

## "THE THINGS THAT GIVE LIFE MEANING"

TEXT: "Meanwhile the disciples besought him, saying, 'Rabbi, eat'.  
But he said to them, 'I have food to eat of which you do  
not know'" (John 4:31)

INTRODUCTION The disciples were preoccupied, as we all are, with the material necessities of life. Not having eaten for some time, they had gone to get some food and they surprised to discover upon their return that Jesus didn't even touch it. They urged him to eat, for they were unaware that He had drawn on sustenance of another kind. He had been in conversation with a Samaritan woman about deeper cravings than those satisfied by food and drink and apparently his own physical weariness and fatigue had been forgotten in His absorption in the conversation. He went on to tell his disciples about the spiritual nourishment by which He had been sustained. And he put it to them in these words; "My food is to do the will of Him who sent me, and to accomplish his work".

DEVELOPMENT Consider what this incident from John's Gospel says to us. It suggests to us that we are made so that we are never fully satisfied even though all of our material necessities are provided for, that there is in each of us a hunger for the things that feed the spirit, that vitamins for the spirit are every bit as necessary as vitamins for the body. "Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die" is a shallow, superficial philosophy. In the long run the person who lives by it is plagued by boredom and triviality. The best things in life pass him by; he is without that deep satisfaction that comes from being needed and from contributing something of substance and worth to the common good. Rollo May, the psychiatrist says that one of the problems of people today is inner emptiness. Well-fed, well-clothed, well-paid and living in well-built houses, they nevertheless feel that perhaps they are missing something, that their lives should be happier and counting for more than they do.

ATTITUDE TOWARD OUR WORK What are the things that by feeding the spirit give our attitude toward our daily work. Just as important as the nature of the work we do is the manner in which we do it. Whatever it is - operating a machine, standing behind a counter, sitting behind a desk, interviewing clients - we should try to put our highest self in to it. When we do this - when we put our highest self into our work, we are putting something of God in to it. Through our work we express ourselves, fulfill ourselves. We can offer the prayer: "God helping me, today I will do my best with what I am, where I am".

Charles Kingsley wrote to a young man:

"Thank God every morning when you get up that you have something to do that day that must be done, whether you like it or not. Being forced to work and forced to do your best, will breed in you temperance and self-control, diligence and strength of will, cheerfulness and content, and a hundred virtues which the idle will never know."

I think that Kingsley's counsel is in line with what the Church of Christ has always said to men and women about the task in which they are engaged for the greater part of their hours:

"You have been set in the world to be partners of God in his continuing work of creation, and in what you are doing, you are so far as the work is creative, productive, useful, cooperators with God".

But what about the men and women who have work to do that makes no demand on their creative faculties? Or what about those persons caught up in undertakings so downright mercenary and so harshly competitive that their conscience is troubled and, attending church on Sunday, find it difficult to be a real Christian on Monday when they go back to their work? If a man has a troubled conscience about the work he does, he can neither express nor fulfill himself as he should. Therefore it is an urgent Christian concern that work should be so organized and so directed that people can respect themselves while taking part in it and can do it "to the glory of God". That day may be a long way off but we must strive toward it; and progress is being made. It used to be said that the difference between trades and professions is that the first are organized for profit and the second for service, but the distinction can no longer be drawn so sharply. While there still are men in business and industry for whom money-making is the sole motive, the service concept is nowadays playing a far greater role.

The service concept can be a motivating factor even where work is repetitious and monotonous. A mechanic on an automobile assembly line told how he had two incentives - the quality of the cars being turned out and his part in maintaining good relationships with the other workmen on the job. Suppose we stay a little while with the second incentive. Most of us work together in groups - large and small. It is not only our attitude to our work that affects our attitude to life as a whole; it is our attitude to the people with whom we work. So much depends on our temper and temperament. If we are cooperative, approachable, good-natured and friendly, if we cultivate those sterling qualities in ourselves, though the work itself may be tiring and taxing, life will not be empty and meaningless. To get caught up in petty rivalries, bickering and office disputes is a sad thing. On the other hand, to work with a team in happy relationships is a stimulating, satisfying experience.

#### RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHERS

We are coming close now to the Christian answer to the question: how does life take on greater meaning? The essential meaning of life is bound up with our relationships to other people. What Jesus kept on saying with an emphasis that was altogether new was that our chief business, next to loving God, is to love our neighbor. Caring for people, being concerned about them, projecting ourselves imaginatively into their lives, befriending them and helping them - this is what so much of the emphasis was placed. And when we care, really care, then changes take place in us - changes of mind, spirit and character. If we have been hard, the hardness begins to soften. Instead of criticizing and condemning, we begin to appreciate and encourage. We grow in understanding and sympathy. And when, as is sure to happen, loving and caring deeply, we meet love in return, life takes on new meaning. We enter into a new world; we feel different. We have food to eat that nourishes our souls.

Love is the greatest thing that life can hold, the thing that surely unites us to God and men, the ultimate secret of meaningful existence. Shakespeare knew that and put on the lips of Othello this cry:

"But I do love thee; and when I love thee not, chaos is come again".

And Aldous Huxley knew that. Listen to something he says:

"Of all the worn, smudged, dog-eared words in our vocabulary, 'love' is surely the grubbiest, smelliest. Bawled from a million pulpits, lasciviously crooned through millions of loud speakers, it has become an outrage to good taste and decent feeling, an obscenity which one hesitates to pronounce. And yet it has to be pronounced, for, after all, "love" is the last word!"

It is the last word not only in personal relationships - husbands and wives, parents and children - the life of the family and the daily associations of friends and fellow workers, but also in the relations of nations. So often as one looks around the world one has the feeling that love has deserted the earth. So many of our present day troubles stem from the fact that ours is a loveless world - loveless and to a great extent chaotic and meaningless.

Love is the greatest thing that life can hold, the thing that most surely unites us to God and men, and out of chaos, brings meaning. I think of a news item carried some time ago by the press and television about an airliner ditched in the Atlantic and how planes and ships at once converged on it, pilots and crews, bent on saving life. This is human nature at its highest and its best - caring - giving of itself spontaneously, instinctively, regardless of the cost, the danger, the inconvenience. I'm sure that there have been parallels in Vietnam to an experience of World War I related by Henry Williamson:

"In the stupendous roar and light blast of the final barrage that broke the Hindenburg line, I see only one thing which grows radiant before my eyes until it fills all my world: the sight of a German boy half-crushed under a shattered tank, moaning, 'Mutter, mutter, mutter' out of ghastly gray lips. A British soldier, wounded in the leg and sitting near by, hears the words, and dragging himself to the dying boy, takes his cold hand and says, 'All right, son, it's all right. Mother's here with you'"

Out of chaos and disaster, it is love that brings meaning to life.

A CAUSE TO SERVE      Thus far I have made two points. First, affecting our attitude to life is our attitude to our daily work and to the people with whom we work. Second, the essential meaning of life is bound up with our relationships with one another. I move on now to suggest a third thought.

I have found in my ministry that one seldom complains of the meaninglessness of life and of existence if he has found a cause in which he believes and to which he can wholeheartedly give himself. If I am convinced that something worthwhile is going on, and that I have a part in advancing it, it simply does not occur to me to maintain that life is without meaning. Life takes on significance when it is devoted to an ideal, an ideal embodying a cause.

One way then to rid yourself of inner emptiness is to choose your cause and then go to work for it with zest and vigor. The Peace Corps has been just a cause; Civil Rights is another; anti-poverty programs and head-start programs represent still another. The point is this: to have something to live for and to work for, something bigger than yourself, better than yourself, outlasting yourself is the remedy for futility and boredom. You have not risen to the height of your God-given origin, nature and destiny if you are pursuing disconnected ends, if you are taken up all the time with material concerns and money-making - what to eat, wear - if you have no causes, no goals, if you are not related to and participating in the live issues of your day.

And this is what Christ offers us - an ideal, the Kingdom of God, embodied in a cause. A cause, mind you, not a social club, a cause in which we are enlisted under orders and to whose service we are dedicated, our discipleship not a matter of formal profession but a life-long vocation, our role not that of sideline spectators but of active participants. An ideal - a cause - under orders - discipleship - dedicated - participants - please don't think these are just pious platitudes. We mean them in this church.

Take note of this church and the direction in which it is moving and for what membership in its means. It is not a devotional society; it does not concentrate on its service of worship without thought for people who have forgotten what the inside of a church is like. It is not concerned simply with what takes place within its own walls. It is committed, so long as I serve as its spiritual leader, to be an inclusive fellowship - interdenominational, intercultural, inter-racial. It is, through its members, relating itself more and more to the life and needs of this community and city. Our Joint Commission on Mission and Social concern has again printed for wide circulation and distribution the areas of need for volunteer service in our community. Copies are available for the asking. We have work to do for God and for man, work in which we deeply believe and into which we can put head, heart and hand. It is hard work, but it is deeply satisfying. And so we say to you, if you are uncommitted and without a cause to serve - join us in our work. Follow Him as we are trying to follow Him.

CONCLUSION

The things that give life meaning. What are the things that by feeding the spirit give life greater meaning? First: our attitude to our work and to those with whom we work. Second: the essential meaning in life is found in our relationships with one another. Third: life takes on even greater meaning when it is devoted to an ideal, an ideal embodying a cause. About this a practicing Christian is never with doubt. For Christ gave him a world he can live in and work in; a self he can live with, and a cause he can work for.

LET US PRAY

As we direct our thoughts, O God, to the things that give life real meaning, help us to think clearly, and then lead us out of ourselves toward him who is the purpose of all men, that we may show forth in our lives something of his life, something of his great love for all men, something of the way in which he served others, that the world through us may be reconciled to Thee.