

"THE ALTERNATIVE TO THE CROSS"

INTRODUCTION

The sermon on Palm Sunday is almost inevitably grounded in one single event, and a dramatic event it was. If a reporter had been sending news of it to his editor, he could have put it in a telegram of several words: Jesus rode into Jerusalem today on a donkey. To be sure, that wouldn't tell anyone much about the significance of the event. He would have to know more about the details, and much more about the surrounding circumstances in which the action took place.

The report would go on to say that many people were going into the city at the same time as Jesus; there were thousands of them because the Festival of the Passover was coming soon, and every Jew from every corner of Palestine would be making an effort to get there for this occasion. The people making the pilgrimage, going along the same way with Jesus, began to hail him as their future king.

He didn't look like a king. He wore no crown, he carried no sceptre, he had no army, he was followed by no retinue of servants; and at that particular time he made no political claim to any throne.

DEVELOPMENT

There are only two things that might possibly have made people think that he was the king. First, he was riding on a donkey. It was a beast of burden which most of the simple people rode when they did not walk. Five hundred years before, one of the prophets, Zechariah, had said that their king, that is, the king for whom they were eagerly waiting, would come to them, humbly, not pompously, riding on a donkey. That might have given them the idea that Jesus was that king, for he was riding on a donkey.

Also, there was something regal about Jesus from the very beginning. There are many people who have not a drop of royal blood in their veins, but who nevertheless have something regal about their bearing, the way they carry themselves, the way they speak, the way they treat other people. Jesus was like that; he was a carpenter, but he had the natural dignity that goes with royalty. When he spoke, he spoke with authority; quietly, but with authority. When he acted, he acted with the calm but sure decisiveness of a person who is in complete control of himself and his surroundings. Even the wind and the waves seemed to obey him. There was something regal about the way he bore himself, handled himself; about the way he refused to stoop to anything which was petty, mean or trivial.

Those two things might well have given people the idea that he was the king for whom they had been waiting so long. Whatever it was, the people recognized the hidden royalty of Jesus. In their excitement and enthusiasm they shouted, "Long live the King!" They waved branches as we would wave banners, and they paved his way with their garments, and they took their coats and laid them down for him to ride on.

Quite spontaneously, they made Jesus' entrance into the city a royal procession. There is every indication that Jesus had planned his entrance; he entered Jerusalem the way he did deliberately, but there is no indication that the spontaneous response of the people was anything that he could either foresee or predict. The plain people had always heard him gladly, and it does not surprise us that the plain people rose to this occasion with such uninhibited enthusiasm.

The people in the city, however, took a quite different view of his arrival. The people behind the scenes, the men in places of power and authority, did not share the enthusiasm of the plain people. If there was anything royal about Jesus, they either didn't see it, or saw it so plainly that they were frightened by it. It made

them uneasy. From the time he arrived, the leaders set in motion the machinery of execution. What they wanted to do was to get him out of the way before any serious trouble was caused.

So the Palm Sunday story is saying simply this: Jesus made one last appeal to his people at the very center of their nation, and his people turned him down. It is the story - an old story - of how people like you and me miss greatness as it passes by, and for reasons that may be perfectly innocent, or that may not be, reject the appeal of that which is good and true and beautiful.

IF THEY HAD NOT TURNED JESUS DOWN, WHAT WOULD THEY HAVE DONE? The question that comes to my mind

this Palm Sunday is this: If they had not turned Jesus down, what would they have done? What was he asking them to do? What changes would they have had to make in their way of life, and in the structure of their society? We raise the question now because we have heard so much about rejection on other Palm Sundays, the rejection of Jesus not only by his own people but by ourselves as well, that we would now like some inkling of what the terms of acceptance are, what the alternative to rejection really is. The subject of this sermon, therefore, is the alternative to the cross.

To answer this question, we must use our imagination, and look at the facts through the eyes of others, read between the lines come to our conclusion and give answers that are tentative ones.

One thing, to begin with, is perfectly clear. Jesus did not ask the people to make him king, not in the ordinary sense of the word. He did not ask them to rebel against the Roman Government and make him the head of an Independent Jewish State. He had even told the people to pay their taxes to Rome, and had bluntly refused to join the Zealot party that hoped and prayed for a revolution.

That was not what he asked. What he did ask was that they accept God as their King, as the Sovereign of all people. What you hear it, it sounds simple. You say that the Jews had already done that. We think of the psalm in the Old Testament, "The Lord is King, the earth may be glad thereof". They had always believed that. Jesus asked them to take it seriously. If they had taken it seriously they would have had to make changes in three major areas of their life, in their political life, their religious life, and their personal life. Suppose we consider each area briefly and think of it in terms of our present day life.

POLITICAL LIFE First, the changes in their political life. The system, as far as we can see, would have been essentially the same. He made no suggestion that they start a revolution to throw off the Roman yoke. We are inclined to think that our salvation lies in systems. There is no indication that Jesus shared that belief. It is perfectly true that some systems are better than others. Democracy as a system of government is certainly far better than dictatorship, and a benevolent despotism is better than a tyrannical one. The point is that no system is perfect, and no nation was ever saved by a political system.

The system would be essentially the same, for the time being; but the ultimate loyalty would be different. Caesar would never have the last word. If the demands of Caesar conflicted with the demands of God, Caesar would take second place and lose, and the people would take the consequences, which would probably be punishment and persecution. To think of it in terms of our own life (and here we shall imagine something that does not now exist, but it might quite possibly exist in the future) if the State should forbid us to gather together in public worship, then the State would lose our loyalty, for our ultimate loyalty is to God. We would say, We will obey God rather than men.

If the State should demand that we preach and practice the doctrine of segregation, then we would say once again, We must obey God rather than men, for God is the supreme sovereign of all people, not only ourselves, but of other nations; not only of our friends, but of our enemies, and therefore when it comes to a final decision and all the counts are down, our loyalty is to Him.

The story is told that Philip of Macedon had a slave who had one function only. He was given the instruction that every morning he was to enter the chamber of the king and no matter what the king was doing at the time, he was to say to him, "Philip remember that thou must die". If the Jews had decided to accept Jesus, they would have put in the anteroom of every man and woman in authority, whether it was in the church or the state or the family or the school or any other place where a person had authority, some young Christian with the specific instruction that every morning he go into that person's room and say, "Remember, you are not God". That would be a big change to make in our political life.

RELIGIOUS LIFE The people would have had to make another change in the area of their religious life. Again, in this case the institution would have continued. There is no evidence that Jesus had anything against the religious institution as such. He had the sense, may I say, to know that religion without an institution would evaporate, just as learning without any buildings, laboratories, or lecture halls, would soon evaporate. But the institution would be quite different. God would be the center of it. The rules and the regulations, the rites and the ceremonies, would grow out of it as natural expressions of the love of God and man.

At the time Jesus lived, the rules and regulations were at the center of it, and, when you look at them, you are bound to admit, no matter how friendly you feel toward the Jews - and I am not making any condemnation of them because the same thing might be said about us - that many of the rules and regulations at the center of their religious institution were partly to glorify God, to be sure, but also partly to identify them as a nation. The rule about the Sabbath, the rule about circumcision, the rule about eating with foreigners, and the rule about marrying outside the race - all these rules set them apart, isolated them, preserved their identity, kept them as a nation quite distinct from all other people. And Jesus had been saying to them, over and over again, These rules have got to be on the circumference, even though you may lose your national identity when you change their position.

I cannot help but think of this in terms of our own life and the way the changes would affect us. As I think of this church and other churches I know, it might be something like this. Jesus is saying to us today as he makes one more appeal to us: take the rights and privileges of members of the church, and the rules for preserving Methodism out of the center of the institution, and put them on the circumference. Put the presence of God in the center, and out of it will grow the privilege of being accepted, the privilege of being forgiven, understood, renewed, the privilege of contributing what we as one branch of the family have to contribute to all the other branches of the Christian family.

I make bold to think that he would say also to us, Take doctrine out of the center and put faith in the center. Take tradition out of the center and put the living spirit in its place, and, out of these living things, the doctrines will grow and have their place; the traditions and customs will grow and have their place, but they will be on the circumference, not in the center.

PERSONAL LIVES The greatest change that the people in those days would have had to make was a change in their personal lives. If they had taken Jesus seriously and had accepted him, they would have turned their lives upside down

and inside out. It is almost impossible to put in a few words the radical changes that they would have made. We can infer it by what we know of his teachings before he went to Jerusalem. If I may paraphrase it, it would be something like this: try less; trust more. Take less, give more - that is what you are made for, and you will never live until you begin to give. Let the luxuries go, or at best take them lightly; concentrate on the necessities, the necessities of your life and the necessities of other people's lives.

Pretend less; be what you really are. People can see it in your face; you cannot cover it up. Pretend less; do not wear a mask. Be what you are, for better or for worse. Shout less. Shout less; say quietly what you really think, and say it in the simplest terms; say what you know is true, but say it quietly. Make less show; show more concern.

In other words, of course, what He would say is simply this: Be like me, believe in me, and believe in the way I live. Follow my lead; for my way leads to life and your way leads to destruction.

CONCLUSION If we went not another step, it would not be hard to see why they turned him down. What do you think you would have done. If they had taken him in, they would have had to toss out of the window three of the major bulwarks of their life: nationalism in their political life, legalism in their religious life, and egotism in their personal life. Are you ready to throw those out? Nationalism - legalism - egotism?

Remember that scene in Lloyd Douglas' book, The Robe, where Demetrius catches a glimpse of Jesus riding into the city on that first Palm Sunday. A crowd had gathered. And for one brief, fleeting moment, the eyes of Jesus catch the eyes of Demetrius. And Demetrius is stirred and moved by the depth of calm authority in the eyes of the Master. Travelling with Demetrius is a rough, uncouth Athenian who asks excitedly, "Can you see him, Demetrius? Is he crazy?" "No, not crazy" replies Demetrius. "Is he a King". "No.....he's not a king". "Well what is he... who is he?" And Demetrius replies quietly, "I don't really know, but I think he's far more important than a king".

Far more important than a king! The man from Nazareth rode quietly into the city that day and a few days later he carried his cross to Calvary and there he entered into history as the greatest revelation of God in human terms that mankind has ever seen or witnessed. To some he was just a king. To others, far more important than a king. God - incarnate in human terms is the way the theologians expressed it. And when we come to welcome him as the king of all kings, and the Lord of all Lords, then and only then will life become triumphant - and then, and only then - will his way of peace and love and brotherhood and goodwill be established firmly in the far corners of this land and all lands. His way is the alternative to the cross. More important than a King. What is he to you?

LET US PRAY: