

"THE NEED FOR PRIVATE ALTARS"

TEXT: "They went each to his own house, but Jesus went to the
Mount of Olives" (John 8:1)

INTRODUCTION

At first glance there might seem to be an element of pathos in those words. The people that had flocked around Jesus and followed him all day dispersed as night began to fall. They left Him and went to their homes. He, alone, climbed the Mount of Olives. Now Jesus did not climb the Mount of Olives because the door of every home was closed to Him; many there were who would have gladly had Him as a guest in their home. But He had a greater need at the end of the day than human companionship and a bed on which to sleep. Purposely He went off alone - to pray, to be in communion with God, to open His life and spirit to the life and spirit of God.

He set up a private altar on the Mount of Olives. It was not a brick and stone type of thing. It was a shrine of the spirit built of the sturdy bricks of discipline, devotion and dedication. Time and again He went to it. Back of His public life was this private altar. There can be no accounting of the one without the other. From the one, He derived the inspiration and the strength for the other. It was impossible even for Jesus to live always in the limelight, always in the pressure of public affairs, without losing vitality and inner strength. He constantly sought solitude and privacy for moments of reflection and thought, meditation and prayer. His important decisions were always prefaced by this quiet and solitary time. Back of his public life there was this private altar; for Him it was an imperative, an absolute necessity. He could more easily go without the shelter of a home at the end of a day than He could go without communion with God.

NEED OF WITHDRAWAL

Nansen, the explorer, in an ^{speech} address delivered to university students maintained that the world's redemption would not come from the noisy centers of civilization but from the lonely places. He reminded his hearers that the great reformers who have left their mark on history came from the wilderness. Whatever of vision, power, or genius there was in their work was wrought in the stillness. Think about it - Moses going out to his life work from the back of the desert, Amos from the hillside, Paul from Arabia, Luther from the monk's cell, and chief of them all - Jesus, from the quiet seclusion of Nazareth and direct from forty days and nights in the wilderness.

Public life and private altars. I wonder if what I am saying in any way touches your life, whether or not it carries any weight with you? Am I voicing your conviction? Do you believe that back of your public life - if it is to count significantly for goodness and God - there has to be this private altar? Do you believe that to do justly and to love mercy you must walk humbly with God? I suspect that our forefathers spent more time in private prayer and in meditation than we do. It was an essential part of their everyday existence, an element in their life without which the whole did not make sense. They prayed without self-consciousness. They believed that by daily dependence on God and daily communion with God they were given the power not only to preserve their personal integrity, but to serve their day and their generation worthily and well.

I think of William Gladstone, Prime Minister of England a century ago, faithful in his attendance at the public worship of God, no less faithful in his observance of private prayer and of the relationship (clear to everyone) between his personal religion and his public life and work. About Gladstone, Spurgeon said, "We believe in no man's infallibility, but it is restful to feel sure of one man's integrity".

Several weeks ago we saw the movie "A Man For All Seasons". As you know, it's the historical account of the struggle between Henry the VIII and Sir Thomas More. What courage, what faith, what strength on the part of Thomas More! Again, one sees and feels intensely the relationship between a man's personal religion and his public life and work. Back of his public life there was this private altar.

One thinks of Abraham Lincoln, President-Elect, leaving Springfield for Washington and saying to his friends gathered at the railway station to see him off:

"I now leave, not knowing when or whether ever, I may return, with a task before me greater than that which rested upon Washington. Without the assistance of that Divine Being who ever attended him, I cannot succeed. With that assistance, I cannot fail. Trusting in Him who can go with me, and remain with you and be everywhere for good, let us confidently hope that all will yet be well. To His care commending you, as I hope in your prayers you will commend me, I bid an affectionate farewell".

Again, back of the public life, the private altar.

FEW PRIVATE ALTARS I may be wrong on this, but I suspect that very few of us have these private altars in our lives built of those sturdy bricks of discipline, dedication and devotion. Moments of quiet prayer and thoughtful meditation, I fear, are rare in our lives. They are disappearing. Our stress is on action - getting things done. Among us, the kneeling man, even the kneeling minister is rare. We are promoters, organizers, fund-raisers, talkers, doers, and we rely on what can be done by committees more than by God. Meaningful prayer has a small place in our lives.

A number of years ago there was a short-story in the New Yorker by H. G. Wells, entitled "Answer to Prayer". Its insight seems no less valid today than it did when it was published. It told of an archbishop of the church who came to the close of a day strangely disturbed in spirit and weighted down with so many institutional concerns involving the churches of his diocese. Things had not been going well. And remembering how often he had advised others to pray at such time, the archbishop decided to take his own counsel. So he went into his private chapel, knelt on the altar stairs and folded his hands in the accustomed manner. When he began to pray, however, his voice had an unusual sincerity and quietness. He began, "O God". Upon the speaking of those words there came from behind the altar a Voice neither friendly nor hostile, but simply brisk. "Yes" said the Voice, "What is it?" They found the archbishop the next morning at the foot of the altar stairs. It was said that his sudden demise, sudden death, must have been due to some unexpected shock or surprise.

Even a moment of fiction can be a mirror in which we see ourselves. Yes, a whole dimension is slipping out of our lives. ~~The stress is on action~~ - it's as Henry Sloan Coffin put it in one of his books: in speaking of churches and people in them.

"Instead of praying, they plan; instead of trusting with child-like confidence to a Power outside themselves, they resolutely push their own way; instead of opening their spirits to intercourse with one another, they think hard. Instead of casting their burden upon Him, they throw it over their own shoulders".

There's something about present-day church life with all of its emphasis on committees, organizations, activities and good works that reminds me of this simple story of a spider who dropped from a branch by a very slender thread and at the end of it spun a glorious web. Looking around at this beautiful web he had spun - this beautiful domain - he caught sight of the narrow thread holding it and thinking it was no longer useful and necessary, bit it through, whereupon his whole web fell into ruins. This, I feel, is what happens when we mistake the scaffolding for the foundation and discard it. Our personal relationship to God made real through private altars is the lifeline of our souls. Our good works both in the church and outside in the community where the need is so great will soon collapse, I feel, if that lifeline with God is neglected and discarded.

And with many of us, it is in danger of being discarded and neglected. We are drifting more and more in this respect and not realizing it. Your ministers are spending more and more time tinkering with the nuts and bolts of the institutional machinery, squirting in a little oil here and there to keep things going than they are in prayer and reflection and thought. The average churchgoer is becoming more and more casual and haphazard in his observance of the forms of religion - all its forms: church attendance (we come only when it really suits us...some prefer to come to the coffee hour than to Sunday worship), Bible study (seldom do we really sit down and study the Bible), private prayer (when was the last time you went into a church and really prayed), giving to the church (we give to the church out of our left-overs, I fear), we say "yes" to some form of service and then when the time comes to go to work, we have an excuse not to be there. Am I exaggerating the picture? I think not. I'm reminded of something that happened a number of years ago; we had announced the reception of new members on a certain Sunday one Fall. A young man had been so enthusiastic about joining the church. He called during the week to say he couldn't be there that Sunday - something had come up. Then he called back on Saturday and told me, "I can be there after all. I made a mistake. The Giants are playing out of town this weekend. You can count on me - I'll be there". He was a promising member...always promising. And so it goes.

Friends, we are so conscioustious about our public duties and our social duties, but pretty lax about our private altars. Our cocktail parties, our football games, - our theater engagements....we manage to keep them. And then we wonder why it is that life has lost dignity and sanctity, why church life is so conventional and political life so permeated by corruption and mediocrity and why the moral fiber of our land has weakened. We wonder....but we do so little.

CHALLENGE The first Communion service of a new church year can be a time for us to take stock and to wrestle with some of these matters in our own lives. Back of Christ's life there was a private altar. For Him it was an absolute necessity. From the one, He derived strength and inspiration for the other. Think on these things this hour while you worship quietly and take the cup and the bread which brings to mind His life, way and words. And as we share in the Sacrament may we be strengthened inwardly. Then may we depart resolving to do better in building a private altar in our lives.

PRAYER Teach us, O God, how to withdraw from the pressures of life - not in self-interest or self-indulgence, but to find the quietness and the strength that we need in order that we may handle well the gift of life. Help us always to remember the example of Jesus and how in his withdrawing and returning, He fulfilled one of thy laws and in so doing made his life great and rich for others. In his name, we pray.