

"THE CHRISTIAN AND THE CHANGING WORLD"

INTRODUCTION: My son and I share a similar concern. Last Sunday afternoon as we were checking over the electric train that Santa Claus brought him for Christmas, David looked up and rather thoughtfully said to me, "Daddy....Dr. Metzner preached last Sunday, didn't he? And Mr. Stribling preached today." Several moments later he asked, "Daddy....what are the people of our church going to do with you?" Just about at that moment we managed to get the train running again. On Tuesday evening of this week I detected an answer to that question. It was said, "How wonderful it is to have Mr. Stribling here to preach to the younger element of the church, and Mr. Clarke here to preach to the older element!" Whereupon one person commented, "Some of us can remember when Mr. Clarke was considered to be a young man". I'm sure that if Dr. Metzner were with us all the time, he would be quite happy to take care of those who are in between. The change was good for all of us. And we all appreciated the words of Mr. Stribling to us last Sunday and the words of Dr. Metzner to us two weeks ago.

I want to talk to you this morning, on this the second Sunday of a new year, about change - more specifically, about the changing and the unchanging. There's a line in the 102nd Psalm which, if you reduce it to its barest essentials and trim it down to the core, reads this way: "They will change, but Thou art the same". Without going into the Psalm as a whole, it is clear that the man who wrote that line saw quite plainly that a great many things in life change, but that, on the other hand, there are some things that do not change. Heaven and earth, he said, change; God will change them the way a man changes his clothes. They change, but God himself does not change. What I should like to do today is to explore this double-pronged truth which I feel has something to say to the Christian as he tries to find his way through the rapidly changing events of the world in which he lives.

THE FACT OF CHANGE We begin with the fact of change itself. Everything changes. Heraclitus pointed this out to us long ago in ancient Greece. The only constant thing he saw was the reality of change itself. Everything changes. Take this city, for instance. Think of this neighborhood. Some of you have lived here in Yorkville all of your lives. Think of the changes you have seen. Why, we think of the changes of just these past few years. The "El" no longer runs up and down Third Avenue. The entire street has changed. Think of the new buildings that have gone up and more are scheduled to go up. The city is always changing. It is never finished.

The world changes. The pattern of political power changes every so often. Washington is undergoing a change as a new leader assumes leadership. In our own lifetime the center of political power in the world has shifted from London to Washington and from Berlin to Moscow. Many people who were once dependent and part of great colonial empires are now free to govern themselves. A new pattern of world organization has come into being.

Our way of travel has changed. We move around the country and the world at incredible speeds. The picture of Pope Paul boarding the Vatican chartered DC - 8 jet last weekend caught my attention. Somehow it seemed strange, incongruous, to see the Pope in the

traditional garb of the Church boarding a modern, sleek jet liner for a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. The picture was but one more reminder that the world in so many ways has moved faster than the church.

But the Church - yes, even the church - is changing. Things are happening within Protestantism. We read of changes occurring within the Roman Catholic Church. Some of the old patterns of narrow denominationalism and provincialism are breaking up. The historic meeting last weekend between Pope Paul and Athenagoras of the Eastern Orthodox Church marks a new era for Christendom. The idea of a summit meeting for the leaders of all branches of Christendom is a new idea. The new climate of unity that has been developing now for some time (and praise God for it) is a sign of the changing time.

You and I change....we change in the way we dress and the way we think. All we have to do, if we have any doubts about it, is to take out a picture taken fifteen years ago and look at it. Then again, perhaps this might not be such a good idea for the chances are that most of us were much more trim then than we are now. But we change, too, in the way we dress and the way we think. Our attitudes change. As young persons we were much more daring than we are now. As we grow older, we are likely to become more conservative, more traditional in our thinking.

Everything changes. There isn't any doubt in our minds about this. But there are three things to keep in mind about change before we pass on to the other side of this truth. I hesitate to mention them because you know them already, but we don't often stop to think about them. And here, at the beginning of another new, it might be well to have them before us.

The first thing is that change is nothing new. Sometimes we talk about the changes that are taking place in the world today as though change had never occurred before. Every now and then you will find someone writing a book about this changing world as though the world had never undergone change from the beginning. We need to remember this and translate it into terms of our own lives. I so often find myself talking to others about the great transiency problem we face in our church - the problem of people coming and going - as though it were something entirely new. I recently discovered that one of my predecessors here in the church, a pastor back in the 1850's had this same problem. Here's an excerpt taken from one of his reports....mind you, this was over a hundred years ago:

"In the spring of each year there would be numbers admitted by transfers, but at the same time as many would remove by certificate. Yorkville seems to be a way station for migrating Methodists".

I'm sure that more than one of your pastors across the years has tried to find out where these Methodists are migrating to. Change is nothing new. We need to remember that. It's been here since the beginning of time. The only difference is that the change may be more rapid and perhaps more radical now than it has been in the past.

A second thing that it is well for us to remember is that things do not always change for the better. Sometimes we slip into the dangerous habit of thinking that all change is for the better. But is it. I wonder.

Abstract art isn't necessarily any better than the art of Raphael or Rembrandt. It may be. It may represent real development, a forward movement in the world of art. But it isn't necessarily any better just because it is abstract. It may be a sign of decline.

Something of the same sort of thing may be true in the field of music. Dissonant music that deafens the ear isn't necessarily better than melodic music. It may have something to say to people who live in a discordant world, and we may sometime discover what it is saying, but it isn't necessarily any better simply because it is dissonant and hard to listen to.

The patterns of morality we are told are changing. The article in Look magazine back in September, "Morality USA" pointed up to us what is happening...how the old standards and established patterns of morality are changing, and I'm not at all convinced that they are changing for the better. Free love isn't necessarily better than family life with its restrictions and disciplines. A certain amount of freedom in the relationship between men and women may lead to something better, and to a deeper understanding of each other, but you can't say that free lance partnership is necessarily better than the old patterns of family life that spring from the Judeo-Christian heritage.

Think of this in terms of contemporary Church architecture. A church "in the round" where everyone sits around the altar instead of in front of it, isn't necessarily any better than a church like this one with a long nave. It may be; it may help people feel the community of all faithful people in a way that this style of church does not; but just to build a new church "in the round" doesn't make people any better.

And the third thing to consider when confronted with change is, this having said all of these things, I feel it is better to approach change in a flexible rather than inflexible attitude. You can reserve critical judgment and at the same time keep your mind open to the fact of change and to the possibility that it may be for the better.

Listen to these words spoken by a President of the United States:

"The dogmas of the quiet past are inadequate to the stormy present....as our case is new, so we must think anew and act anew".

Do you have any idea who wrote those words? They sound like something John F. Kennedy might have said. They could have been spoken by Lyndon Johnson this past week in his "State of the Union" speech. Actually they were spoken in 1862 by Lincoln. Change is nothing new; all change is not necessarily for the better. As we approach change, we would do better to approach it with flexibility rather than inflexibility.

THINGS THAT DO NOT CHANGE

Now the other side of the truth that needs lifting up is that there are some things that do not change. For instance, think of this in terms of the material world. If I had an egg here in my hand and held it out over the side of the pulpit and let go of it, would not fly up into the air and hatch. It would fall to the ground and break. It doesn't make any difference whether you do this from this level or whether you go to the top of the Pan Am building and do it. So long as you stay this side of outerspace, the law of falling bodies remains the same.

Translate this into the important areas of our moral and spiritual life. To be sure the patterns of life change and they are changing rapidly. But the basic principles of life do not change. You may live in the country or the city. Whether you live in the country, the city or the suburb, whether you live by yourself or with your family, on a farm in the country, or in a one room apartment in the city, you cannot have freedom, real freedom and real life without inner discipline. This is one of the principles that does not change. You can't have the joys of family life without accepting the responsibilities of a family...without sharing in its problems as well as its joys. You cannot live a full life on a full stomach. You have to have something else in your life besides material possessions. You can't have a real friend until you can be a friend. That is, people will not trust you and give themselves to you until you are a person who trusts who other people. People will not love you and reach out to you in affection and warmth until you begin to do the same. These are just a few of the basic principles of life that never change, no matter how the patterns of life may shift and change.

Going a little further, our theories about Jesus change from one generation to another, from one century to another. Church history points this up. Our theories and our interpretations about Jesus may change, but He does not change. He is the same no matter how we may change in our thoughts about him. The Sermon on the Mount - this too doesn't change. He is the same, and what he had to say is the same - whether you live in the first, the fifth, the fifteenth, or the twentieth century.

Our ideas about God change too, and they are changing more rapidly today perhaps than they have in the last five hundred years. There are different ways of thinking about God. An adult doesn't think of God in quite the same way that a child does. And Christians over the centuries have thought of God in different ways. It is fashionable today under the guidance of Paul Tillich to think of God as "the ground of all existence". The way we think of him changes, but God himself doesn't change. The mind - the energy - the love - the creative force that rests at the heart of all life - this does not change. And this is what the psalmist meant when he said long ago: "They will change, but thou art the same".

AN APPEAL

This truth - this insight - makes an appeal. It appeals to us to be the kind of persons who say that change is not necessarily bad, not something to be feared or avoided. It appeals to us to be the kind of persons who can distinguish the good from the bad, the changing from the unchanging. It appeals to us to see those things that are changeless, that are constant, that do remain and to be willing to stand up for them.

Recently I read an article by Will Durant. Remember he wrote the Story of Philosophy. He is now working on the Story of Civilization. Toward the end of the article he wrote these following lines:

"Let us speak out. Let us say humbly but publically that we resent injustice and unfairness in any form, that we resent corruption in politics, dishonesty in business, faithlessness in marriage, pornography in literature, coarseness in language, chaos in music, meaninglessness in art".

Let us then in this new year speak out for the things that do not change as we move about in this rapidly changing world. And may I suggest that you work out in your life the subtleties of this double-barrled truth that the psalmist saw long ago: "They will change, but Thou ar the same."

LET US PRAY: We live, O God, in a world that is forever changing. May we not be blind to the changes that are taking place in our own day. Give us such power of discernment that we may distinguish what which changes for the better from that which changes for the worse. Then hel us to see the things which do not change, and give us the courage to stand up for them, to speak out for them and to live by them in our daily lives. We ask all these things in the name of Jesus - the same, yesterday, today and forever. Amen