

"THE CULTIVATION OF COURAGE"

INTRODUCTION

Courage is one of the most admired of all virtues. James Barrie it was who once said about it: "Courage is the thing - the lovely virtue. All goes if courage goes". He went on to quote Samuel Johnson, "Unless a man has that virtue, he has no security for preserving any other". Certainly this generalization is borne out in everyday experience. Where courage is lacking, there is, for instance, no guarantee of integrity. Without it the chances are that the person under pressure will lie when, regardless of the cost, he should speak the truth. He will come apart, give in, when he should hold out. All goes if courage goes!

To face a situation from which one is inclined to run away, to take the hard knocks and come up smiling, to accept a crushing defeat or handicap and instead of looking at it as an injustice, turn it from a liability to an asset - who does not applaud such gallantry? Robert Louis Stevenson, through years of ill-health refused, as he put it, to let the medicine bottles on his mantelpiece be the limit of his horizon and prayed:

"Give us the courage and gaiety and the quiet mind; give us the strength to encounter that which is to come, that we be brave in peril, constant in tribulation, temperate in wrath, and in all changes of fortune and down to the gates of death, loyal and loving to one another".

DEVELOPMENT

I speak as one who now for a number of years and at relatively close quarters has watched men and women fight hard battles with great heroism. The courageous way in which many of them have faced adversity is truly impressive and humbling. About little things they may have fretted and fumed, but about the big crises they have not been cowards. ~~They have shouldered heavy burdens with never a word of complaint. They have encountered bravely and without self-pity a crippling illness, or a long and drawn out anxiety for a loved one, or a business reverse.~~ A surgeon asked how in his experience people faced suffering and death replied after a moment of reflection that most of them acted like heroes.

The ancients esteemed courage so highly that they placed it among the seven cardinal virtues. Their annals are full of tales of men of great valor. But even more than physical courage, they admired moral courage. This was more noble and more rare. Their highest praise was reserved for men of the stamp of Anaxarchus who, when ill fortune struck at him blow after blow, declared: "Beat on the body of Anaxarchus; Anaxarchus himself you cannot touch".

We find that in the literature of ancient Greece and Rome repeated emphasis was placed on the cultivation of courage and the development of inward resources of fortitude which no outward circumstance, however adverse, could exhaust. The young were exhorted to discipline themselves so that when misfortune came their way they would be able to master it - not only endure it without flinching, but make creative use of it and be better for it. Those faced with adversity were urged not to whimper nor indulge in self-pity, but to be strong and play the man. It was the characteristic soul-attitude of the Stoic and it has always commanded respect. But there is no gospel in it - no indication of resources of strength beyond the self - nothing but a challenge to self-reliance.

NEW TESTAMENT AND COURAGE

In the New Testament we find that little stress is put on the actual cultivation of courage; here the emphasis is of a different kind. A great deal is made of it and for reasons that are clear. To be a Christian nowadays is not generally regarded as an arduous undertaking. For many it means no more than joining a church - attending it with a fair degree of regularity,

ASSURANCE VALIDATED

This assurance has been validated from generation to generation in the experience of the followers of Christ. They have had "courage - gaiety - and the quiet mind" - not because they possessed the physique of a Samson or the build of a Hercules, but because they drew on divine power. Abraham Lincoln, ~~like Martin Luther was a man for all seasons~~, staunch and unswerving in principle, his heart undaunted and his honor unsullied through years of crisis and conflict - but his fortitude was not self-sustained. Said he, "I have been driven many times to my knees by the overwhelming conviction that I had no where else to go". "My own wisdom and that of those around me seemed insufficient for the day".

And Dietrich Bonhoeffer, one of the truly courageous Christians of our own time, imprisoned in Buchenwald by the Gestapo. One Sunday he was conducting a service for his fellow prisoners and after pronouncing the benediction, the door was opened and two officials entered and said to him, "Prisoner Bonhoeffer - get ready to come with us". Those words "come with us" meant only one thing to the men in the room - the scaffold. They said good-bye to Bonhoeffer. Drawing one of them to one side he said, "This is the end - for me the beginning of life". The next morning he was hanged.

CONCLUSION

Courage. We admire it; we covet it for ourselves. Faith in ourselves we need. Courage is infectious; we can catch it from other. But we should never overlook the deepest source of courage - the courage that comes into our lives as we relate them to the Higher Power. May the time here this hour provide you with the opportunity to relate your life, your spirit, to the life and spirit of the living God. As you receive the Sacrament here this morning, on this World-wide Communion Sunday, may you find your faith renewed and strengthened, your courage deepened. Something that Wendell Phillipps said at the height of the struggle for the abolition of slavery comes to mind:

"It is easy to be brave when all behind you agree with you, but the difficulty comes when 900 and 99 of your friends think you are wrong. Then it is the brave soul who stands up, one among a thousand, but remember that one with God makes a majority"

Remembering that, we shall not lack courage.

LET US PRAY

Grant us, O God, the gift of courage. Give to each of us the strength to encounter that which is to come, that we be brave in perild, constant in tribulation, temperate in wrath, and in all changes of fortune and down to the gates of death - loyal and loving to one another. Remembering the example of Jesus, we ask this in his name.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

Today we join with Christians around the world in observing the Sacrament of Holy Communion. Since 1940, the first Sunday in the month of October, has been the day when Christians in all lands united in this common observance. In a world that is divided and split into various antagonistic segments, we have opportunity to illustrate our oneness in Christ.

We can do this in more than just words. We can and must do it in deeds. In the bulletin today there is an envelope for your contribution to the Fellowship of Suffering and Service. And your contribution will show your concern for the work of chaplains and also your concern for those overseas distressed areas. This offering will be received in the next several moments along with your regular Sunday offering.

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We greet those of you who may be worshipping with us today for the first time. We hope that we may have the opportunity to greet you in a more personal way either at the coffee hour to which you are warmly invited or at the door of the church. Be free in the offering of your name to us. Leave your name and address in one of our guest books. Come and worship with us again.

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The announcements are listed for you in the bulletin. The young adults will be eating together today in a near-by restaurant. If you are a young adult and without plans for lunch, join this group that will be forming at the end of the coffee hour. You will note too that the Woman's Society of Christian Service will hold their first meeting of the Fall Season, this coming Saturday at noon. If you have not yet sent in your reservation, we encourage you to do so today.

Jesus said: It is more blessed to give than it is to receive. In this spirit, let us worship God with our morning offering.