

NEW TESTAMENT PERSONALITIES "V. Demas"

INTRODUCTION

I remember several years ago hearing Dr. Metzner preach a rather unique sermon in the first person about the New Testament personality Demas. It was the first time I ever heard a sermon about Demas, that erstwhile traveling companion of the Apostle Paul. Some of you may remember how that sermon was based on three references in Paul's letters to this man, Demas, who apparently made a promising beginning but a poor ending, and so has become the symbol of a man who never finished what he began.

PAUL'S REFERENCES

All of Paul's references to this partner come toward the end of his ministry, indicating that Demas was with Paul in Rome. In one reference, Paul couples the name of Demas with that of Luke and John Mark and gratefully refers to all of them as "my fellow workers". In the next reference Paul says, "Luke the beloved physician and Demas greet you". The third reference to Demas is a sad one. Toward the end of his letter to young Timothy, Paul writes, "For Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica".

So far as I can find, there is no more information available about Demas than those three brief references. We simply know that this man was one of Paul's lieutenants in Rome, who for a time shared the Apostle's ministry there, but at length deserted and went back to Thessalonica.

THE IMAGINATION FILLS IN

From there on, the imagination fills in the outline. Since Demas went back to Thessalonica, can we assume that this was the city from whence he came? Had he been among the converts in that Macedonian city when Paul came preaching the gospel there? Had he been one of the enthusiastic founders of the church there, opening his home to its meetings, lending his time and talent to its growing strength. And once, when Paul came back to revisit Thessalonica, did Demas take the Apostle aside and say, "Look, I've been thinking a great deal about all of this, and if you could use me, I'd like to be a member of your team that travels". Certainly somewhere along the line Paul met Demas, sized him up as a man who could be of considerable help to the Christian mission, and welcomed him to the partnership. I can imagine that the members of old First Church, Thessalonica, were proud of their fellow member as he marched off in company with Paul, and there were speeches, and flowers, and perhaps a small purse given to him at the farewell gathering.

For a time, one supposes, all went well, and Demas thrilled to his new responsibilities, the new sights, the new experiences. How he must have delighted in seeing Rome, the center of civilization with all of its wonders. Then, too, there was a certain fascination about this man Paul. He always seemed to emerge triumphant over his troubles. There was a certain amount of prestige about presenting your credentials as a member of Paul's company. But the day came when the newness wore off. Paul was in prison. The power of Nero loomed large. The role of the Christian was increasingly demanding and dangerous. The faith seemed vague. The old town and

the old ties beckoned. And so one day did Demas sit down and pen a note off to Paul? "I hate to do this Paul, but I just don't think that this is where I belong....I've decided this just isn't for me. By the time this reaches you, I'll be on my way back to Thessalonica".

Of course, we don't know the details. We only know Paul's final sad reference to Demas, "For Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica". But even from such meager information as we have, we are reminded once more that the Bible is not an unrealistic version of human nature, not the result of collusion which omits that which is unfavorable, but rather the result of honest reporting which pictures people as they were - and as they are.

DEMAS - NO STRANGER

Our encounter with Demas first causes us to look outward and to admit that Demas is no stranger to our list of acquaintances. One of the darkest, most dismal moments in life occurs, I suppose, when we realize that someone in whom we have placed our trust and confidence has either fooled us or failed us. It should be of some little comfort to us in such a moment to remember that any adventure in faith in people will almost inevitably result in disappointments. So Paul had his Demas, Jesus had his Judas. Here was the peerless pioneer of our faith, and here was his tall first lieutenant - both of them surrounding themselves with men who grew into the strongest kind of discipleship - but each of them choosing at least one man who is remembered as a failure.

So remember that, you people in business, the next time you are pondering the puzzling failure of someone you had chosen for a position of trust. Remember that, those of us in the church, the next time we are disappointed in a selection for an office of an important responsibility. A biographer of Alexander Whyte, the great Scottish preacher, said, "Dr. Whyte was willing to face the risk of failure here and there, if only he could bring as many as possible of his men to bear an active part in the work of the church". Indeed, Jesus and Paul knew something about such risks of failure. Remember that, in our friendships and even in our homes, when a recipient of love does not measure up in his response.

In all of this, we do not need to reject or revise anything that we have said about the power of persistent love. Love still abides as the greatest, strongest force in the world. But it does need to be added that even the love of God is not coercive. In our creation, God gave to each of us the dignity of freedom of choice, and God himself respects that dignity. This is a fact which is unforgettably etched into Holman Hunt's painting, "The Light of the World". Jesus stands knocking at the door, but there is no latch on the outside. The door can be opened only from the inside. So Jesus could not coerce Judas, even by the power of so great a love, nor Paul, Demas. Anyone who follows the Master's injunction to "love one another" may well meet up with Demas somewhere down the line, even as Paul did. "For Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me".

FAILED TO FINISH

But now the harder lesson from our encounter with Demas is to look inward and ask what is there about ourselves that makes us relatives of this man who lacked the ability to finish what he started. For do we not all know something about the enthusiasm of splendid beginnings and then the doldrums of an uninspired continuance when we are sorely tempted to let down and give up? I remember reading in the Reader's Digest once, the contribution of a mother whose son earned his spending money by mowing lawns. She said that one Saturday morning he was unusually slow in leaving the house and when she asked him about the delay, he said, "Oh I'm just waiting till people get started. You see, I get most of my jobs from people who are half through".

Compare the lad's clear observation about so much human nature with the oft-quoted comment of the Duke of Wellington when someone asked him the secret of the English victory over the French forces at Waterloo. He said, "We were brave five minutes longer". And who was it who said, "The rock bottom thing about life is to keep on going when we don't want to keep on going, and to be willing to give up what isn't really necessary."

Most of us know how easy it is to stop halfway through and how difficult it is to find that added perseverance that provides the margin of victory. We know all about promising beginnings, and not so much about satisfying conclusions.

You who are in school - are you Demas? Demas abounds in good intentions, does well on his achievement tests, becomes marked as a promising youth. But you know how it is - the homework becomes sandwiched between telephone and television, the outside activities pile up, the exams come, the marking period ends, the record is compiled, the years pass and people shake their heads and say, "I wonder what ever became of Demas. I thought he had such promise".

You who are in the home - are you Demas? Demas has a fine wedding and people say to him and to his bride, "Congratulations and best wishes. You will be very happy". But all of life is not a June day to the music of Lohengrin. The children get sick, the in-laws need help, there isn't enough to go around, you don't always see eye to eye. And Demas begins to look for the nearest exit!

You who are busy - whether in vocation or in volunteer work - are you Demas? You start a job, to the tune of many congratulations and good wishes. You take a responsibility upon your shoulders in your church or in a civic organization. After a few weeks and months, you run into hardships, headaches, problems, disagreements, criticism, and you are ready to turn in your resignation, to throw it all over. Do not misunderstand me. I'm not pleading for that blind endurance which glues a person in a position for which he is not fitted. But by and large, as a nation of workers, we are more inclined to be tentative than tenacious. And when things get rough we tend to pack up rather than push on. There's more of Demas in us than there is that measure of discipline that makes the difference.

I remember a basketball coach we had in High School. His favorite expression with which he use to greet the candidates for the

team was, "Only those who are agile, tenacious and who have peripheral vision will eventually make this team". Agile - tenacious - possessors of peripheral vision - perhaps something like this needs to be said to the present day Christian as he prepares to join the team. Certainly people who are tenacious and agile and who have this peripheral vision (the ability to see what's going on around them) are needed in today world.

Yes, there's something of Demas in all of us. How many of us make a splendid start in youth, perhaps build up to a strong maturity, and then wither away into old age and complaining bitterness. I see so much of old age in my work and mind you there are great contrasts among older people. Every now and then I find myself wondering what kind of a person I will be in old age. I know I do not have much to say about the state of my body when I am old, or the state of my mind, but I do know that by the grace of God I may have something to say about the state of my spirit when I am old. At any rate, after seeing some radiant older people who have come through a lifetime of varied experience and are now like glorious sunsets at eventide, I desperately want to be like that - not like Demas, magnificent at the beginning, but miserable at the end.

CONCLUSION We have analyzed Demas. In so doing, we have evaluated ourselves. There isn't much we can do for Demas, but there is something we can do for ourselves, something we can do to strengthen our lives and our loyalties.

Years ago I came across a poem which has been constantly re-occurring in my thoughts as I have prepared this sermon about Demas.

"Across the fields of yesterday
He sometimes comes to me,
A little lad just back from play -
The lad I use to be.

And yet he smiles so wistfully
Once he has crept within
I wonder if he hopes to see
The man I might have been"

I wonder how Demas would have felt had he repeated this poem to himself several years after his desertion of Paul and the kingdom enterprise. I'm even more concerned about the effect it has on us today as we think of the tasks that involve our lives in the work of the kingdom.

One thing I know. A religious faith of meaningful depth - a faith undergirded by personal prayer and weekly worship, can save one from responding to such a poem with an answer of disillusionment. For all of the imperfections and shortcomings in pulpit and pew, God uses worship to renew and reach his children. This is the claim Isaiah made when long ago he said, "They that wait upon the Lord..." This claim was validated by Jesus in his experience of prayer and worship, so obviously renewing and restoring his energy and perspective, that the disciples came to him and said, "Lord, teach us how to pray".

For the God of our Lord Jesus Christ keeps us at those unfinished tasks, with that assurance that we shall not run out of power, that we shall not be finally defeated. The Bible says, "I can do all things in Him who strengthens me". Remember that and believe it. And may that assurance undergird you as together we again take up the tasks of building a better church, a better community and a better world. "We can do all things in Him who strengthens us".

PRAYER In the quietness of these moments here at the end of this service of praise and thanksgiving, we would privately renew our commitment to Thee, O God, thou who hast revealed the fullness of thyself in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. Brood over this congregation. Unite us and bless us in our efforts. We ask this in the spirit of Jesus Christ. Amen