

"THE CHRISTIAN'S CALLING"

TEXT: "On entering the house of Peter, Jesus noticed that his mother-in-law was down with fever" Matthew 8:14

INTRODUCTION Jesus noticed. It was so characteristic of Him. Wherever He went his alert eye took in all that was happening. There are so many people today (and many of them in our churches) who move in and out among their friends and neighbors wearing blinkers. That is to say - they fail to notice. They are oblivious to the diversity and desperateness of human need. But it was never this way with Jesus. He entered into the lives of people - put himself in their place, saw with their eyes, felt what they felt. He sensed their needs and reached out to them.

CHRISTIAN'S CALLING To live in such a fashion is not always easy. To have a responsive and understanding heart is not, as one goes through life, to tread a primrose path. And yet fellow feeling and self-involvement are deeply satisfying. It is a great thing to be keenly aware of the people around you, the people with whom you live and work, to notice how things are with them, whether they are up or down, sick or well, sad or merry. It is a great thing to keep the imagination alive, the capacity for feeling strong, not to allow our sympathies to become hardened. The Christian's calling (to borrow a phrase from Henry James) is to be finely aware and richly responsible.

DEVELOPMENT Life is a toughening process. Those of you who are young ought to be careful in looking out for your ideals - those you cherish about yourself, the work you do, the home you wish to make, the contribution you can offer to your nation as a responsible citizen. Ideals are native to young people. If one doesn't have them in his twenties, if the status quo doesn't concern him then, if he is not a crusader for some just cause, some sorely needed reform, what in heaven's name will he be like when he enters into the fat forties. And even if you do have ideals, even if in your teens and twenties you participate in debates, pass resolutions, feel led to take part in demonstrations, you will require as you grow older to be on your guard against two very subtle and corroding tendencies: one of them compromise and the other cynicism.

According to a recent article in one of our national magazines, we are told that the middle years of life are the testing time, the years from 40 to 60. It is not uncommon for idealism to fade - idealism about one's marriage, one's profession, one's politics, one's church - to give way to some disillusionment - then skepticism, then cynicism, and finally indifference.

A college president asked an alumnus, "What are you in business for?" Without a trace of embarrassment, the alumnus replied, "To make a pile and then to get out". I wonder what that man was like in his college years. We should like to think that he was hotly dissatisfied with the world as he saw it. Perhaps he felt that he could do something to improve it. But see him now in his late forties, going on to his fifties - the organization man, fleshy, flabby, easy going, accomodating himself without discomfort or strain to the world and its ways. John Kennedy, you may recall, was told by an older man when he went to the Senate, "The only way to get along is to go along". Certainly that is the path that leads to compromise, then on to cynicism, and slowly to the death of one's ideals.

Yes, life can be a toughening process. In the sense that the longer men and women live the harder they become in their sympathies. A protective shell seems to go up around them - no longer finely aware and richly responsible - self-interest becomes

the one main-spring of action and the gratification of the senses the chief end of life.

A novelist summed up one of his characters in this sentence: "Edith was a little country bounded on the north, south, east and west by Edith". Is that what they say of you? Or how about this one: a man from the middle west put an advertisement in the newspaper which read - "I am 58 years old. Would like to marry a young woman of 30 who has a tractor". "Send picture of tractor". Now what has happened to Edith and to the farmer is obvious. They allowed life to narrow down their interests. They were wrapped up in themselves. Certainly as types they are extreme, but they illustrate a tendency that exerts pressure on all of us. The point is this: there are many fine and respectable people who have ceased to notice, who no longer care greatly or feel deeply about anything - husbands living year after year with their wives and never really discovering with whom they are living, parents with children growing up in their homes whom they do not really notice or understand - so many good, respectable people in whom imagination has died, sympathies hardened so that their judgements are harsh, stern and prejudiced.

When Muriel Lester was twelve years old and appaled by the sight of the slums of London her well-to-do father, full of solicitude for her said, "It's all right. They don't feel things the same way we do. And if they did, they've only got themselves to blame. They get drunk. That's why they're so poor." A man you see with a protective shell around himself and trying to put one around his daughter. He meant well, but thank God - he didn't succeed. For Muriel Lester grew up to be a woman "finely aware and richly responsible".

TRIVIAL LIVES Finely aware. Richly responsible. How do you measure up. As I see it, one of the troubles with so many lives is not that they are vicious, but that they are so often so trivial. It's not that they are guilty of any flagrant evil, but simply that they become so immersed in shallow, narrow, petty, self-regarding concerns.

A man made himself famous in the catering business. He established a chain of restaurants right across this continent. As he lay dying, his relatives gathered round his bed. They bent over to hear his final words. His last whisper was "slice the ham thin". Upon my soul. Think of a man going to meet His Maker with these words on his lips, "Slice the ham thin". You laugh. It could be that you laughed too soon. It could be that you are laughing at yourselves. Do you happen to know Phyllis McGinley's poem, "Occupation: Housewife?" It's a poem about what happens to a woman in her middle years:

Her health is good. She owns to forty-one.
Keeps her hair bright with vegetable rinses,
Has two well-nourished children - daughter and son,
Just now away at school. Her house, with chintzes
Expensive, curtained, animates the caller,
And she is fond of early American glass,
Stacked in an English breakfront, somewhat taller
Than her best friend's. Last year she took a class
In modern drama at the County Center.
Twice on Good Friday she's heard "Parsifal".
She often says she might have been a painter,
Or writer, perhaps, except she married young,
She diets, and with Contract she delays,
The encroaching desolation of her days.

The sting is in that last line: "the encroaching desolation of her days". Why do

people become disillusioned about life and bored by it. Time again it is because they are hoarding what they should be giving away. They spend too much time fussing over themselves: their health, their diet, their figure, the impression they make on others when with their education, background, opportunities, they should be spending themselves and devoting their time and skills and more of their money to people and causes. They think they are on earth to be served. They are wrong. They are here to serve.

FINELY AWARE AND RICHLY RESPONSIBLE.

The Christian's calling: to be finely aware and richly responsible. Dr. Benjamin Tenney, a Boston surgeon, said this: It has taken me half of my life to discover that my business in the world is not to try to make something of myself, but rather to find a job worth doing and lose myself in it". This is what it means to be finely aware and richly responsible. It means to get out of your own light, to cease measuring existence in terms of what it gives you or does not give you. It is to care greatly and to feel deeply. It is to expand your interest and push out your horizons. It is not to keep out of things, but to get into things that are worthwhile. It is to resolve decade by decade to put more into life than you take out of it. For life finds its real meaning, climbs its loftiest levels, not in protecting the self, coddling and shielding it, but in the fulness of our personal relationships - in self-forgetfulness, in caring for others.

And so on this Sunday as we begin to launch into another season of Christian work in this place, to you who are members and friends of this parish, to you who are new to this community, new to this church, I would ask you to take this phrase "finely aware and richly responsible" from here with you, to be put into that place in your own life where you keep the things that are most important. Remember these words of Albert Schweitzer which might have been written expressly for Americans:

"You are happy, therefore you are called upon to give mich. Whatever more than others you have received in health, natural gifts, working capacity, success, a beautiful childhood, harmonious family circumstances, you must not accept them as being a matter of course. You must pay a price for them. You must show more than an average devotion of life to life"

And what is that price? The answer is in these lines:

God - let me be aware.
Stab my soul fiercely with others' pain
Let me walk seeing horror and stain.
Let my hands, groping, find other hands.
Give me the heart that divines, understands.
Give me the courage, wounded to fight.
Flood me with knowledge, drench me in light.
Please, keep me eager just to do my share.
God - let me be aware.

LET US PRAY

Our prayer is a silent searching of our own hearts and minds and consciences. Help us, O God, to lay these things to heart. Keep our eyes ever alert to scenes of human need; our sympathies broad and deep, always remembering the example of Him whom we call Lord - how he realized human need and did something about it. In his spirit, we pray. Amen