

"THE QUIET CHRISTIAN"

INTRODUCTION

In this election year I'll give you some presidential trivia. William Henry Harrison served the shortest term of any president of the United States - only thirty-two days. But he gave the longest inaugural address - one hour and forty-five minutes. Which means that he spent a good part of his term talking about it.

Harrison can be forgiven for producing more words than deeds. He gave the inaugural address on a bitterly cold day, outside, in a snow storm, caught pneumonia and died of complications.

Other presidents enjoying longer days in the White House have to live with their words, which is a particularly irksome thing to politicians. They don't like the fact that everything they say is heard, reported, recorded, written down, filed away and sometimes used as a yardstick against which their behavior is judged. But like all forms of life, the politician - when threatened with extinction - develops survival mechanisms. For the politician it's double talk, which George Orwell in 1984 called "newspeak" - the ability to say one thing when you mean another.

PREACHERS

Preachers face the same problem of public scrutiny. It's not uncommon to have somebody say to you following a service, "What you said this morning is in direct contradiction to what you said on March 23rd." So as a species, preachers have developed their own survival strategy. It's called obfuscation, which means to "confuse, to bewilder, to obscure". The trick is to preach in such a way that nobody can understand what you mean. The masters of this art add boredom to obfuscation. And as a result, you not only don't understand what they are saying, but you can't even remember it.

"My preacher's eyes I've never seen,
Though light from them may shine,
For when he prays he closes his,
Then when he preaches - mine."

So it's time to say "good night" to some of you now. I'm about to preach a sermon on this text in the concluding chapter of the Sermon On the Mount, chapter seven:

"Not every one who says to me, 'Lord, Lord' shall enter
the Kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My
Father...."

DEVELOPMENT

Beware of glibness in religious language, that's the message. That's the point. Speech sprinkled liberally with religious words does not make the person saying them a Christian. Talk is cheap and easy. It's the deeds that count. That's the message. Not words.

There are some of you who probably wonder if you're really Christian, because you are not comfortable using religious language, and sometimes not even comfortable around those who do. If you have to give a prayer in public, you'd die. You wonder if this reticence is the result of a lack of faith, is there something missing in your spiritual life? The text for you may be, "Not those who say, 'Lord, Lord' will enter the kingdom of God, but those who do the will of my Father in heaven."

I know children who have become more zealous in their religion than their parents are in theirs. They often leave the Church of their parents and join another Church, or they join what's called a "fellowship" of Christians rather than a formal Church. And that fellowship puts a high premium on talking religious. It's almost another language. And that's important for them, because the mark of belonging to that group is speaking the same language. People feel a bond that they don't feel in a culture as a whole when they are with people who speak the same language. The language is the "glue" of the fellowship.

These children are a bewilderment to their parents. All that religious language makes them feel uncomfortable. Family gatherings are more like entertaining strangers than homecomings. Sometimes there are confrontations, the children accusing the parents of not being sufficiently Christian. If they would only talk about their faith, the children are apt to say, then I would know they are Christian. For them, you see, the badge of Christianity is speech. For them, a Christian is known by the company he keeps and by the language he speaks.

ILLUSTRATION

A friend of ours has a son who was that way for a time. He left the Methodist Church and went to another youth group, converted, became zealous in his new-found faith, tried to convince his parents that they were not really Christian. The love between the parents and the child was never broken. It was always there, there was no rift in that family, as I know there are in some families when that happens. It was always there, but it was strained a little bit.

One day the father took his son up into the mountains to spend the weekend together. It was time that they did that, just the two of them going off together so that they could have a talk together as adults. The father waited until the appropriate time, and then he said to his son:

"I want you to know something about your mother's and my faith. We may not talk much about it, but if you look back over the decisions that we have made, the hard ones we have had to make, look at the sacrifice that we have made, and the things that we have stood for, and if you were to look at our checkbook over the years of our marriage and see how we have budgeted our money, how we have handled our sense of stewardship over things, I think you will see that our faith is something that we practice. We may not talk about it as much as you would like, but we think we have said something with our deeds."

"Not those who say, 'Lord, Lord', but those who do the will of My Father". Christians ought to witness. Verbally. I've done that. It's not easy. But witnessing in our time, I'm afraid, has been modeled and shaped by those who believe to be Christian you've got to talk religious all the time. I think many people who ought to tell their story hesitate to do it because they are uncomfortable with religious language. I personally believe that that is the more reason why you should do it. You ought to find words that are true to your own personal experience and tell the story in your own way, the way you feel comfortable with. The purpose of telling your story is to give encouragement to other people and if you can do that quietly and honestly, with integrity and with ease, then it's a valuable and moving witness.

TODAY'S TEXT SUGGESTS

But that's another text. This text is saying this to us: even more valuable will be your life. More important than what has happened to you is what you've done since it happened.

To be a Christian is to make an adult commitment to Christ as your Lord. And how that comes about is going to differ from person to person. As John Wesley put it, it may come to you suddenly and dramatically, or it may come to you slowly and cumulatively. The kind of experience that you have is going to be determined by your biography, that is, what's happened to you up to that time, and by your chemistry, your temperament, your environment. If you're emotional, you're probably going to have an emotional experience; if you are intellectual, it will probably be structured rationally. If you've lived a lecherous and dissipated life, then it's probably going to come through repentance and a liberating feeling of forgiveness. If you haven't lived that kind of life, don't expect to have that kind of experience. And don't fake it. If you've lived a generally moral life, in a stable environment, it will probably come to you through a sense of gratitude for what you have received. If you're a dull, phlegmatic person, your experience will probably be like that. You may find people yawning as you tell them about your experience.

The point is that the kind of experience you have doesn't matter. For religious experience is private, personal and ineffable, which means there is no way you can measure its authenticity. What is measurable is what happens after the experience. That's why Jesus says in this passage for this morning, "You will know them by their fruits". Not by the experience, but by the results of the experience. Not those who talk of conversion, but "those who do the will of My Father in heaven."

MATTHEW'S GOSPEL

Matthew has structured his Gospel to make this very point. His Gospel is there to tell the Story of Jesus. It begins with a preface, called the Sermon On the Mount, which is a summary of the teachings of Jesus. It ends with a warning about judgement. "Not those who say, 'Lord, Lord' will enter the Kingdom of God, but those who do the will of My Father in heaven". And then it continues with these words,

"On that day many will say to me, Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name? Did we not cast out demons in your name? Did we not do mighty works in your name? And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you. Depart from me you evil doers.'"

That's the end of the seventh chapter. The eighth chapter begins a detailed record of the teachings of Jesus, where the lessons of the Sermon on the Mount are fleshed out and illustrated. And the section that begins with the eighth chapter ends with chapter twenty-five, where you find another parable, the parable of the Sheep and the Goats, spelling out the meaning of the phrase, "On that day some of you will say, 'Lord, Lord', and I will say, 'I don't know you'".

The Parable of the Sheep and Goats says there is only one criterion for judging whether you are Christian or not, and that is service. That's the bottom line. What matters ultimately, in the end, in the final analysis, the only thing that matters is:

"I was hungry and you gave me food. I was thirsty and you gave me drink. I was a stranger and you welcomed me. I

was sick and you visited me. I was naked and you clothed me. I was in prison and you came to me...."

The righteous asked, "When did we see You in these dire straits". And the King answers, "Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these you did it to me."

When the New Testament wants to make the point that something is really important, when something is ultimately important, it always puts it in the context of a last judgement. Then you can see what counts in the final analysis. And neither in the preface nor in the conclusion of the Gospel of Matthew is there anything said about religious things counting, or pious practices, or holy speech. None of that matters. In fact, there is a bit of a warning against them. The only thing that matters ultimately in being a Christian is practicing it. So if you have trouble talking religious, don't worry about it. It's not going to count for much anyway. And if you are uncomfortable with public displays of piety, it may be a good sign. It may not be what you fear, that you're not religious. It may mean that you have a solid sense of what is authentic religion, and you know that pious acts are not it. Too cheap.

CHURCH AND STATE CONCERN

Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrestled with the question some forty years ago of why a nation that was so historically and pervasively Christian as Germany would sink into the evil of Nazism. Christianity was the official religion of the State. The Church was supported by the State. And you would think that with all of that public religion it would serve as a guard against injustice and immorality and fill the hearts of the people with compassion and caring for others. But it didn't.

I've thought about this recently. In prison Bonhoeffer came to see that outward forms of religion are not only useless in insuring a nation's righteousness, but they are a hindrance. Because - public religion adds a veneer of virtue to the policies of the State, no matter how evil those policies may turn out to be. And it was out of that realization that he turned again to the Gospel of Matthew and to the Sermon on the Mount and concluded that pious practices should always be done in private, not in public places and ("nod" to God) gatherings. Church and state should be kept separate. "Thou shalt not mix Church..."

Then there would be no danger that they would be used for something other than their real purpose, to prepare the Christian for service to others in the world. They are to be used by the Christian the same way athletes use calisthenics, to prepare them for the real task of being a Christian. The purpose of Christianity is not to get you on your knees being pious. The purpose of Christianity is to get you on your feet so you can be counted.

"Therefore, when you pray" said Jesus, "Go into your closet. Shut the door". "And when you give, don't make a big show of it."

And when you want to tell the world you're a Christian, don't say anything. But do it. Good words to take home with us as we begin to move into a new season. Deeds. Not words. That's what makes a difference in the long run.

LET US PRAY.

PRAYER O God, who hast gathered thy people together in this house of
 worship and this place of prayer, grant that we may commit ourselves
to Thee and to Thy purpose for us, and that we may go forth from this place,
strengthened and renewed in body, mind and spirit - to do thy work and to let
thy light shine through us into the world. Amen