

## "THE CROSS AND THE CROWN"

TEXT: "From that time Jesus began to show His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised"

Matthew 16: 21

INTRODUCTION A number of years ago I was invited to share in a service in a church that was about to celebrate the burning of a mortgage. At the appropriate time in the service several representatives of the congregation came forward to join the pastor in putting a match to the legal documents that had kept the church in debt for many years.

As the flames brightened and the circles of smoke danced their way toward the ceiling one could sense the jubilation and relief of a grateful people.

As an interested and sympathetic outsider, I found myself unable to reach the heights of joy that the congregation felt. I was present at their victory celebration, but I had not shared their daring vision, their risk of faith, their sacrificial giving, their patient waiting. At best I was something of an outsider looking in; it could not have been otherwise.

DEVELOPMENT I've often had the feeling that something akin to this takes place on Easter Sunday around the world. In heartening numbers people gather to participate in an ecstasy without having really participated in the agony that preceded and produced it.

What can the dawn mean to one who has never experienced the darkness of night? Or, what can restoration mean to those who have never suffered separation? What can resurrection mean to those who have not died? Or, what is Easter Sunday without the starkness of Good Friday but a rite of Spring, a time for jelly beans and speckled eggs, a haberdasher's delight, an excuse for dining out?

Today we meet not to celebrate resurrection, but to celebrate the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. His resurrection is not an isolated event, but a sequel to earlier happenings. We say, "The third day He rose again from the dead". That statement in the Creed means far more when we know what preceded it. "He suffered under Pontius Pilate; was crucified; dead and buried".

I sometimes have the uneasy feeling that Good Friday is apt to be a neglected day on the Christian's calendar. A ministerial friend remarked that he was spending a few days in Charlotte, North Carolina last year during Holy Week. He remarked how appalled he was by a sign that was posted in the lobby of his motel: "Fashion Show in the Ember Room on Good Friday -- from 12:00 to 2:00". So much for Good Friday in a city known for its beautiful churches.

Popular Christianity passes so easily from the poinsettia's of Christmas to the palms of Palm Sunday and on to the lilies of Easter, conveniently by-passing the thorns of Good Friday. But death and resurrection are inseparable in the Scripture. No cross - no crown. That's the principle. The agony and the ecstasy go hand in hand!

THE DISCIPLES HAD TROUBLE

You'll perhaps recall that the disciples of Jesus had some real trouble at this point. In the north country beyond Caesarea Philippi, Jesus experienced one of the major crises of His life. Peter had just announced in a triumph of great faith, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God". And Jesus had, in effect, responded, "Bravo, Peter. You've got it. That's it. And upon the rock of this confession I shall build my church!"

It was at this point, at this juncture, that Jesus, according to the Scriptures, began "to show unto His disciples now that He must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things of the elders and the chief priests and the scribes, and be killed and be raised on the third day". And this was just too much for Peter. He both resisted and rebuked Jesus, saying, "Never! Not you, Lord." And Jesus retorted, "Get thee behind me Satan. You're a hindrance to me. For you are not on the side of God, but of men!"

Now we shouldn't be too tough on Peter. After all, he was only being human. I think all of us would much prefer to avoid the tragic dimension of life. The shallows are less demanding. We're on the prowl for a painless, a cost-free faith, an "ouchless" Christianity. Take the cross out of it and let's just have the crown. It reminds me of when I was a youngster. I discovered early on in life that iodine dropped into an open cut made it sting. Ouch! But mercurochrome on the other hand did not hurt when applied. Believe me, I became self-prescribing when it came to the cuts and bruises I experienced. When the need arose, as it often did, I always insisted on mercurochrome.

"Daddy" asked the five year old boy of his father, "Why is it that vitamins are always found in spinach and never in ice cream?"

No cross no crown. The agony and the ecstasy. They somehow belong together. In his altercation with Peter, Jesus prevailed, and setting His face steadfastly toward Jerusalem, He marched to His death. The only ones who really rejoiced on that first Easter morn were those who had marched and suffered with Him.

TRUE FOR US, TOO

I often have the feeling that this point is true for us as it was for the disciples of Jesus. The Easter message is not indiscriminantly radiant. It is not a portable happy ending that can be hitched up to just any story. I believe it has little to say to those who live the unexamined life, who go through life craving only the creature comforts and security, whose only pressing questions in life are "what shall I eat?", "what shall I drink?", "what shall I wear?", "what model car shall I drive?". On the other hand, I believe that this message of Easter comes home with driving conviction and with relentless power to those who have already borne the torments of life's deeper questions and wrestled personally with its larger concerns and greater issues. ...suffered its hardships.

CAN I BE FORGIVEN?

One such question is, "Can I be forgiven?" Good Friday was, in a way, raising that question. Certainly one cannot be casual about his sins in the presence of the crucifixion of Jesus.

Nor can one place the blame at the feet of others. What the crowd was urging and what the soldiers did that day, they did and urged for us. If we had been in that crowd on Good Friday when goodness was crucified what would our response have been? One wonders. Would we have remained silent, or said but it's really none of my business? Would we have been too busy to get involved?

"Who was the guilty? Who, brought this upon Thee?  
Alas, my treason, Jesus hath undone Thee!  
'Twas I, Lord Jesus, I it was denied Thee;  
I crucified Thee"

Yet, from the cross that day this Saviour of mankind was heard to utter, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do". That was His prayer for us, but we do not know whether that prayer was heard or answered until the third day when God in the great mystery of things broke into human life and intervened. Easter was the Father's "Yes" to that searching prayer of Jesus. There is forgiveness!

We were not there on that Good Friday. But how many times have we since that day crucified goodness and truth and all that Christ stood for. As I understand the meaning of a New Testament experience of God, we must in an act of faith identify ourselves with Jesus in His dying, if we would participate in His resurrection. This was what Paul was driving at when he proclaimed, "I have been crucified with Christ. Christ lives in me". Only as we know Him, in the fellowship of His suffering can we know Him in the power of His resurrection. There must be a dying before there can be a resurrection.

This, I think, helps to explain the story of the minister who was approached one night by an alcoholic whom he was trying to help, trying to reach. "I've got to have a drink, or I'll die" said the man. The preacher calmly replied, "Go home and die!" Next morning the man called the preacher and said, "I died last night". It was the turning point in his life. The death brought resurrection. No cross no crown. Without the agony there is no ecstasy.

#### CAN THE VISION OF JESUS PREVAIL?

Another deep and critical question that breaks through on Good Friday is this: "Can the Jesus vision of life prevail?" We may not have put it in so many words, but I suspect that at one time or another all of us have wondered about this. Can the vision of the Galilean prevail in a world like ours? Can what Jesus stood for hold up in the world in which we live? Mind you, all the muscle that day we call Good Friday was on the side of Rome. No room there for the quiet virtues and the gentle graces.

I think Jesus himself must have had some questions along the same line. "My God, my God" He was heard to cry, "Why hast Thou forsaken me?" At least He still believed in God. He had not gone so far as to doubt the existence of a supreme power in and with and under all of life.

Some of us are not so sure. We wonder. We fight to hang on to the bit of faith we have. Is God something of a game that people only play? Fernando Arrabal in his play, "The Architect and the Emperor of Assyria" introduces us to a king who has a pinball machine in his palace on which a game is played called "The Existence of God". If one should run up a score of thousand points this would mean that God exists. The monarch plays and runs up a score of 957, then a score of 980, and just as he gets the count up to 999, he conveniently taps the machine causing it to "tilt". The score of 1,000 is never reached. God is only a game. The one who pulls the handle controls the answer. The machine keeps flashing 999 and 999 and 999. We cannot prove conclusively that God exists.

Come now, be honest. On this beautiful Easter morning of 1974, given the kind of world we know without and also within, do you really believe that forgiveness has a chance over vengeance? Do you really believe there is room for meekness over pride? And that justice can prevail over oppression? That trust can win out over doubt? Do you believe that love can prevail over hate?

Jesus had the temerity, the audacity to turn to His disciples whom He had trained to believe in things like forgiveness, meekness, trust and love and say to them, "Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom!"

Certainly after a few evenings sitting in front of TV listening to the Ten O'Clock News, we can be pardoned for holding that it's just too good to be true. "It just can't be...." we're tempted to say to ourselves. "So may it be!" is God's answer. Easter is God's grand "amen" pronounced over all that Jesus came to do, and to say, and to be. The Easter faith is that His will shall be done on earth even as it is in heaven! His vision of things shall prevail!

CLOSING SECTION      If we haven't truly wrestled with our private sins what can forgiveness mean? If we haven't truly wrestled with the fundamental nature of life, what can this glorious affirmation of the resurrection mean?

Easter, dear friend, is there and ready when you are. No cross no crown. No agony, no ecstasy. For as our text reminds us,

"From that time forth Jesus began to show unto His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things, and be killed, and be raised again on the third day".

"It was the way the Master went,  
Should not the servant tread it  
still?"

PRAYER      O God, we thank thee for the life and the death and the risen Jesus, opening as it does to us the larger areas of life. Help us to make the most of them, not to be satisfied with the shallows of cynical and doubting and skeptical minds.

Take our natural impulses, O God, and stretch them; confirm them and reassure them on this day of resurrection. Give us the power and the grace to go out now into our world and to live as though Christ were living in us, that our world may be raised from death to new life. Amen