

THE STORY OF JESUS  
"Chapter VI: One Last Appeal"

INTRODUCTION It was a small and plain procession that made its way over the Mount of Olives, down into the Kidron Valley and up to the city gate of Jerusalem. Jesus was seated on a donkey which had been borrowed for the occasion. Some of his friends walked along side of Him. As they approached the city gate, it's reported that the people began to shout and wave palm branches. I suppose the curious onlooker traveling into Jerusalem that day must have wondered what it was all about. And I think it's interesting for us, onlookers now for two thousand years, to once again ask ourselves what it was all about, to once again bring to mind the meaning behind this rather strange scene that has been cherished by so many Christians down through the centuries of time.

ONE LAST APPEAL This is the day when Jesus made one last appeal to the people. It was a dramatic appeal - not because Jesus was a showman - he was anything but that - but because he knew enough about people to know that if you want to reach them, you will do it not so much by a thought or a word as by a deed, something done, something they can see; and he knew also that the more deeply the deed grows out of something with which they are familiar, the deeper the impression will be. And so he acted out an Old Testament Story that had to do with the ideal king who rode into the city on a beast of burden, without a bodyguard, and with no weapon but his own goodwill.

Not only was it a dramatic appeal, but also a decisive appeal in the sense that it demanded a decision. People could listen to the Sermon on the Mount, or the Parables, or the teaching by the lake and come away saying "No man ever spoke like this before", but they could let it go in one ear and out the other. They could listen and learn without doing much of anything about it. But when he swept the Temple clean, something had to be done about that. That kind of action demanded a decision. A man can preach anything he wants to at the Marble Arch in London or in Washington Square here in New York, but if he tries to do it, for instance, in the Park Avenue Methodist Church someone has to make a decision about Him one way or the other. Either they let him carry on, or they stop him.

It was dramatic, it was decisive, and it was doomed from the very beginning. And Jesus, I think, knew that it was because once again, he knew what people were like. He knew them inside and out, their strength and their weakness. He knew that it was hard for people to change their patterns and attitudes. He knew that the average person liked to run in the old well worn ruts of his parents grandparents, those ruts that were comfortable and familiar. He knew that the average person did not have a vivid imagination, nor any great capacity to step out of his own skin and he knew that the majority of the people were basically selfish and that in case of fire, they would run for the nearest exit. And they did.

And so he made his appeal as dramatically as he could, and as decisively, doomed though he knew it to be. This was his last appeal to the people to follow him, to accept him as the Way, the Truth and the Life. And the people said "no". His appeal was turned down

completely. His rejection was unanimous. A very sobering thought, is it not. It leads me to make this observation: we human beings have a strange way of rejecting goodness and greatness. Not always mind you, and I hope that no one will go away from here today with the idea that I have nothing good to say about human beings. We don't always reject greatness. Thank goodness for that. We don't reject Albert Schweitzer, we idolize him. But he lives a long way off and he doesn't bother us very much, and we can live vicariously on his tremendous spiritual energy. But I've often thought that our attitude toward him might be somewhat different, however, if he came to the shores of our country to live and to try to influence our international policy in the direction of outlawing atomic weapons. But as things are now we accept him, as we do hundreds of others who represent the good life.

However as we look over the history of mankind, we begin to realize that our record of rejections is nevertheless quite a staggering one. Socrates, I suppose, was one of the half dozen or so original thinkers that ever lived, and he was rejected as a disturber of the peace. To come a little nearer to our own time and to an entirely different field, Franz Schubert, who has been called the greatest songwriter who ever lived, wrote over six hundred songs before he died at the age of thirty-one and most of them were rejected by the publishers as good for nothing but waste paper. Abraham Lincoln, to my way of thinking, towers above every other American. The shot that killed him represented the poisoned arrows that came invisibly from the minds of thousands of Americans of his day who rejected him secretly because he was too magnanimous towards the south. "With malice toward none, with charity for all" - this was too tenderhearted to suit them. They wanted someone much tougher. Galileo was rejected for saying that the sun was the center of the solar system. Columbus was rejected for thinking that the world was round. And much nearer to our own time, Woodrow Wilson was rejected for insisting that the United States could no longer go it alone.

Of course you may say that these are all before our own time. At least those of you in the congregation who are under sixty could use this as a legitimate excuse. Perhaps you're different. I hope so, but I doubt it. I doubt it because I know myself too well. I know how often I'm tempted to reject the thing I know is good in favor of the thing that will pay me the largest and most immediate return. I may not reject it outright, once and for all, but I reject it at least for the time being. I suppose my life from the time I was old enough to know the difference between right and wrong has been a series of rejections here and there all along the line, some great and some not so great. Some important and some less than important. I would imagine that you and I are very much alike in this respect.

#### WHAT MAKES PEOPLE DO THIS?

We pause and wonder why we do this. What is there about people that makes them do this or act this way. Why do we reject goodness and truth and greatness when it comes so very close to us. This is what I would like you to think about this morning, and perhaps we can find some answer to these general questions by asking ourselves another question: why was Jesus rejected? Different reasons could be suggested I suppose, and in the next few minutes I'd like to introduce three reasons to you.

In the first place, he was rejected because the majority of the people didn't want him. They wanted his cures, but not his criticism.

They wanted to be made well, but they had no desire to be made good. They wanted him when he was healing their sick, but not when he was staking out the way toward the cross. They wanted his help, but not his yoke. To put it in a nutshell, they wanted Barabbas, and that is what they got. You will recall that Pilate, the Governor, according to custom would release to them at the time of the Passover, one of the prisoners and when Jesus was on trial, he proceeded to do this very thing. And when he asked them whether they would have Jesus or Barabbas, they chose Barabbas and Barabbas they were given.

I sometimes wonder as to whether people today are any different. I should like to think they are, and those of you who follow us all the way, all of the time, know how hard I try to see every shred of goodness in people and how much I love that goodness. But on the other hand, I'm afraid that the majority of the people are not very much different today, and I cannot pretend that they are. The bulk of people today don't want the Play of the Week or See It Now; they want Rock 'n' Roll and that is what they get. The bulk of the people don't want to be committed to anything; they want to be free and come and go as they please. They get what they want.

The majority of people (and I say this without cynicism. I say this because we are standing under the shadow of the cross and I cannot say anything else) the bulk of the people today don't want Christ, not Christ crucified, not the rule and love of God. They want a tranquilizer; a ranch house with two cars; they want social security; they want lower taxes and high wages and shorter hours; they want freedom from responsibility, and a quick trip to Paradise for a down payment, the rest in ninety days. And that is just about what they have gotten, a fairly safe, comfortable standard of living. The majority of the people didn't want Jesus. This is the first reason why he was rejected.

In the second place, the leaders of the people in Jerusalem were not ready to accept him. I think they recognized in him right from the beginning, their own mortal enemy. They were smart enough to know that if they followed what Jesus said, their religion would have to be changed from top to bottom. They knew, for example, that the temple would have to become once more a real temple and not a banking house; that the wealthy hierarchy that controlled the temple would have to become the servants of the people. They knew that their religion would have to be radically revised. Routine performance of religious obligations would have to be replaced by a dedication of spirit to the will of God. And they knew also that the law which meant so much to them would have to be entirely rewritten so that the emphasis was not so much on the performance of things done, the number of services attended, how much they put into the treasury, but upon what they were like inside, and why they did what they did, and what their attitude toward the people they did not particularly like. Their law would have to be entirely rewritten. There would have to be a place for sinners in it, and also for Gentiles. Moreover, they knew - and this was the thing that was very difficult for them to face - they knew that all their hopes for a military revolt against Rome would have to be forgotten. They knew that God's rule of love included enemies as well as friends, and that they would have to set aside forever any hope of a rebellion. And they knew that the life of the individual would have to be turned upside down; that he would have to begin to trust God rather than himself; that he would have to try to put God's will before his own will, and that he would have to become like a little child, putting his life in God's hands. It was much, too much for them - too radical, with too big a price to pay, too much to give up, too many risks to run, too much to lose, and

they rejected him and his offer.

You ask, was there no one at this point who wanted him? Didn't anybody in the whole country respond to him? I'm sure there were many people who were for him. There were many whose lives had been helped and touched by him and who were trying to keep the Word of God as they saw it in him. But they kept still and never said a word. If they were for him, they never let anyone know it. They might have turned the tide. Think of it. We can't be sure, but they might have turned the tide in the other direction. And they, my dear friends, represent most of us. We accept him; we don't reject him. We love him, at least we admire him; we hold him before our children as an ultimate ideal. But so often in so many situations, in so many crises of life, we never say so. We just let him go by.

This is a deep seated habit of ours, this keeping still when we ought to be speaking out. We think the country is going mad for material things, but we never say so. We think that political leadership should aim at reconciliation above everything else, but we seldom say it in public. We think that atomic warfare is wrong, and that if it ever is begun it will end the human race, but we almost never say anything about it. We think that the Church should be a House of Prayer for all people but when an issue comes up in which that principle is involved, not many of us say what we think. We let it go. We don't want to start a fuss. We would rather go with the crowd in the wrong direction than strike out by ourselves in the right one. And after all, what is the will of one man among so many. We think Jesus is the way, the truth and the life. I'm sure that nine out of ten of you, perhaps even a greater percentage of you who are here, think that way, but in any office or any discussion group where this is questioned, have you ever said it. Remember it when you're in a meeting, or in a group of any kind. Remember too that Jesus went to the cross because the people like you and me who should have been for him and were for him did not say a word. They held their peace. And the very stones cried out against them.

And so Jesus was rejected. He went on his way to the cross. The majority of people didn't want him. The leaders couldn't tolerate him. And the few people who were for him kept still. What a familiar story. What a tragic tale.

CLOSING And so you see there is an infinite sadness about Palm Sunday. It is a strange kind of day in which sadness is mingled with joy. You see, it's the deep sadness of something glorious and beautiful refused and rejected. They were there - on the very threshold of life, yet they refused to enter in. So near and yet so far. So wise and yet so foolish. And to increase to the sadness, that rejection has continued on down through the years. Person after person and nation after nation have not been willing to make the necessary changes in order to accept the rule of God which is the law of love. And one hesitates to ask what our nation would do if that promise and offer were set before it today.

And yet, mingled with the sadness of the day, there is still some of the joy of that first Palm Sunday, for the royal figure of Jesus is still somehow mysteriously before us. In spite of rejection after rejection, that man on the donkey still goes on before us, still haunting our memories and challenging our hopes and stimulating our spirits and probing our consciences. And after all these years and all these failures on our part to accept what he has to give us, he still

makes the offer and I wish through me he could make that offer to you and to our nation. If you are willing to submit to the rule of God, God will give you new life; but the rule of God is the rule of love, and you cannot have the life unless you are willing to love. Will you accept that? Will you take the chance? That is the promise, that is the offer, and it is up to you to decide.

Once to ev'ry man and nation  
Comes the moment to decide,  
In the strife of truth with falsehood,  
For the good or evil side;  
Some great cause, God's new Messiah,  
Offering each the bloom or blight,  
And the choice goes by forever  
'Twixt that darkness and that light.

By the light of burning martyrs  
Jesus' bleeding feet I track,  
Toling up new Calvaries ever  
With the cross that turns not back;  
New occasions teach new duties,  
Time makes ancient good uncouth;  
They must upward still and onward  
Who would keep abreast of truth.

LET US PRAY:

Our Father and our God, we know that we have lagged in our loyalty to thy son. We know that we cannot ignore him. Help us this day and always to welcome him as the Lord of our Lives.  
Amen