

## "THE MAN CALLED JESUS"

### INTRODUCTION

The sermon today begins with a simple statement of fact, and this is the fact: the Christian religion begins, continues and ends in a Man called Jesus. To my way of thinking, it is an undeniable fact. It is also a fact that is sometimes forgotten, or overlooked. Therefore, in the first part of this sermon I shall dwell on the fact itself, first by looking at the church at the very beginning of its life, and then twelve hundred years later.

### THE BEGINNING

It all began when a small group of young men were drawn to a man about their own age and about whom they knew virtually nothing. He asked them to follow him. He didn't ask them to believe in him, or even to believe him, or to worship him. He simply asked them to follow him, to listen to him, to watch him, to join him, to share his life. And they did!

Chances are that if you had asked them why they did it, they couldn't have told you. They had no theories about him whatsoever at that time. They didn't know exactly who he was except that he was the son of a carpenter and that he came from Nazareth. They didn't know what he was going to do. He promised them little or nothing, except "the pleasure of his company" - and to share in his mission and life by way of suffering.

They didn't always understand. In fact, they often misunderstood him. They loved his stories because they were good stories, but sometimes they missed the point of his stories, as many people do now when they listen to a sermon and hear an illustration that stays with them and then can't tell you for the life of them the point that the illustration was meant to illustrate.

They were impressed by the wonderful things that he did - by the extraordinary way in which he could make sick people well, by the way he could make a little go a long, long way, by the way he could change a man's attitude and outlook on life!

They often disappointed him. Sometimes they let him down and at the most crucial moment they left him utterly alone. But they came back. His death shook them, and his resurrection renewed them. They came back - changed, sobered, and above all else, cheered.

### LIVED IN A NEW WORLD

In a sense, they lived in a new world. Oh, the old world was still there with all of its problems, conflicts, questions and concerns. The Roman troops were still marching through the cities; the taxes were unbearable; the evil was still rampant in every city, town and village. Yes, the old world was still there - but they went on their way - rejoicing. They didn't try to destroy that old world - they just ignored it. They could go on their way rejoicing because in that Man called Jesus they found a glimpse of God - the mystery of life, the ground of their being - and what's more - in them he found a habitation for his spirit.

They never equalled him. They never really explained him successfully, although they tried to in generations to come and men are still trying to, but they were never able to put into words exactly what he meant to them. They had a way of treating each other, and above all else, a way of meeting life - life when it is harsh and cruel - that was unique. And that way they caught from him, and this eventually caught the attention of the civilized world. That's the way it began: a small group of people were drawn to a Man called Jesus and took him seriously. It's as simple as that!

It's as simple as that!

## THE TWELFTH CENTURY

Now skip across twelve hundred years and see how it continued. By the 12th century, this small group had grown into an enormous institution. The church had a great deal of property, power and prestige; its leaders, especially its bishops, and above all, the Pope, were political leaders as well as spiritual guides. To be sure, they inspired artists and made it possible for them to work. They encouraged educators and in the dark ages were largely responsible for keeping alive the learning of the past when it might have been lost. And above all, they inspired architects to send up buildings that seemed to touch the skies...the great cathedrals of Europe.

What happened to the Man called Jesus in all of this? He was there; he was glorified, theologized, painted, pictured, worshipped - but I am sorry to say, he was not always followed. He was too far away, too remote, too much apart from the life of the people who belonged to the church. This, I suppose, was inevitable and a natural development. A movement - any movement - that starts rather simply is likely to become complicated if it grows to any great extent, and the church did become more and more complicated as it grew in power, in majesty, prestige and wealth. By the 12th century, it was over-grown, top-heavy and the Man Christ Jesus was almost in danger of being lost in the shuffle.

Then something happened, rather unexpectedly. A young man appeared on the scene. He was not a Jew, he was Italian - the eldest son of a rich family. In his young day, he was the playboy of the town, the leader of the swinging set of the village. His name was Giovanni Francesco Bernadone. Things began to happen to him. First, he was taken seriously ill; he recovered. He tried to do something useful to make up for the time that he had wasted, ~~and he made many clumsy attempts to do it.~~ For one thing, he stole from his own father in order to do the work that he thought he was called upon to do in the little chapel that he wanted to restore. The result was that he was completely alienated from his family. His father even went to law against him, and the two were never reconciled.

Then on February 24, 1209, he went to a mass in the little chapel and he listened to the Gospel. The Gospel for that day was from the 10th chapter of St. Matthew, the same reading that was read in our service earlier, and this is a part of it:

"Go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. And as ye go, preach, raise the dead, cast out devils; freely ye have received, freely give. Provide neither gold nor silver, nor brass in your purses. Nor scrip for your journey, neither two coats, neither shoes nor yet staves; for the workman is worthy of his meat".

He had already separated from his family. He was already living on what people would give him for what work he could do, but at that moment something happened. His biographer says that Francis' mind took a swift plunge into the literal. Right there, before the little altar, he threw away his stick and his bag, his purse and every cent of money that he had, and went out to do what he had never done before, to preach. He wasn't a learned man. He had very little formal education. But he went, if you can believe it, to his own home town, to Assisi. There were no pulpits in the churches because preaching was not often done in those days except in an informal way - so he stood outside, jeered by the crowd because he looked like a mad man, a beggar.

Every biographer has pointed out that he was not handsome, nor robust; he was slight. But there was a grace in his movement and something unforgettable about his voice. It was his voice that made people listen. He stood there in the street and talked to the people about the love of God.

When he finished and started to go away, three men asked if they could join him; two of them had very little and one was well-to-do. They went with him. Later, more and more sought him until thousands began to look for him and ask what they must do to join his group. He required no training period; only two things did he require. First, he asked them to give away everything that they owned. I wonder if you know what the second thing was. He asked that they be cheerful, that they could mourn their sins in private, but as they went about their way, they must sing.

He never attacked the institution. He wanted his own way within it, but somehow a breath of fresh air swept across our western world, and if we try to say what it was that made the difference, it was cheerfulness, the gaiety of Francis and his followers that spread like wildfire. He didn't change the institution, nor its structure, but he changed the lives of people in a way that is hard to describe.

#### CAN THIS HAPPEN TODAY

So much for the statement that the Christian faith begins, continues and ends in the Man called Jesus.

Now a question to put before you and it is not an easy question to ask or to answer: is it conceivable to you that anything like that can happen today in a world like ours? Is it possible that a small group of people, people like ourselves, can take Jesus seriously, and by so doing, change the world...make a difference in it? At first, we would be tempted to say it's unthinkable, that the world today is entirely different, that our problems are so immense, that we don't think in the way people did in the time of Francis of Assisi - - ~~that a group of people taking this Man called Jesus seriously can do anything to change it is ridiculous.~~

I now speak for myself simply because I can't speak for anyone else - though I am reasonably sure that I will include some of you. In speaking for myself, I could not take him literally the way St. Francis did. I couldn't give away everything I have and live on welfare, not in this day and age and city, with a wife and three children. I couldn't cut off my right hand or pluck out my right eye, even though in Matthew's Gospel Jesus says: "If thine eye offend thee, pluck it out, and if thy right hand offend thee, cut it off". I couldn't try to move mountains by faith and prayer because I know I can't.

But there are other things that I can do, and you can do. I am going to mention only two of them in the moments that remain.

#### I. SIMPLIFY

For one thing, I think we can simplify our lives. Every once in a while I hear that word spoken to me: simplify, simplify. Many of us live such cluttered lives. Our lives are apt to be filled with so many things that we never get to do anything thoroughly. I would suggest that we cut out, that we eliminate some of the non-essentials. I'm not suggesting where to begin. That's up to you. It may be committee meetings that aren't really necessary. It may be giving up trying to be every place at one time. Leave some things to other people and some things to God. Simplify - not in order to have more leisure - but more intensity. Every person who has burned with any great brightness has been concentrating on some one supreme thing. To simplify means to concentrate your energy on some one great thing. Simplify.

Howard Thurman, Dean Emeritus of the Chapel at Boston University, tells of a visit he had from his friend, Dr. Cabot. The men were visiting when a student knocked. Dr. Thurman talked to him a few minutes and then the student departed. They resumed their conversation, but the telephone rang. Then it was the door again. At last Dr. Cabot said, "Would you do me a favor? Just for ten minutes lock the door and tell that young lady who keeps buzzing you not to buzz. I want to tell you something". In the quiet of the next minutes he explained that human needs were infinite and that "if a man were to work twenty-four hours a day for a thousand years, human needs would still be infinite". At last Dr. Cabot said:

"A wise man discovers that he cannot make a quantitative impression on infinity - the only thing to do is to try to make a qualitative impression on it".

"A qualitative impression" .... in order to do this, one has to simplify at certain points. I think it ties in with what we're thinking about.

Second, keep your eye on your style of life. This is a word that is used a great deal now to describe what used to be called Christian ethics - style of life... it has to do with many things. Strange how the city can alter, influence, and corrupt change one's style of life - sometimes not for the better.

Of course, the first thing we think of when we speak of style is the way that one dresses. My emphasis will not come at this point; I'm not going to say much about the changing hemlines. Chances are it wouldn't make much difference anyway. My wife doesn't always appreciate my point of view, I've discovered in terms of the hemlines. One can dress - not to conform, or not to rebel; one can dress in a way that will not hide the person one really is. One can dress in a style so as not to add to so much of the current eye-sore that one witnesses up and down our streets.

Yes, style touches the way one dresses and also the way one speaks and what one reads. It seems to me that every three or four hundred years we go through what you might call a "bawdy" period: Chaucer and then the Restoration period of the late 1600's, and now we seem to be going through another. Here we have this Presidential Commission Report on Pornography calling for a repeal of the laws that we still have on the books against the obscene and the leud. Our friend from around the corner at St. Ignatius, Father Morton Hill, the Jesuit Priest, has battled valiantly as a "minority voice" on that Commission whose report was cited recently by our President as being "morally bankrupt". "Father Hill vs. Fanny Hill" is the way the press is handling it. The language of the barnyard has become the language of the theatre, the novel, the movie, the home. You may not agree, but I think there is some connection between the way one speaks and the level on which one lives. To my way of thinking, there is some connection between what one reads and what one eventually becomes. And I think that if we take Jesus seriously, we will not willingly add to the polluted air we breathe by language and by book that is profane, and obscene and cheap.

is tied in with our values, with the arrangement of our priorities, the things on which we place emphasis, the concerns that claim our time and our talent and our pocketbook. Style of life - keep your eye on it!

The style of life, in the long run, primarily declares itself in the way that one treats other people - people you like and the ones you don't like, the people you have much in common with and the ones you have nothing in common with. If one is attempting to take this man Jesus seriously, then he will careful how he treats others. He will see to it that he treats other people as human beings - yes, as children of God...with the spirit of that man called Jesus....looking for the best in others, trying to bring out the best that is there. When we do this, something

is bound to happen - to them and to ourselves.

IN CLOSING

Simplify. Be sensitive and alert to your style of life. If you and I take the effort to do these two things and more besides, would the world be any different? I don't know - really. To be perfectly honest I don't know. I should like to think that it would be. Francis, back in the 13th century, had no way of knowing what the results would be when he took Jesus seriously. I do know this that when a man decides to take this man called Jesus seriously - the world around is warmer, brighter, the burdens lighter, and the future, strangely enough - is filled with hope.

Tomorrow morning, before you put your hand on the door knob to open your apartment door to begin your work-a-day week ----- pause and ask yourself these three questions:...in reference to taking the man called Jesus seriously:

If not me - WHOM.

If not here - WHERE.

If not now - WHEN.

PRAYER

O God, who hast revealed to us thy love, care and justice in this man called Jesus, help us to take him seriously. Give him a habitation in us that he may radiate life and light through us into a world that is dark, hard and seems at times to be going to pieces. It is thy world and in it, we who call his name, cannot be hopeless. Give us the spirit of joy, of brightness and of courage. This we ask in the name of Christ. Amen