

## "THE RESOURCES OF THE INNER LIFE"

### I. A Book To Go By

#### INTRODUCTION

The sermons on the Sunday mornings in Lent this year are centered around the general theme, "The Resources of the Inner Life". The text for today's message is taken from the Gospel according to Matthew, the first four verses of the fourth chapter.

"Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. And he fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterward he was hungry. And the tempter came and said to him, 'If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread'. But he answered, 'It is written, Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God'".

#### A DECISION TO MAKE

Jesus had a decision to make and it was a crucial one, at the beginning of his public ministry. To put it in simple terms, he had to decide whether to take the high road or the lower road (not necessarily the low road, but the lower road); whether to please God, or to please himself, and the people; whether to make men into sons of God, or to make stones into bread. That in a few words is the decision he had to make, and there was a great deal to be said in favor of the second alternative.

You can see at a glance how many things were in favor of the more practical and expedient way. Facts are facts and we must face them, says the voice of common sense. No matter how idealistic we may wish to be, we must be realistic at the same time. People are human; they operate from a physical and material base, and food often means more to them than anything else - especially if they live in a land where there is not enough to go around and where bread is so scarce that it is a luxury. The one sure way to win them is to feed them.

You can almost hear the tempter as he puts his case before our Lord. Isn't it better to appease the lower elements in man in the hope of winning him to the highest, than to appeal to the highest in him and run the risk of losing him altogether? So ran the reasoning of the tempter, and Jesus had to decide whether to run with it or against it.

#### WE FACE DECISIONS LIKE THIS

On a smaller scale, we have decisions like that to make. If you are a teacher, for instance, there comes a time when you have to decide whether you want to cater to the desires of your students and thereby become a popular teacher, or whether you want to stand for the truth and make its demands upon the students without reservations, and run the risk of being unpopular.

If you are in public office, sooner or later you have to make the decision to stand for what you know is right and lose the people's favor and probably their votes, or to stand where the people want you to stand in the hope that you will be able to raise them to a higher level later on if in the meantime you have not gravitated to their level.

A minister faces this same sort of thing. Should he say the things he knows the people will enjoy hearing, the things that will not offend and arouse, the things that comfort rather than challenge and become a popular preacher. Or should he say the things that in his heart he knows should be said, that are more in keeping with the will of God as he understands it to be revealed in the life of Christ, and run the risk of being unpopular.

You and I face decisions like this from time to time, and we know from our experience that they are not easy to make. One reason why they are so difficult is that they are not often decisions between black and white. More often, we have to make a choice between white and various shades of gray, and so many times, at least in my case, the gray seems to be so adaptable to the circumstances, so suitable to all the existing surroundings that, even though it may not have the purity of whiteness, it seems more serviceable, more durable, more practical. Against my better judgment I am drawn toward it.

So when you get to the point where you must make a decision, you waver - at least, I do. I lean first to one side and then to the other, and I realize in the process that the resources of my inner life are not adequate, that my inner life is not as rich as I wish it were, that though my body may be well clothed and more than well fed, my mind and spirit are undernourished. Perhaps there are times when you feel the same way, and we would do well to turn to Jesus to see what resources he had - to see if we can discover what it was that fed those inexhaustible springs of energy that kept him steady and on the right track. (pause...)

IT IS WRITTEN When the tempter put before Jesus the possibility of the lower road, Jesus answered, "It is written, 'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God'". The words that rise up off the page as I read them now are the words that I'm afraid I have never paid any particular attention to until I began to think of the resources of the inner life of Christ. They are the words - "It is written". "It is written..."

What was written? It was written that when the Israelites were starving in the desert, complaining, grumbling and wishing that they had never left Egypt, slavery was better than starvation; when there was no bread to be found to feed the mouths of even the children, God fed them. Not by miraculously producing more bread, but by giving food that they never knew about before. They called it manna. It was a substance that formed on the bark of the trees; it was a food they had never heard of, never seen, never dreamed of before. And it was enough to keep them alive and, in years to come, as they remembered that event, they were reminded that bread is not the only means of a man's existence, and that God's resources are never exhausted.

Where was it written? In a book. What book? The book of Deuteronomy - the 5th book of the Old Testament, the 8th chapter, and the third verse. Who wrote it? Moses wrote it, at least everyone in that day thought that he had written it.

To Jesus in the desert for a long time, hungry himself, sent to save a people who were often hungry and in despair, in these words, God spoke directly to him. Don't forget, God said, bread is not the only thing in life. A well-fed man may be miserable and cruel, and a well fed nation may be soft and weak; whereas the hungry man may be open to the intimations of the highest. God said to him - don't forget, without bread man cannot live; but with nothing but bread, man might as well not live.

His questions answered, his own conscience confirmed, Jesus took the high road. He let the stones remain stones, and he set out to make men into Sons of God. He went out to feed the people the bread of life, and the particularly significant thing in the story and in this sermon is this: when he was in the valley of decision, he had a book to go by. All along his way, Jesus had a book to go by.

It was written.....it was written.

WHAT ABOUT THIS BOOK

What about this book? For one thing, his people had given it to him when he was a small boy. In it was the accumulated wisdom gathered from the experiences of generations of men and women, and through their experience God spoke to them. This book, therefore, was not only a human book, the record of a people's history; it was a divine book. It was given to Jesus as the Word of God. He knew parts of it by heart; he did not have to have it with him in order to remember what it said. He knew the great passages the way that we know our alphabet. They were in his blood stream. He believed what this book said. And as a young man, time and again, his own experience rose up to confirm the great affirmations that he found in it, and his own observations sanctioned the wisdom that his people had accumulated through the years.

Yet, he was never a slave to this book. Because he had a book to go by, he did not stop thinking for himself. Nor did he think that God had said all that he had to say in that one book. Remember how he said with amazing boldness: "You have heard that it has been said, but I say unto you thus and so....." In other words, what was said was true as far as it went, but he was saying that there is much further to go, greater things God is wanting to reveal to us, and we must not stop until the depths have been plumbed.

But when he was in the valley of decision, when he was trying to work out how he would use the gifts and powers that God had given him, how he was going to pursue his mission in life, when he was in that terrible valley of decision, he did not start from scratch, he did not depend simply on his own wisdom and his own common sense; he did not turn to the tempter, if you think of him as personified, and say, 'I say thus and so, or think this or that, it seems to me, this makes sense....'. This was not the response he made at all. He said, "It is written - man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God". He had a book to go by. (Pause...)

WHAT BOOK DO WE GO BY

What about ourselves? Do we have a book to go by? What book or what books do we go by. It seems to me that we have hundreds of books. You go to dinner with a young couple; you know the wife has never cooked in her life and yet she prepares a magnificent meal and you say, How did you do this? She looks at you quietly and says, it's perfectly simple. I have a cook book, and I just go by the book. Or, a young man gets up to make a speech, and he is not a man who is accustomed to public speaking. You are a little surprised by the facility of his speaking and you say to him, How do you do this so easily. Why, he says, I got Dale Carnegie's book and I just go by the book.

You and I, of course, could mention other instances many times over. All of us have books that we go by. But let me ask you this: when a person stands at the fork in the road, not knowing which way to go, tempted strongly to take the lower road, thinking that it may be the better road in the end, what book does he have? It seems to me, and I may be wrong, but it seems to me that nine times out of ten, he has no book at all. He doesn't have the Bible if he lives in the United States in 1968 in the same way that his grandparents had it. He knows too much about it to take it seriously. And furthermore, it seems to me that he is not at all sure that he wants a book. He would rather work it out for himself, play it alone. Sometimes he comes out all right, by the grace of God, I suppose, but many times he does not, and when he does not, it may be because he had no book to go by.

WHAT BOOK DO YOU GO BY:

What book do you go by? When you come to a crucial or critical point in your life, will you do this. Will you remember that when Jesus stood at one of the most crucial points of his life, he was not too proud to say, "It is written". Take up your Bible and read it. Make it a

habit to feed on the word of God, so that these words become not words in a book, but words written into your life, into your subconscious, as well as your conscious life, so that you can think of them and repeat them in the difficult moments of life.

When the storms of life come and you are shaken, you will then be able to say, "The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want". When you begin to wonder and doubt what it is all about and whether you are anything but a piece of driftwood in the stream of time, moving toward oblivion, you can say, it is written, "The very hairs on your head are numbered". When you are tempted to play both sides and this is a temptation that comes to us so often and so subtly that we are hardly aware of it - when you are tempted to play both sides, you can say, "No man can serve two masters.....you cannot serve God and mammon". And when you begin to think that life is over for you and it looks as though the clouds were settling in toward an endless night, you can say, it is written - "In my father's house are many mansions". "I go to prepare a place for you...." "And if I go to prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you unto myself that where I am, there you may be also".

It is written. It has the authority of God. You have a book to go by. This is one of the greatest possible resources of the inner life, an essential it seems to me for effective living in today's world.

LET US PRAY      O God and Father of us all, when we are tempted to take the lower road and to think things through all by ourselves, may we always remember that Jesus turned to the Book in which it was written that man does not live by bread alone. Open this book to us and open our minds and our hearts to it that, when we are in the desert, thy word may speak to us, to steady us and to save us from falling. Amen      (wilderness)