

GOD'S GREAT GIFT"

INTRODUCTION

This morning, in many churches across our land, particular attention is being given to the fact that today is Universal Bible Sunday. I could spend my time in the pulpit today praising the Bible for its comfort, beauty and guidance, reminding you that it is still the world's best seller, so far outstripping all other books that there really is no comparison. However, instead of talking to you about the Bible, I would much rather let the Bible talk to you and with this in mind, I would turn to the New Testament, to Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians, a letter in which Paul wrote about himself and his own religious experience in an unusually intimate and personal way. In the course of this revelation of himself he wrote this rather unforgettable line: "We have this treasure in earthen vessels". I put this line before you here this morning in something of the way of a text.

WE ALL HAVE OUR TREASURES

It is true, is it not, that we all have those things that we treasure, those things that we consider to be of supreme worth in our lives. On the one hand a person may treasure an object because it's valuable in the markets of the world, and if placed on sale would bring a high price. For instance, he may have in his possession an autograph of Mozart, or a painting by Rembrandt. Such treasures, as we saw a few weeks ago here in New York, are worth over a million dollars in the markets of the world.

On the other hand, the treasure may not have any commercial value at all. It may be a teddybear, tattered and worn, treasured by a child, clutched to his side as he goes to bed as if his little life depended upon it. My daughter has a blanket that she treasures. And mind you, if she doesn't have that blanket with her when she goes to bed, there is apt to be trouble. No peace and quiet until she has that blanket clutched securely in her two little hands. Or it may be a band of gold worn thin by the years, worth practically nothing in a jeweler's shop, yet treasured by a woman because she wore it for the first time on her wedding day. Or it may be a faded letter that means nothing to anyone save the person who received it. The person treasures that letter because it was the last message received from someone deeply loved.

It may be something solid, tangible, material - a rare book, a piece of fine china, a lock of baby's hair, an autographed baseball. Or it may be something intangible, immaterial - a memory that shines brightly through the years and pierces the clouds that have gathered around a life of sadness, sorrow and loneliness. It would be hard to find a person who had no treasure of any kind - material or immaterial, tangible or intangible, solid or spiritual - somewhere in his life.

PAUL AND HIS TREASURE

Paul said "We have this treasure in earthen vessels". The treasure that Paul was referring to in this line was an intangible treasure. He had some material treasures too, but they were few and far between. You'll remember he had no permanent address, no home after he left Tarsus. He was on the move all of the time and depended on his friends to take him in. Sometimes his home was a jail. He

had no family of his own, only the family of God. He did not have very good health, and had very little money. Most of Paul's treasures, therefore, were of the other sort. They were immaterial, intangible treasures - the unfailing loyalty of men like Luke and Barnabas, men who never left him or let him down; the affection of younger men like Timothy, who were at his side when he needed them; the generous love of friends in Philippi who not only said they loved him when he was there, but thought of him when he was in prison and sent gifts of money to help him out; the satisfaction of doing the one thing that he wanted most to do, and the enormous gratification of seeing people, here and there, set free by the Gospel he preached. These, you might say, were the immaterial treasures of Paul.

But the real treasure of his life, the one thing he treasured above all of the other treasures, the one he refers to in his letter to the people of Corinth, was light. Not the kind of light that brightens a room when you turn on the light switch. Not that kind of light. The other kind of light - the light that shines in a person's heart - the inner light. As he put it so beautifully in his letter - "the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in Jesus Christ". It was an inner light that made all the other things bright, no matter how dull they in themselves might be. It was the knowledge, if we dare to paraphrase it, that somehow or other, in spite of appearance, all is well in the world, that while every story may not have a happy ending here and now, the Author of that story has a purpose in the movement and action of every chapter and that his intention is good. All this knowledge came to him shining from one single life, from the face, so to speak, of Jesus Christ. And as long as he had this one treasure in his heart, he could get along without some of the other treasures. In those wonderful phrases of his, he could be troubled, yet not distressed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; cast down, but not destroyed. This was Paul's treasure. I wonder how many of you have this treasure - really have it, in your heart.

It seems to me that all of the other treasures of life are really worth very little without this one, or to put it more positively and I think more accurately, all of the other treasures of life begin to have real life and significance when they are brought into the light of this one great treasure, the knowledge and faith that God is shining through to us in the face of Jesus Christ, the knowledge and faith that the power behind the scenes is good.

WHAT ABOUT YOUR TREASURES?

Think for a moment about the things you treasure. Suppose that fire broke out in your apartment house, or in your own apartment, and you had a few precious moments in which to gather together a few of your belongings, what would you bring out with you. I thought about this this past week. If it were in the middle of the night, our first thought of course would be about the children. We would get them out as quickly as possible. That would be our first concern. If I had a few extra moments, I would get together a few clothes, at least enough to get us by a day or two. After that I really began to wonder what I would take out next. I thought of some letters (a great many of them) tucked away in a box in my

closet, letters I wrote to my wife when I was courting her, and letters she wrote to me. I'd like to save these. Fifty years from now they will be very precious to us. They're precious now. I enjoy reading them now....the only trouble is my wife reminds me of those many promises I made to her before we were married. And then I thought of a few photographs that I would want to try to save. But beyond that, I couldn't think of too many things I would want to risk my own life to save. My father use to say to us when we were growing up (he was a Methodist minister, too).....if ever a fire breaks out, save his sermons (his study was at home). He could say that because he was a great preacher. I'd just as soon see most of my sermons go up in smoke. Suppose however that all of the things you had gathered together through the years, the things that mean so much to you - your trinkets, the little things, valuable and invaluable, the things that mean a great deal to you and the big things you have worked so hard to possess - suppose they went up in smoke. Would you have anything left?

Or suppose you were to be told tomorrow by your doctor that you have only six months left to live, and that soon all the things you had collected and the things you had counted on, would be taken away from you including life itself. Would you have anything to live for?

We are on the threshold of another Christmas. We celebrate it with material things and I for one have no objection to that. Soon the treasures and toys will be piled high around the trees in the homes and apartments in which our people live, and I am glad of this. But at the same time it is a good thing, is it not, to ask ourselves questions like these: what do I treasure most in life? Are the things that I treasure most worth treasuring? Am I gravitating more and more as I grow older toward the tangible things, the material treasures I can hold on to, that give me the most immediate satisfaction. Or am I growing out of them toward the imperishable things of the mind and spirit? And have I the one treasure in my life that gives value and meaning to all the others? Have I this inner light, the light of the knowledge of God? - the peace and love and life of Jesus Christ in my heart?

GOD'S GREAT GIFT TO US And Paul writing to the people of Corinth said, "We have this treasure....this treasure in earthen vessels". Isn't this the meaning of Christmas, the coming of this treasure into our world.

I was reading recently in the newspaper where two women were walking along the east side of Fifth Avenue down around 35th Street doing some window shopping. They stopped in front of one of the best known stores on Fifth Avenue and admired the manger scene that had been set out so beautifully in one of the windows - the wise men, the shepherds, the star of Bethlehem, Mary and Joseph and the baby Jesus. One lady turned to the other and remarked, "Why look at that - even the church is now trying to get in on Christmas".

We smile at the story, but seriously we do need to be reminded that the church does have a part in Christmas. Jesus is the treasure of God in an earthen vessel, his great gift to us. This is what Christmas is all about. God once chose the human life of Jesus to be the lamp for his light in the world.

He now chooses you. I'm as sure of this as I am of anything I know on this second Sunday in Advent. He is now choosing people like you and me to carry that light into the dark streets of the world.....wherever we walk.....wherever there is unhappiness (and the amount of unhappiness in the world is staggering)....He is choosing you to carry the treasure of His light by which the clouds of unhappiness will be broken up and eventually dispersed.

"For God who commanded the light to shine out of darkness hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us. We are troubled on every side, yet not distressed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; Persecuted, but not forsaken; cast down, but not destroyed. Always bearing about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life also of Jesus might be made manifest in our body."

LET US PRAY: We thank Thee, O God, for the great gift thou gavest to us long ago. Give us willing hearts to accept this great gift and give us the desire to carry it as well as we can.....as far as we can....for a long time or a brief time....brightly or dimly... into the dark streets of the world, wherever we may walk, so that the clouds of darkness may be broken by thy light. Amen

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as bright as we can

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