

"THE FACE IN THE SKY"

INTRODUCTION

Remember the opening scene of the Italian film of a number of years ago, La Dolce Vita? A helicopter is flying slowly through the sky not very far above the ground. Hanging down from the helicopter in a kind of halter is a life-size statue of a man dressed in robes with his arms outstretched so that he looks almost as if he's flying by himself. Every once in a while, the camera cuts out the helicopter and all you can see is the statue itself with the rope around it.

It flies over a field where some men are working in tractors and it causes quite a bit of excitement. The men wave their hats and jump around and yell, and then one of them recognizes who it is a statue of and shouts in Italian, "Hey, it's a Jesus"....whereupon some of them start running along under the helicopter, waving and yelling to it.

The helicopter keeps on going and after a while it reaches the outskirts of Rome, where it passes over a building on the roof of which there's a swimming pool. A number of pretty girls in bikinis are basking in the hot sun by the pool. They, too, look up and start waving, and this time the helicopter slows down and does a double take as the young men flying it get a good look at the girls and come circling back again to hover over the pool where, above the roar of the engine, they try to get the telephone numbers of the girls, explaining that they are taking the statue of Jesus to the Vatican and will be back as soon as their mission is accomplished and Jesus is dropped off over at the Destination.

DEVELOPMENT

During all of this, the reaction of the audience in the little theater here on the East Side where I saw the film was to laugh at the incongruity of the whole thing. On the one hand, there was this sacred statue of Jesus dangling from the sky, and on the other hand, the profane young Italians and the bosomy young bathing beauties - the one made of stone, so remote, so out of place there in the sky on the end of its rope; the other made of flesh, so bursting with life.

Indeed, it was quite a contrast and I couldn't help but smile, and nobody in the audience was in any doubt as to which of the two came out ahead, or at whose expense the laughter was.

But then the helicopter continued on its way, and the great dome of St. Peter's looms up from below, and for the first time the camera starts to zoom in on the statue itself with its arms outstretched, until for a brief moment the screen is almost filled with just the bearded face of Christ. And at that moment, there was no laughter at all heard in the theater...a theater filled mostly with young men and women and their paper cups of buttered popcorn. La Dolce Vita - New York style.

Nobody laughed at that particular moment because there was something about that face - ~~for a few seconds~~ there on the screen - that made them be silent...the face hovering there in the sky and those outstretched arms.

For a few moments, there was no sound - as if the face were their face somehow, their secret face that they had never seen before, but that they knew belonged to them, or the face that they had never seen before but that they knew they belonged to.

WHAT THE CHRISTIAN FAITH IS ALL ABOUT

I've thought about that scene many times and of the audience reaction to it. And in a way, I think that this is much of what the Christian faith is all about. It is for a moment - just for a little while - seeing that face and being still. That is all. For many of us, the face of God becomes most visible to us at this time of year. We're most vulnerable to see it, to feel it in these days and hours leading up to Christmas. The face of God as seen in the child of Bethlehem...the beginning of the greatest story ever told.

There's so much about the whole religious enterprise that seems irrelevant and archaic at times, as out of place in our age as an antique statue hanging on a rope in the sky. But - just for the moment itself - say, of Christmas - there can be only silence as something comes to life. Some spirit. Some hope. Some touch of light. Something is born again into our world. Something that is so new and strange and precious and compelling that not even a cynic can laugh although he might be tempted to weep.

The face in the sky. A mother's low cry. The child born in the manger of Bethlehem. The sweet, warm breath of a baby amidst the steaming, stench of animal dung. What a contrast! And nothing is ever the same again.

NEVER IN A WAY BE SURE OF GOD AGAIN

For one thing, those who believe in God can never in a way be sure of Him again. Once they have seen Him in a stable, they can never be sure where He will appear or to what lengths He will go or to what ludicrous depths of self-illumination He will descend in his pursuit - his wild pursuit - to win the hearts of men....to bring them back to Himself.

If holiness and majesty and power of God were present there in this least auspicious of all events - this birth of a peasant's child - then there is no place or time so lowly and earthbound, but that holiness can be present there also. This means that we are never safe, that there is no place where we can hide from God, no place where we are safe from His power to break in two and re-create the human heart. It is just where He seems most helpless that He is most strong. Just where we least expect Him that He comes most fully.

This, to me, is part of the miracle of Christmas for us. The manger confirms this for us.

GOD HIMSELF IS NEVER SAFE FROM US

Then, too, for those who believe in God, this birth means that God Himself is never safe from us. Maybe this is the dark side of Christmas, the terror of the silence.

He comes in such a way that we can always turn Him down, as we could crack a baby's skull like an eggshell, or nail him up when he gets too big for that. We can turn Him down - our mixed-up values, our indifference, our selfishness, our messed up priorities. God - in Christ - comes to us in so many ways. He comes to us in the hungry man we do not have to feed; He comes to us in that lonely man we do not have to comfort; He comes to us in all the desperate human need of our brothers and sisters everywhere that we are always free to turn our backs upon, to walk away from.

It means that God puts himself at our mercy not only in the sense of suffering that we can cause Him by our blindness and coldness and cruelty, but the suffering that we can cause Him simply by suffering ourself. Because this is the

way that love works. When someone we love suffers, we suffer with him. The suffering and the love go hand in hand. They are one. Just as it is with God's love for us.

Let me share a story with you which seems to be a kind of parable of the lives of all of us. It's a 20th century story, and it's almost too awful to tell. It's about a boy of twelve or thirteen who, in a fit of crazy anger and depression, got hold of a gun somewhere and fired it at his father who died, not right away, but several hours after the shot was fired.

When the authorities asked the boy why he had done it, he said that it was because he could not stand his father, because his father demanded too much of him, because he was always after him, because he hated his father. And then later on, after he had been placed in a house of detention somewhere, a guard was walking down the corridor late one night when he heard sounds from the boy's room and he stopped by the closed door to listen. The words that he heard the boy sobbing in the dark of his room were, "I want my father. I want my father".

"Our Father". We have killed Him in so many ways, and we will kill Him again. Our world will kill Him. And yet, He is still there. It is He who listens at the door of our lives. It is He who is coming. It is He who through Jesus will come again on Christmas. The child. Born in the night. And nothing is ever the same again. The poetry of His birth - the star, the angels, the shepherds, the three Kings who came out of the darkened night to place their gifts on the straw, Mary and Joseph. Jesus. The poetry points beyond itself to the very heart of reality, which is beyond the power of time and change to touch. This, I believe.

HOPE OF THE WORLD But what of those who both believe and yet - do not believe, cannot believe - which is some men all of the time, and all men some of the time?

The statue with its outstretched arms hovers in the sky - the still face looks down and people recognize that face and call it by name. They wave and many go running a little way along the rough, uneven grounds beneath it.

The night deepens and grows still. Quietness. Maybe the only sound is the birth-cry, the little agony of new life coming alive, or maybe there's also the sound of legions of unseen voices raised in Joy.

For them, too, the "believing unbelievers" nothing is ever quite the same again. Because what they have seen and heard in that moment of silence is just possibly the hope of our world. And what they feel in their hearts as they wave - maybe only with one hand...a little wave...not very certain, but with His name on their lips - is the stirring of new life, now courage, new gladness seeking to be born in them even as He was born in Bethlehem's manger. If only they, too - we, too - the entire family of man will stretch out arms to those arms and raise our faces to that face in the sky. The hope of our world. Said the shepherds:

"Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has come to pass which the Lord has made known to us." And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph and the babe lying in a manger"

What a tragedy it would be for us when we come to the end of our days to discover that we had not really lived....that we had failed to look up and see the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

LET US PRAY Lord Jesus, be born again into our world.

Wherever there is war in this world, wherever there is pain, wherever there is loneliness, wherever there is no hope, come, thou "long-expected one" with healing in thy wings.

Wherever there is boredom, wherever there is fear, wherever there is temptation too strong to resist, wherever there is bitterness of heart, come, thou blessed one, with healing in thy wings.

Saviour, be born in each of us who raises his face to thy face, not knowing fully who he is or who thou art, knowing only that thy love is beyond his knowing and that no other has the power to make him whole.

Come, Lord Jesus, to each of us....Amen