

"THE LIFE WE LOOK FOR"

INTRODUCTION

The sermon this morning begins with the rather sobering observation that generally speaking the people of today are not interested in and concerned with the things of the life to come, not at least, shall we say, to the extent of the people of one hundred years ago. In fact, if we were to take a poll of this congregation at this moment on this question, DO YOU BELIEVE IN A LIFE AFTER DEATH, we might be shocked and startled with the results of that poll. I may be wrong. I hope I am. But by and large, I think there's more truth involved in this observation than many of us would like to admit there is.

I suppose there are several reasons involved as to why this change of attitude has taken place in the past one hundred years regarding the life to come. To begin with, I suppose that life on this planet today is much more comfortable today than it was for the people of one hundred years ago. People are enjoying this life here and now. There's every little desire in their hearts to escape from this world into the world beyond. The result is that people tend to think less concerning the world to come. Another reason for this change of attitude grows out of the fact that we've discovered there to be far many more people inhabiting this planet than the people of past centuries ever supposed there to be. Some two billion, four hundred and million people exist on this earth. And there are times I think when we find it difficult to visualize all of them as creatures destined for eternal life. And then I suppose that modern science has done its part to bring about this change in attitude. For the most part the old cosmology of the Bible has been removed from the minds of people. The old picture of a heaven and a hell with earth in between has been removed from the minds of people, but unfortunately we have had difficulty in replacing this old picture with a new picture. And I think this too, that God is less real to us than he was to our grandparents. We find it difficult to visualize a God who knows and directs the lives of each one of these two billion, four hundred eight million people, and when they die, takes them back unto himself. Life's more mechanical today than it was one hundred years ago. It grinds out products with great efficiency, but in our minds it doesn't seem to have the power to raise people from the dead.

And so for reasons of this nature, and for similar reasons, Rufus Jones the great Quaker, remarked a few years before he died:

"The hope of the great future life has grown dim, and the expectation of it has practically disappeared from the hearts of people"

DEVELOPMENT

And yet, if this observation is true, then why is it that people still flock to the churches on Easter Sunday? And they do to! Not only to the churches of the city, but also to the churches of the country, and not only in this country, but also in the countries of Europe, and the other countries of the world where Christianity has shed some of its light. This past week as I prepared this sermon, I kept asking myself why is it that people go to church on Easter Sunday. Why is that the churches of our land are filled on this one Sunday like no other Sunday of the entire year.

Once again, I suppose that there are several reasons involved. To begin with, I think that some people go to church on Easter simply because

of habit. They were brought up to go to church on Easter Sunday. Their parents always went to church on Easter Sunday. Their grandparents always went to church on Easter Sunday. It's been done for generations in their family. And sometimes habits that are this deeply roots are hard to break. And then I suppose some people go to church on Easter because they want to hang on to some of the ritual and ceremony and quaintness of the day. They like to hear the music. They like to see the flowers. And although they don't take too seriously the indications that these things provide, nevertheless they want to hang on to them.

And then there are people who attend church on Easter Sunday because of the prestige that's involved. I find it difficult to conceive of this taking place, but I'm realistic enough to know that there are people who attend church on Easter because of the thrill and the excitement that they derive from the event. It's the same kind of thrill and excitement that a person derives from attending the opening night of a play or the opening night of the Metropolitan Opera. Socially, it's the thing to do. It's hard to conceive of people attending church for this reason, and I'm thankful that the number of such people is decreasing from year to year.

But frankly I'm not satisfied with any of these reasons as to why people go to church on Easter Sunday. I think the answer to this question goes much deeper than any of us realize. It does as deep as this, and it's going to take several minutes to explain this reason, but it begins with this fact. That every human being is looking for greater life. Every human being is born with the impulse or the instinct, if you can call it that, to look forward as well as to look backwards. It's part of our nature. We're born with this. For instance, a child is constantly looking forward to the wonder and the thrill of the next stage of life. For instance, a student is constantly looking forward to the day when he receives his diploma and graduates. A young person is always looking forward to the day when he meets that one person and falls in love and gets married. A simply ordinary human beings is constantly looking forward to the life that's richer and fuller and more satisfying and less frustrating than the life he's not living. A person is born to look forward, and as he looks forward he looks forward to greater life.

You know in my work as a minister, I'm constantly coming in touch with the lives of elderly people. To me, this is one of the joys of the ministry. I find that people in their seventies, and in their eighties, and in their nineties always have such a wonderful outlook on life. They always have such a wonderful philosophy of life to share with younger people. And I hardly ever see an elderly person who does not talk and plan as though he or she were going on indefinitely. They make plans for the summer. Already they're making plans for next winter. To be sure, I don't know what they think about when they're all alone, but what I'm trying to bring out here is this that there's something instinctive in all people that looks forward to greater life. And isn't it true that when you stop to think instinctively and spontaneously, you do not think of death as being the end of all life. And so just to pull together the different threads of thought so far, I would say this: Deep down in our hearts all of us are looking for greater life, not only in terms of this world, but also in terms of the world to come. And so perhaps the deeper reason as to why people come to church on Easter is because for a few brief moments, they may catch a glimpse of this greater life that

instinctively they're longing and looking for. All of this leads us into the next question which might be put in this fashion:

WHAT KIND OF LIFE
ARE WE LOOKING FOR?

What kind of life are we looking for? What kind of life are we longing for in terms of the life to come? Now I recognize that I can't answer this question with any degree of certainty for you. All I can do is answer it in terms that are meaningful to myself. But on the other hand I know some of you pretty well, so perhaps I can include some of you in my answers. What kind of life are we looking for?

For one thing, we're not looking for a life that goes on and on forever, an endless prolongation of the days and years of our own time. We're not looking for a life that's an exact replica of this one, filled with the infirmities and inhibitions of this world. Nor are we looking for the kind of life that's described in the Book of Revelation - angels, harps, and streets paved with gold. I think I know some of you well enough to know that you might like this kind of world for a time, but in the long run I think you'd eventually get sick of it. Nor are we looking for the kind of life that's little more than a reward for being good in this life. There are times I suppose when all of us tend to think of the hereafter in terms of a bribe or a bait in order to make sure that we're good and decent people in this world. But this conception is not entirely satisfying. I feel that people are going to be good and decent here and now in this life without having to be bribed or baited into it. At least they ought to be.

These then are some of the things that we're not looking for in terms of the world to come. Now some of you may be wondering well what kind of life are we looking for. Now mind you, this is no easy question to answer. It's like some of those other great questions that we touched upon during Lent. All we can hope to do is make a few inroads here and there, and perhaps in the course of things we'll shed some light upon a question that may have been for some person a very baffling mystery.

Occasionally we come across what you might call pointers or hints which help us to answer some of these questions. What kind of life are we looking for? Here's a pointer or a hint that's been helpful to me. If you have any knowledge of music, you'll know what I'm talking about when I speak of the dominant seventh chord. There's something about this particular chord that leads into something else. And if you don't play what it leads into, namely the tonic major chord, you'll soon go crazy. This unresolved seventh chord leads into something else. It keeps you in suspense, in tension, but once the major tonic chord is struck then you have complete musical satisfaction.

Now I realize that this illustration is far from being perfect, but in a limited way it suggests to us the kind of life that all of us are looking for. The life of this world compares to that unresolved seventh chord. Sometimes it makes you impatient. It keeps you in suspense. There are so many questions we'd like to have answered. So many things we'd like to know. But this life, like the dominant seventh chord, leads into something else. And eventually it is resolved in that major chord in which we find complete peace, rest and satisfaction. This is the kind of life we're looking for - a life in which the broken chords of this life are fulfilled and magnificently resolved, once and for all times.

THIS KIND OF LIFE
IS FELT HERE.....

Now, I'm enough of an optimist to believe that people go to church on Easter Sunday because they feel and taste that kind of life they're looking for here in this place. They may feel it for just a few minutes. There are suggestions, intimations, convictions of the heart offered to them. They may see it in the flowers, because flowers are a thing of beauty, and while their beauty is fading and transient, they nevertheless do speak to us of a beauty that is not fading and transient. They may hear it in the music, for music comes from that other world where things are changless and eternal.

And then of course the resurrection of Jesus openly proclaims it. We know that Jesus did not die a natural death. We know that he was killed by some people like ourselves who may have thought they were doing the right thing. His life was certainly an unresolved chord. But somehow, in the mystery of God, that chord was resolved. Experiences of this type are always hard to put into words, and sometimes the words are not satisfying. But his friends claimed that they saw him. They felt his presence. They had contact with him. Life flowed between them. And somehow in the great mystery of God, he gave them the assurance that the life they had been looking for and longing for was not hemmed in by time and space, but was a life of a different quality - a life of loving and giving, a life in which death is not the end, but only the beginning. And so in that great event, the unresolved seventh chord was resolved, and the life of the world to come was brought that much nearer to us.

HOW DO WE FIND THAT LIFE

Now just one last word. How do we find this kind of life. Not everyone, I suppose, finds it. There's no compulsion about it. There's not proof regarding it. Nothing is forcing you into it. Some of you will be content to go along with Napoleon who said "When we're dead, we're dead" Others of you will be content to linger with Browning who spoke of "The grand perhaps". But the majority of you, I think, will peace and satisfaction in the words from St. John's Gospel: "In my father's house are many mansions. If it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you"

What is it that makes the difference? I suppose it's this. It all depends on which side of your ship the cargo lies. By this I mean that if the cargo of your ship is loaded with things, worldly interests and goods, then you'll hug the shore and never see this life that we've been talking about. But if on the other hand, the cargo of your ship is loaded on the seaward side, if the interests and the loyalties of your life are on the ~~open~~ side toward the open sea, where life is deep and the mysteries are great and the risks are many, then your life will lean more and more to the open seas of eternity.

In a way, I hesitate to put all of the burden on you at the end of this Easter sermon, but there really is no other way. For the life that you're looking for and longing for in the high moments of existence, depends a great deal on the life you live, and the life you live will determine the life for which you look!

LET US PRAY: Our Father and our God, we thank for the life and the wonder and the beauty of this world. And on this day we do thank thee for the life and the wonder and the beauty of the world to come. Help us to order our lives that the weight of our interests may be on the side of eternal things so that when the time comes to return to thee, we shall know whither we are going. Amen