy dogged him all his life, that it "dripped from him as he walked", that it was a constant torment to him - one that he had to learn to live with, though at times he found relief from it in humor and merriment.

For some, the root of melancholy may be altogether personal. I don't want to sound unsympathetic - but the fact is that for some the range of their interests, their concerns and worries is narrowly circumscribed. They stand in their own light; they make their own shadow. They can't seem to get away from an endless pre-occupation with themselves. They are fretful, irritable, sleepless, and depressed because of their failing health, ~~or because they are growing old~~, or because they lack friends, or because they are sure they are in the wrong job, or in the wrong marriage, or because life has not come up to their expectations. Now none of these can be called petty concerns, but they can make people petty and cross and despondent. When they become obsessive, when they take over and dominate, watch out for the despondency they breed is bad stuff.

However, in our day as never before melancholy has a wider range and for this reason. The continents have been bridged; the world has become a whispering gallery. We know within hours what is happening practically anywhere on earth, and what is happening does not make cheerful reading, or hearing, or viewing. Isolationism is dead. We're inextricably bound up together - nation with nation - race with race - and whether we want it or not we are involved - involved and therefore, concerned, and because the human predicament is so grave and frightening it weighs heavily on the hearts and minds of thoughtful people.

Sometimes before his death, Churchill said: "I have lived 78 years without hearing of bloody places like Cambodia. They haven't worried me and I haven't worried them". That was essentially a 19th century point of view. There is no place for it in the 20th century, and so we hear and read about places in remote places of the world that affect us - Hanoi, Aqaba, and many others.

REMEDIES So much for the anatomy of melancholy. Suppose we give consideration to several effective remedies. And if some of them seem so simple as to be superficial, I ask you to bear in mind that they have been put to the test of experience over and over again and that multitudes of people have borne witness to their efficacy.

For one thing, to get rid of melancholy try to get out more into the open. Take time, if at all possible, to commune with nature. Nature is one of the best cordials for sagging spirits and never betrays the heart that loves her. They say that the late Dag Hammarskjold during the momentous days of his leadership at the United Nations, whenever he had a few spare hours, would leave Manhattan and go out to the beaches near-by on Long Island - fall, winter, and spring - and seek the solitude of the empty beaches - and there in walking found re-invigoration for his spirit. You can find re-invigoration, too, in the sound of waves breaking on the shore, or birch trees waving in the sun, or camping in the mountains, or watching the sun set gloriously in the distance.

Each year at this time, as I begin to contemplate a few weeks at the sea-shore away from the city and its demands, I'm always reminded of a comment of a ministerial friend who said, "I just couldn't go through a year without a few weeks at the ocean.. to see those waves rolling in and breaking on the shore, to see something moving that I feel I don't have to get behind and push...."

Another suggestion. When in the grip of melancholy, try to do somebody a good turn. Perhaps there is a friend of yours who would prize a letter, or who would be cheered by a telephone call, or who would be touched even by a gesture of interest on your part. The good you would do him or her would be nothing compared to the good you may do yourself. I know that often after I have visited people in hospitals and because of the courage, the gallantry, the acceptance I have seen and felt, I have come away lifted and convinced that I have received far more help than I could have given.

Earlier I suggested that much of our melancholy is due to self-absorption and pre-occupation with our own worries and concerns. I'm sure it is. Generally speaking, the person who forgets himself in remembering and helping to meet the needs of others finds life to be rich and pleasing in flavor. Remember this: when you are quite despondent, the best way is to go out and do something kind for somebody else. Job, the great patriarch, had many reasons to be downcast and gloomy. Toward the end of that great book of Job, there is this sentence: "The Lord turned the captivity of Job when he prayed for his friends".

And a third suggestion: if you are in the grip of melancholy don't yield to the temptation to resign from life, to disengage yourself from involvement and responsibility. Many do. Many yield to this temptation. I often think that when they are in low moods, the temptation besetting men in the Administration at Washington must be to quit politics. I'm sure it's the temptation of many who actively rallied behind the Civil Rights crusade in the early years, but now with the back-lash, with obstacles in the way, the slow progress, the problems presented by extremists like Stokely Carmichael, they have lost heart and hope and want out. It was with such people in mind that at the outset I quoted Alan Paton and would quote him again:

"Stick to your course; stand firm by what you believe. Do not tax yourself beyond endurance, but calculate clearly and coldly how much endurance you have. Keep your friendships with those of other races warm and alive. Beware of melancholy and resist it actively if it assails you...."

C. L. Sulzberger several weeks ago wrote about a conversation he had with Konrad Adenauer. ~~In his last years, Adenauer gave the impression of holding on to office when he should have made way for a younger man.~~ At the height of his powers and in the thick of the post-war struggle of Germany to rehabilitate itself, he had no longing to hold on. "You may think this funny" he said to Sulzberger, "but my dream was to live as a notary in the country with my family and just enough money to get along without too much work". If Adenauer had lived as a notary in the country, would he have been a much happier man? I doubt it. Hard work may not be all it is claimed to be, but for untold number of people it has been a saving boon.

Michelangelo used to say that it was always well with him when he had a chisel in his hand.

Get out into the open; do something for somebody else; don't yield to the temptation to disengage yourself from involvement and responsibility - these are effective remedies that have stood the test of time and experience. Let me suggest one more. Long ago, Martin Luther, out of his experience with black moods of despair and melancholy, offered both safe and witty counsel, some of it in the language of his day, some of it modern in tone. Hear it:

"Don't argue with the Devil" he said (equating the Devil with melancholy). "He has had five thousand years of experience. He has tried all of his tricks on Adam, Abraham, and David, and he knows exactly where the weak spots are. And he is persistent. If he doesn't get you down with the first assault, he will commence with a siege of attrition until you give in from sheer exhaustion. Better banish the whole subject. Seek company and discuss some irrelevant matter, as for example, what is going on in Venice. Shun solitude. Eve got into trouble when she walked alone in the garden. I have my worst temptation when I am by myself. Seek convivial, feminine company - dine, dance, joke, eat and sing."

I'm sure there were those in Luther's own day who were somewhat shocked by his advice, as there may be church people today who cannot bring themselves to accept the fact he offered such advice. But Luther went on to strike a deeper note. "Seek out" he said, "some Christian brother - some wise counsellor. And undergird yourself with the fellowship of the church".

I think he's got something there. Certainly to resist melancholy actively the "undergirding" is so important. I came across this quotation in an old sermon source book which I leave with you to think about.

"Whenever anyone gives something too big to something too small to carry it, too big sails to too small a ship, too big meals to too small a body, too big powers to too small a soul, the result is bound to be a complete upset....."

Perhaps this is the source of much of our trouble - "too big powers to too small a soul". And the lesson it teaches us could not be clearer. For unless we have something within us that is under us and above, we shall soon succumb to that which is around us.

LET US PRAY We are conscious, O God, of our spiritual weakness. Help us to renew those energies which we need if we are to drive out the devils of despair and discouragement. Help us to be willing to take time apart from the world of busy activity and to bathe our spirits in thy power and majesty, help us to loose our lives in the needs of others, and so ground us in the things that we believe so that in our moments of testing, we shall stand firm. In the spirit of Christ, we pray. Amen