

"THE INCREDIBILITY OF A STABLE"

TEXT: "God has chosen what the world calls foolish to shame the wise; He has chosen what the world calls weak to shame the strong". (I Corinthians 1: 28)

INTRODUCTION

Among his various achievements in recent years in behalf of the American consumer, Ralph Nader has been instrumental in getting Truth in Packaging Laws on the books in many states. In size and in printed information, the box and what's inside must correspond. Yesterday's NY Times carried word of his latest attempt to have the Federal Trade Commission ban ads on products that are not backed by scientific tests. Truth in packaging - this is what it's all about. This is his concern. For his efforts, we are grateful.

DEVELOPMENT

I cannot help but wonder if there is a sense in which the circumstances of the birth of Jesus misrepresented the importance of what was going on? Misrepresented - not by overstatement as is so often the case, but rather by under-statement. A Messiah, a Saviour, a King -- born to the commonest of parents; welcomed by shepherds, but unrecognized by professional divines; and nursed by his mother not in the temple, not in the palace, not in a clean, well-ordered home, but tenderly cared for by his mother in - would you believe, a stable?

By faith, we are led to believe that the birth of Jesus was a well-planned happening, that no detail was left to chance, that all of the props were just as God wanted them. Yes - even down to the stable. Suppose we reflect for a few minutes this morning on the appropriateness of the stable, and what it suggests.

OUTSIDE ESTABLISHED CHANNELS

To begin with, at the very least that stable suggests to us that life's creative forces often flow outside the established channels. The inn in Bethlehem that night housed the conventional, the customary, the ordinary, the usual. But Jesus was born in a cave, in a stable, as an outsider. I wonder if God is trying to say something to us.

I was interested and glad to read only the other day in the doctor's office while I was waiting my turn that all progress in the business world is not generated by the giant corporations and the huge conglomerates. I came across these interesting facts in an old copy of a business magazine:

1. Hilton or Statler did not create the motel revolution. It was small, undercapitalized local entrepreneurs who had no previous experience in the lodging business.
2. Neither Ward Baking nor National Biscuit created the frozen cake revolution. It was Sara Lee, a local baker in Chicago.
3. Similarly, it was not Ward or Bond that created the quality revolution in packaged white bread. That was done by two companies absolutely new to the baking business. Pepperide Farm and Arnold Bakers.
4. It was not RCA or GE that created the mass market for transistors. It was a remote and tiny company in the geophysical business, now called Texas Instruments.
5. Armstrong Cork and Congoleum-Nairn did not bring on the vinyl tile revolution in floor covering and care. It is a little known firm

called Delaware Floor products.

6. Metro-Goldwyn Mayer and Paramount did not create the feature TV series which made television an entertainment success. It was entirely new companies like Four Star, Revue and Desilu.
7. General Foods and Campbell Soup did not create the new wave in the convenience foods revolution. It was completely new companies like Swanson.
8. Neither General Motors nor Standard Oil of NJ developed the first mass production efficiency 24-hour automotive repair and maintenance center. It was the small Canadian Tire Company of Toronto.
9. Federated Department Stores and Allied Stores did not develop the mass merchandising, one-floor suburban shopping revolution. It was people never before in the retailing business, like Two Guys from Harrison.
10. Nor finally, in the 1930's was it the A & P or Jewel or Kroger chain that created the supermarket. It was undercapitalized merchandising upstarts like King Kullen on Long Island and Big Bear in Ohio".

In the business world some creative forces flow outside the set and established channels. What shall we say of the church? Enamored of the truth she holds and the power she possesses, the church, at times, is apt to become puffed-up with a sense of pride and self-importance as though all truth must be received through her and interpreted by her. Often in the gospels the line of the future seems to be forming outside the establishment. Jesus went to the town of Jericho where there was an accredited school for prophets, but he did not visit the school. Instead, he made his way to the house of Zacchaeus, a tax collector. And on that first Palm Sunday when the faithful were gathered in the temple, the real wave of the future rested in what was going on outside, in the hosannas the people were shouting because of one who was entering their city riding on a donkey.

When the church gets soft on justice and ^{loses} its passion for peace, God is likely to speak His word through an aroused militant wing, ~~or through demonstrations and marches in the streets.~~ When we are obsessed by status symbols and all of the popular notions of success and the things that money can buy, God is likely to speak from without through flower children who warm to human values and spurn our dress and titles and styles and notions of success. When we tend to become stuffy and stifled in worship, he is likely to speak through soul music from the outside and through the gut rhythms of rock and roll. At the great insistence of my 12 year old, I spent two hours last Sunday night listening to this new rock opera from England, Jesus Christ, Super-Star. I confess I liked it; it was a real treat and something of an experience. I can see how people can be drawn to it. Sit down and listen to it from beginning to end, with script in hand. It may turn you on.

What I am trying to say is that God is not limited to sources that are dear to us. Let us be careful not to over-estimate the inn, nor to under-estimate what's happening in the stable.

GOD MEETS US IN THE STABLE

Let me go on to the second thought I wish to put before you. More important, the stable reminds us that God meets men in the earthiness of life which that stable is a symbol of. This is, after all, the meaning of the Incarnation - God in the midst of life.

Now when you come right down to it, there's just no way that we can pretty-up that stable - no matter how many creches we place on our mantels or tables, no matter how many prints of a clean stable we find on our Christmas cards. Chances are that stable back in Bethlehem was a primitive and pungent place alive with all the sounds and smells and what have you of everyday life. And any one intent on going there would be well advised to take along a can of lysol spray and wear his high-top shoes - for that's the kind of place it is. The stable stands as a testimony and a reminder to the earthiness of our Lord.

I think we fail to appreciate this. So often we try to deny the existence of that earthy side of life and of our own nature - the wild, boisterous, elemental, basic, unrefined side. Believe it or not, there is a direction sign over in the Hayden Planetarium that says: "To the Solar System and Rest Rooms". It reminds us that even in our loftiest pursuits we are not delivered from our most basic needs. It reminds me of a comment that was made by two spinsters in our church a number of years ago after announcement was made in the bulletin regarding the adoption of a child by our former associate minister and his wife. As the prelude was being softly played, one turned to the other and said in a whisper that was overheard: "Now, that's the right way for a minister to have a child".

Any treasure we humans hold is held in earthen vessels, whether it be a treasure of art, of culture, of religious insight, and yet we sometimes fail to appreciate this and create the impression that this part of our nature is strange, foreign, unmentionable.

We would like to deny that Christ can be there on that seamy, underside of life. We have an aversion to the rough and a strong preference for the smooth. We like to sing about "The Old Rugged Cross", but the crosses we know and love have their surfaces planed and highly polished. When we baptize, we do not use the muddy waters of a river, but the clean waters and make use of a beautiful baptismal font. When we have communion, we do not celebrate with chunks of bread torn from a loaf and wine taken from a bottle, but rather we use bread that is neatly cut into cubes and where would we be without Welch's grape juice. The unlettered crudity of the men that Jesus gathered to himself - men like James, John, and rough, tough Peter - offend us. We can't take them until we've embedded them in stained glass or made them over into saints.

What I am concerned about here is that we are guilty in our churches of overly identifying Jesus with the "upper" or "proper" side of life. And maybe this is what some of those rebellious voices on the outside (~~many of whom have been reared in our churches and Sunday Schools~~) are trying to tell us. Whenever the Christian church or community tries to identify itself only with exaltation it's in danger of becoming false and counterfeit. It may be that our inability to recognize Christ's presence in the underside of life is what makes the church so inept in the city.

The words of George McCleod, that great spirit of the church of Scotland in our time, speak a sharp and urgent word in this direction:

"I simply argue that the cross be raised again at the center of the market place, as well as on the steeple of the church. I am recovering the claim that Jesus was not crucified in a cathedral between two candles, but on a cross between two thieves; on the town garbage heap - at a cross roads so cosmopolitan that they had to write his title in Hebrew, Latin and Greek. At the kind of place where cynics talk smut and thieves curse, and soldiers gambled because that is where he died and that is what he died about, and that is where more of

us should be and this is what churchmanship should be about".

Said Emerson:

"Tis not in the high stars alone,
Nor in the red breast's mellow tone,
But in the mud and scum of things,
There, always - always something sings".

A SUGGESTION OF SUFFERING LOVE

Finally, and most important of all, the stable is a hint, a suggestion to us of God's suffering love. Far from misleading us as a mode of revelation of divine truth, it corresponds to what we believe to be God's nature and his way of doing things. It hints of a patient and suffering love.. The stable does not mis-represent him; it is no gimmick, no attempt to contrive a rustic effect that might play upon our sentiments. This is the way God works. As Paul reminds us in the words of our text: (nothing spectacular about a stable)

"God has chosen what the world calls foolish to shame the wise;
He has chosen what the world calls weak to shame the strong".

The stable does not overwhelm us, indeed - it underwhelms us. In a way it is suggesting that force is not an attribute of God. Samuel Miller, in one of his books, writes:

"The logos that was powerful enough to make the world, became flesh - was born a baby, absolutely helpless. This is the message of Christianity - that the permanent structure of reality is not coercive, but persuasive, of the nature of grace, and not of law."

And if we have the courage to come a little closer to that manger scene, we will discover that this love of God that we speak of is essentially an activity of "self-expenditure". The stable, as a symbol and a mode of revelation of truth, brings us face to face with the fact that there are two kinds of power operative in our world: first, the power of self-expansive (if you will) that makes use of force, that coerces to achieve, that seeks to dominate, that drives rather than draws, and second, there is the power of self-expenditure which lifts, raises, draws rather than drives and which we are given to believe is God's kind of power.

HAVE WE BEEN THERE

I think what we all deeply want at Christmas is to be able to say that we've really been there, that our lives have been significantly touched and that we have brushed up against eternal truth. How can we know that we've been there. The Wise Men, you will recall, after they were there at the scene, "went back by another way". And therein is our answer. How can we know if we've been there. It's tied in with how we go back after it's all over. On the deeper level, it seems, the birth of Christ is raising a very issue. It asks us which kind of power we believe in and which kind of power we will support and identify ourselves with. Is it the power of self-expansiveness that is linked with force, or is it the power of self-expenditure which is symbolized by the stable and linked with service, with love, with giving.

I heard a story this week that I pass on to you. It seems a young, rather innocent girl from a small mid-western town came to seek work here in the city. She was given one of those massive forms to fill out: "Name, address, family history, etc." When she came to the question, "In case of an emergency whom should we notify?" she paused, called the personnel man over and said, "I don't understand. What do you mean?" He explained it to her: "If some accident, you know, befell you,

or some emergency arose, whom should we call?" She replied, "Why, the nearest human being I would hope".

She would be safe in her answer - if the world were totally committed to the kind of power that seeks to expend itself for others. Our world, so it seems, has a long way to go before it reaches that point. And it will reach that point only as individuals brush up against this eternal truth, and depart - "willing to go back by another way". Yes, the Wise Men went back by another way. May this be the way it is with us as we celebrate the deep joy of this Holy Season. The choice, dear friends, is laid gently at the doorsteps of our hearts. Even here, God will not coerce, nor force.

"Though Christ a thousand times
In Bethlehem be born,
If he's not born in thee,
Thy soul is still forlorn"

PRAYER

Lord, we need an experience of Christmas this year that brings us face to face with divine truth.

Help us to trust the kind of power that prefers service to domination, and is prepared to suffer for that which it would win. May we live - not after the conventional wisdom of those who gathered that night in the Inn, but rather by the light of that love which rose from the stable. In the name of Christ, we pray.
Amen