

"THE TEMPTATION TO RESIST THE PRESENT"

INTRODUCTION

The history books credit Juan Ponce de Leon with the discovery of Florida. Chances are that he arrived there in the off season, else the rates would have driven him back to the sea. But this Spanish explorer holds a fond place in our imagination not because he discovered Florida, but because he set out in quest of the Fountain of Youth. The Indians of the Lesser Antilles told of an island called Bimini where gold abounded and much fruit, and a spring whose waters had the power to make the aged young again. It is not without significance that Ponce was fifty-two years old when he set out to find his fountain.

Those of us who have known the heat of thirty-five summers or more can readily identify with this man in his quest. We fight the calendar the way a losing football team fights the clock.....THE WAY THE Mets are fighting the schedule of only a few remaining games.

DEVELOPMENT

In our society we have made a fetish out of youth. We are obsessed with the passion to stay young. To this end we tint gray hair black again; invoke the skills and ointments of the cosmetician; eagerly purchase books that tell us how to beat the system; buy clothes expressly designed for those who wish to look young. We can even be found drinking a soft drink that panders to our obsession by claiming to be bottled "for those who think young".

On balance, one would have to say that this desire to resist the ravages of time is good. There isn't any reason why a person should roll over and play dead. I am inclined to agree with the following observation that has been offered:

"The struggle with passing time seems to me one of the most admirable features of humanness. An effort to overcome time and remain useful, beautiful, wise becomes a glory and a price"

Why shouldn't we answer back! A respectful 'Amen' to Moses of whom the scriptures write:

"And Moses was a hundred and twenty years old when he died; his eye was not dim, nor his natural forces abated".

But there is a sense in which Ponce de Leon's quest can become a serious matter. It can, if we're not careful, grow into a paralyzing anxiety. It can harden into a mind-set or outlook that disqualifies us from wholesome participation in life here and now. The Ponce de Leon urge plays havoc with the human spirit when it degenerates into a morbid feeling that something vital has slipped away; that something has been lost that needs finding; that the way ahead lies in the way back; that salvation is to be found in a return to what use to be. At bottom, this Ponce de Leon anxiety is a temptation on our part to refuse to accept the present.

Let's think about it as it touches three areas of life.

IN THE LIFE OF THE NATION

One detects this anxiety in the life of the nation at large. How easy it is to nurse the memory of earlier years, to think nostalgically of the pure democracy of the New England town meeting; to reminisce about those times when the enemy was easily defined - the British and the Indians - and just as easily defeated; to dream our way back to those years when this country was not beset with intrusive questions from far away places with strange sounding names. George Washington had settled that for us, perhaps one morning after a sleepless night and a bad breakfast, when he stated that the new republic should not become involved in "entangling alliances".

"Those were the days, my friend" - when the air was clean, when there were no automobiles, when the water was unpolluted, when there were no welfare rolls, no graduated income tax, no bureaucracy in Washington bearing down on the human spirit. It is the yearning of some of us all of the time and all of us some of the time to return to this. It reminds me of an election slogan I heard recently: "Bring back the boys from Vietnam; bring back the Stock Market; and bring back the Yankees". So - it is not altogether bad....and that man will get my vote!

Now at the risk of seeming unsympathetic and unfeeling I feel impelled to suggest that this manifestation of the Ponce de Leon anxiety is both unhealthy and unworthy of us as Christians. Unhealthy because it diverts us from the problems that God wishes us to meet right now here in this time and place. To be sure, ours is a different kind of world. If Cuba and Vietnam have taught us nothing else in this past decade, they have taught us that it is no longer possible for one nation, however powerful, to have its way and force its will on the rest of human kind. This is the point that Marshall Fishwick makes when he says:

"As a nation we are no longer heel-clucking and young, but cautious and middle-aged. Must we act as if our 'youth' is perpetual? After all, it has been over 400 years since those swashbuckling Elizabethans struck out for the brave new world; 358 years since the Jamestown colony was planted; almost two centuries since the shape of our nation emerged".

"Could it be" he goes on, "that America's trouble is not so much blind conformity as a refusal to abide by what we see in the mirror? The United States has grown up, reached maturity, and, like the ex-athlete of middle age, is bewildered and resentful. Impulsive adolescent acts are likely to produce nothing more than a stalemate - or worse. We still have Paul Bunyan's strength, but hacking out a workable policy in the tangled jungle of world affairs is quite different from cutting down virgin timber in Wisconsin or Minnesota. With Babe the Blue Ox to pull him through, youthful Paul could afford to take risks. None of his enemies had thermonuclear weapons."

The wilderness is gone. The frontiers have disappeared. We can't keep moving westward from our problems. There are no badlands to clear, but there are cities to be rebuilt. There are no railroad ties to lay, but there are ties of brotherhood to forge between man and man and race with race. The Town Meeting has given way, and rightly so, to representative government, and so-called local problems are solvable now only on the regional level. All of this we must take pains to learn.

Moreover, the anxiety is unworthy of us if we have any fellow-feeling at all. In pressing for the restoration of what used to be, we sometimes forget that there are millions in this land who had nothing in the past that would make them wish it back. When we think of going back we are met by a counter-force that wants not to go back - but to go on. We can learn from the past, as we should, but we cannot return to it. We must accept our age and act our age. No other way makes sense.

IN THE LIFE OF THE CHURCH

One also detects this anxiety, this temptation to resist the present in the life of the church, too.

And perhaps we ministers are largely responsible that this is so. Sometimes we try to badger our congregations into finer performances by making unflattering comparisons with the early church. How powerful and loving those early Christians were.

Why to hear some ministers tell it - all who belonged to those infant churches in Corinth, Ephesus, Philippi and Rome were capable of powerful prayer, they were committed to the total sharing of their resources, and able to live a life of unlimited love in the midst of a hostile, pagan world.

Our Catholic friends have a way of yearning to return to the medieval church of the 12th and 13th centuries when men like Aquinas and Francis were a part of it, when a remarkable synthesis was achieved between reason and faith, when the church was the organizing center of all life. Protestants have a way of torturing themselves with reference to the Reformation centuries - 16th, 17th, and 18th centuries - an era centering in the names of such stalwarts of the faith as Luther, Calvin, Knox, Zwingli, and a little later - Wesley. God was speaking so clearly and man was so receptive - at least it looks this way in retrospect.

Most serious, too, is the uncritical way in which some people today exalt the America Protestant Church of fifty or hundred years ago - the church of the Currier and Ives prints. You know the kind of church I mean, "the church in the valley of the wildwood" - the church that flung clean lines against a rural sky, that knew the gentle touch of the revivalist's hand every Spring, the church whose peace was never disturbed by the inner city or outer space.

Two comments to all of this. First, and rather obviously, those times were not quite all that we have made them out to be. We have a way of romanticizing the past. Remember that there was a power struggle among even the twelve, and that those men demonstrated a capacity for division, denial and desertion even as people today do. And if we zero in on those early congregations, we are not going to be pleased by all we see. Corinth, for example, was known for its incest, its fornication, its factions, its heresy.

And that church of the Currier and Ives prints that we can become so sentimental about must confess the shameful fact that even though it lived in a century of titanic social evils, it scarcely raised its voice. It slept through the decades of what Teddy Roosevelt called "predatory wealth" and meekly acquiesced.

Second, we should also remember when we compare ourselves unfavorably with those Christians of the first century that our situation vis-a-vis the United States is so different from what theirs was vis-a-vis Rome that the similarity is hardly recognizable.

In some way it must have been easier to have been part of a minority in the Roman Empire than it is for us today to be part of the majority tradition that numbers one hundred and twenty-three million people in this land. There are many Protestants who are disturbed nowadays because the church is trying to develop a sense of public reference. But, my friends, in the name of Christ, we cannot turn in upon ourselves any longer, not with the numbers we claim in this land. Something of what we feel about race and poverty and war must be made known. We do not have the right to prevail, but we are under obligation to speak and act.

No church, in my judgment, has the right today to give itself exclusively to intramural matters and be satisfied with developing a neat array of programs to cover a person from the womb to the tomb. It is not enough. It is ours to be responsible stewards - not only of the Gospel that we cherish, but also of the power we command!

IN THE LIFE OF THE INDIVIDUAL

of God.

Finally, the Ponce De Leon anxiety frequently intrudes itself on a man's personal experience

"Where is the blessedness I knew when first I saw the Lord?
Where is the soul-refreshing view of Jesus and His word?"

"I wish I could go back to that little church in the country where I first received communion" said a harried business executive to me last year. I have no way of knowing what your "first love" for Christ was like. I have no way of knowing where the attachment was joined. It may be that you found Him the all prevailing truth as you sat with a Sunday School teacher in some church many miles from here, ~~perhaps in a different land~~. Or it may be that you found Him to be the Way at a summer church conference, away from the normal round of life - next to a lake, or in the wood, and you heard the voice that made you say "I will". Perhaps it was at the graveside of a loved one, or in a confirmation class, or a revivalist's crusade. It is true, is it not, that we have a way of going back to the moment of faith's onset and feeling unsettled because the ardor has not lasted.....with intensity and feeling.

Just as there is growth in our Christian experience so too there can be regression. But I wonder if we do not unfairly vex ourselves by entertaining expectations that belong more to the beginning than to the middle or end of our Christian life. After all - a person can meet Jesus Christ for the first time only once. A missionary can go to his chosen field of service for the first time only. You can be introduced to the great minds and hearts of the Faith only once. And to expect all subsequent encounters to turn us on the same way is to expect too much. We need to develop expectations appropriate to maturity. Devotion to Christ should become the settled habit of the soul, not something that runs hot and cold!

I think commitment as time goes on becomes more systematic and less eruptive. The early yardage that we make as Christians is rather easy to come by. But, as in football the yardage gets more difficult inside the ten as we near the goal, so too with Christians as we grow and mature. Some who have walked with Jesus Christ for a long time and have known his joy in their hearts are now wrestling with the question of Christ and racism, or the question of Christ and affluence, or the question of Christ and war. Such struggling belongs to the middle and latter stages of the way and should not be lamented. Earlier experiences cannot be re-created, but the God of those earlier experiences can fill our present even as He did the past.

FINAL SECTION

I remember as a student in a Philosophy of Religion course that I came across the term, "Henotheism". Henotheism, simply put, I recall, is the belief that God is limited in sovereignty and present to a particular place. In primitive times many tribes believed that when they move to a different territory, they left the jurisdiction of God.

I would like to suggest a term that describes the "hang up" some of us may have. If you will, it would be the term "chronotheism" - the conviction that God is tied to a particular time already passed. Chronotheism is not Christian for it is suggesting that the Holy Spirit who spoke at Pentecost has been mute ever since. Consider the point of the Scripture lesson read this morning. Under the pressures of life in the wilderness the Israelites who had once been captives in Egypt yearned for a return to the land of their oppression. God had been more real to them in the past, they thought, than he was in the rigors of the present. But Moses would have none of it. He said to his people:

"Fear not. Stand firm. And see the salvation of
the Lord work for you today".

This then is my opening word to us as a congregation as we face into a new church year together. Let us beware of the "Ponce de Leon anxiety" that resists the present and leans toward a return to the past. Let each renew his or her own commitment to the Spirit of the living God in the quietness of this sanctuary at the end of this service, remembering:

"Our times are in his hand
Who saith, A whole I planned,
Youth shows but half; trust God:
See all - nor be afraid. (Browning)

LET US PRAY

Lord, we have thanked thee for other times and places. Help us now to thank thee for this time and place. Forgive our excessive nostalgia for days beyond recall, the time we squander leafing through back issues of the human story, the dullness that blinds us to the furrows Thou art ploughing the field of history now.

Sound thy call again and give us ears to hear and wills that respond. Through Jesus Christ, the same today, forever and yesterday. Amen