

"THE REVOLUTIONARY ARM OF THE CHURCH"

TEXT: "And Moses said unto him, Enviest thou for my sake? Would God that all the Lord's people were prophets, and that the Lord would put his spirit upon them" (Numbers 11: 29)

INTRODUCTION

Today, the second Sunday in October, is celebrated as Laymen's Day in many of the churches across our land. ~~Some of you may recall that it was on this Sunday one year ago that Dr. John Tomlinson who is now in North Africa serving with American Friends of the Middle East spoke from this pulpit. That was the Sunday when both Mr. Bush and Mrs. McDonald shared in the service.~~ What I have to say today is addressed to those of you who do not believe that the Church is finished and her usefulness exhausted, but who take seriously the promise of our Lord to Peter, "Upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it". What I have to say is based upon the conviction that the church is renewable, that the spirit of God can get inside of her and like a rushing, mighty wind blow through her and transform her into a revolutionary movement. This, I think, is the secret of the church - her ability to be re-made from above and to become in each generation God's instrument of reconciliation. *(Read TEXT)*

BACKGROUND OF TEXT

In order to place the text for today's sermon within the context of Biblical history, let us travel in spirit back across the centuries and join Israel on the pilgrimage from Egypt to the Promised Land. You will recall that it was at the foot of Mt. Sinai that Israel was constituted a nation. It would seem that after this great event, when a people so recently redeemed from slavery and confronted by God and given the Ten Commandments and the promise of a land that would be their inheritance, Israel would launch forth and in one stride possess God's great promise to them. But the narrative tells another tale. Hardly had the trek from Sinai to Canaan begun when the Israelites began to look back wistfully on the old way of life in Egypt and to murmur against the leadership of Moses. It was apparent that Moses was attempting too much. The leadership of a spiritually immature people was too great for one man to bear and therefore Moses appointed seventy elders to share pastoral oversight with him.

The day for the solemn ceremony of ordination arrived, the day when the elders were to go apart from the camp with Moses and receive the gift of the spirit in an act of ordination. Now while this ceremony was taking place in the tabernacle, two men - Eldad and Medad - began to speak and prophesy back in the camp. Now a prophet is a spokesman of God - God's mouthpiece. Here were two men to whom the presence of God was suddenly real and they began to speak God's word to their friends.

A young man, hearing them and suspecting them of disloyalty, ran out to the tabernacle and told Moses what was happening - "Eldad and Medad do prophesy in the camp". The men were aghast. It was unthinkable that someone would conduct a rival service in the camp at the very moment that worship was going on in the tabernacle. Joshua, speaking for the group said, "My Lord, Moses, forgive them. Tell them that they are out of bounds". But Moses answered: "Would God that all the Lord's people were prophets and that the Lord would put his spirit upon them..."

PROGRESS IN THE CHURCH

I couldn't help but wonder as I thought about those lines how many ministers at one time or another across the centuries have echoed this prayer of Moses that God would make out of every man and woman in the church a prophet. And it is clear to us that the church has moved forward only in those ages when this has happened. Progress is possible only when the total church becomes alive to the presence of God and commits herself to His mission.

This was the experience of the first century? Where is there in history anything more dramatic than the missionary movement during the thirty years between the crucifixion of Jesus and the crucifixion of Peter in Rome? In the year 30 A. D., the Christian group was a narrow band clustered around Jerusalem. By 60 A. D., the church was transplanted and took root in the alien and hostile environment of the Greek-Roman world. This was achieved by a lay crusade. It was the upsurge of a group of undistinguished men and women who took seriously God's presence and mandate.

Later, on however, something happened in the life of the Church that turned her in on herself. She tended to grow cold and formal and to become more and more institutional. A widening cleavage between the clergy and the laity developed. It was said that the clergy alone were equipped with a vocation, that they alone were called by God in such a way that their lives alone were related to the purpose of God. The laymen had no such calling. He could only accept his station in life as God's judgment on him for his sins. One could see this dichotomy built into the fabric of medieval cathedrals. The laymen were allowed to stand in the nave and to listen passively to a service in a language not his own that went on behind a stone screen.

The Protestant Reformation in the 16th century changed all of this. Our fathers went into the cathedral and ripped out the stone screen separating the clergy and the people, reset the service in the language of the people and restored to them the hymns, the prayers, the responses. Martin Luther, you will recall, placed the householder, the common man, at the center of God's purpose. What was recaptured was the "people" character of the church. It was understood that the ministry of the church is not vested in a single person, but in the total congregation.

Now one wonders whether in our time we have lost this Reformation emphasis? One wonders whether or not this cleavage between the clergy and the laity has developed all over again, this time within Protestantism itself? There are signs that this has happened. We tend to place all of the responsibility for God's mission on the clergy. We feel it's their job. We pay them to do it. This is not good. We are in need of a new Reformation, one that will take seriously the stirring among the laity and will develop it into a movement of the whole people of God involved in Christ's ministry of reconciliation to the world.

TYPE OF MEN GOD USES This story, this account out of the Old Testament suggests several things to us. It tells us something about the type of men God uses in every age. They are persons who recognize His presence, pay the price of decision, and make their commitment to God's purpose central in their lives.

This was undoubtedly Eldad and Medad's experience. It was a day like any other day in the life of a people in transit. Heat, dust, fatigue, daily needs were their companions. But on this day God's presence was felt and two men chose not to remain neutral, un-involved, indifferent, but to acknowledge Him and to bear real witness to His Way.

When God does come to a person, He demands a commitment - a decision. His service must become the dominant note of his life. D. T. Niles, one of the great Christian spirits of India, has illustrated this by recounting how in one of the dioceses of the United Church in South India every convert who comes to baptism is required at one point in the service to place his hand solemnly on his own head and to repeat these words: "Woe is me if I preach not the Gospel". Now this is not a ceremony of ordination to the ministry in any exclusive or professional sense. It is the baptism of every Christian who puts off the lordship of all other lords and starts to take seriously the Lordship of Christ. God can use each and every person in sharing His way and His word - words and deeds - both are needed.

GOD CAN USE MEN WHO PUT THEIR RELIGION INTO LIFE

Another thing that this story suggests is that God uses men

in every age who take their religion out of the tabernacle into the camp, out of the church, that is, and into the highways and the byways of life. This is where we so often fail. We simply leave it all here...

Have you ever stopped to wonder why the Christian Church seems to have so little influence in America today. Why is there no Christian consensus? Why have we begun to speak of "an ex-Christian era". On the one hand, business is good in the church if one takes the statistics at their face value. Membership has increased; giving is at an all-time high. But on the other hand, there is no distinctive Christian witness to authenticate the church.

Is not part of the reason because the message of the church is so often irrelevant to life? One often has the feeling that we are trying to answer questions that nobody is really asking. In many instances the great issues of our day are not being raised. In many churches, we are failing to challenge people to come to grips with themselves and forcing them to think seriously and to take stands on issues that are basic to our lives. We have tried to make out of Christianity something that is an "aside" or an "above" rather than something that is central to life. We have bifurcated the sacred and the secular and divorced faith from life.

In Europe and in many parts of this country, this irrelevance has become the major concern of many heroic spirits. In France, for instance, pastors go out of their churches six days a week to labor in harvest fields alongside harvest workers, to work on assembly lines along side of industrial workers, or to dig coal out of the earth alongside coal miners. Their aim is to take the Church to the people in order to bring them back into the church on the 7th day.

A sensitive professor in the University of Copenhagen acknowledges this irrelevance to be the major problem in Denmark. In a country 97% Protestant only a handful have any vital relation to the church. The cathedral in the center of Copenhagen is the symbol of the problem. Its doors are locked all week save for two hours on a Sunday and it is separated from the teeming thousands around it by an iron fence with a locked gate. A medieval relic locked and separated. This church, not too long ago, used to be locked up and separated from people, open only for two or three hours on a Sunday - more of a liability on 86th Street than an asset. But now its doors are open, open to people most of the day. It creates problems, of course. Last week I caught a thief going through my coat pocket on the coat rack off the balcony. He got forty cents out of my pocket, but then we caught him and much to my distress it was a man who had been by the day before and had asked for help - a hand-out. Risks, to be sure there are when you open up the church. But far better to run such risks than to close up the church and wall it off from the needs of people.

It is not enough in this day and age to simply proclaim the Gospel. In this age, the church is called to join word with deed in the sort of visible witness that will reconcile persons, groups, races and nations. And anything short of this kind of witness has little chance, I feel, of being effective today, much less of enlisting the loyalty and the lives of men and women. The new saints, the secular saint, is the man who has learned to take his religion out of the tabernacle into the camp, out of the church and into the market-place, into the world. This is the role, the task of each layman. He is the arm of the church. He is called to lead the church out of its introversion into the midst of the world.

THE CHALLENGE

God uses men in every age who dare to pioneer, to innovate, to change, to do things differently for the Kingdom's sake. In that Old Testament account out of which today's text comes, seventy elders were chosen, but of the seventy only the names of Eldad and Medad stand out? Why? Because they took their commission seriously and dared to do things differently. They were willing to break the mold. The late Dean Sperry of Harvard use to say that "all progress is made on the opposite side of conformity". Who is the leader in business? He is surely not the one who does business as his grandfather did. Rather he is the man who is seeking the new markets, employing new methods, offering new products, meeting new needs. Why should not the same be true about the church? Why does the Church always remain in the same old rut, doing the same thing in the same old way?

The minister's life is almost by definition sheltered. It is regulated by the rhythm of the days and the weeks and the seasons. Sunday by Sunday he must stand before you to proclaim God's word and the six days between are filled with preparation, with pastoral responsibilities, and with the tinkering of the institutional machinery. And whether he wills it or not a great part of his life is lived behind a stained glass curtain. But his is a specialized ministry, not an exclusive one. The ministry which Christ commits to His body belongs to the whole church. The congregation is not a passive body that assembles once a week to be ministered unto, entertained with good music and not-so-good sermons. It does assemble for worship, but then is sent out into the world to perform its ministry.

Laymen have opportunities every day to go where ministers can never go and to bear witness to their faith and convictions before people whom the ministers will never see. Each of us is sent into the world as His instrument to claim those realms that have not yet acknowledged His way - to witness there with words and deeds. Homes, offices, schools, businesses. For the world will never be saved by the clergy, but by laymen whose commitment and dedication is as strong and as deep as though they themselves had been ordained priest or minister.

The laymen of a church have great potential. They are being challenged to once again become the creative and cutting edge of the church and in so doing to make of the church God's great instrument of reconciliation.

PRAYER

O God, move in our hearts with power and conviction that we may praise Thee not only with our lips, but with our very lives in the days ahead. In the name and the spirit of Christ, we pray. Amen

One of the laymen of our church telephoned me on Wednesday afternoon and said he had a ticket for me for Thursday's game between the Red Sox and the Cardinals in Boston. He said he also had a ticket for the ten o'clock shuttle and that I should meet him at noon for a hot dog in front of Fenway Park and then we'd enjoy the game....

After considerable inner wrestling and struggle to overcome this temptation, I told him I just better not risk it....that I had a sermon to get started on Thursday morning....but I must confess to you that by the 7th inning of that game (as I listened to it at my desk with my transistor), I felt I should have gone...with a no hitter in the making and 2 home runs by Carl Yas. And perhaps by the 7th inning of this effort this morning, you will wish I had gone too.....that it wouldn't have made that much difference and the sermon might have been shorter.

in terms of quality....

Somehow the longer I work on a sermon, the longer it seems to get.