

"THE UNIVERSAL APPEAL OF CHRIST"

TEXT: "And people came to Him from every quarter" Mark 1: 45

INTRODUCTION This line is a tribute to the extraordinary drawing power of Christ. From the beginning of His ministry people flocked in droves to see Him and to hear Him. Within a few weeks all of Palestine was ringing with the sound of His name. He was the subject of conversation on every boat on the lake and in every home in town and village. People sought his presence wherever He went. ~~The multitudes poured out of town and village to catch a glimpse of Him or to hear the words He spoke.~~

There is always a magnetic attraction exercised by a powerful personality. Emerson once remarked that if a man can write a better book, preach a better sermon, or construct a better mousetrap than his neighbor, the world will make a beaten track to his door. We are all drawn to the person who can do his work supremely well, particularly to the person who has some word of truth to utter and the capacity to give it fresh, vivid, vigorous expression. In a superlative degree, Jesus of Nazareth was such a person. He had a rich and magnetic personality, and a message of such power and cogency, then when He appeared crowds flocked around Him. Suppose we consider this morning several of the qualities that drew people to Him from every quarter.

I. ORIGINALITY For one thing, there was his originality. I would venture to say that we have all wondered at one time or another whether there is any such thing as originality. We may share the opinion of the writer of the book of Ecclesiastes that "there is nothing new under the sun". Is any idea, any truth, any system of thought altogether original. Is it not simply a reorientation of something thought or expressed long ago? Somebody has said that all work and no plagiarism makes Jack a dull boy. Mark Rutherford in the poem that prefaces his autobiography wrote:

"For I was ever common place,
Of genius never had a trace,
My thoughts the world have never fed,
Mere echoes of the book last read".

But nobody who ever heard Jesus ever felt that way. The first impression created by contact with his personality, by listening to him talk was: Here is a different type of teacher who has memorable and striking things to say. He did not say the things people expected him to say. He broke with the traditions of the elders. He got out of the rut of conventional exposition of Scripture. He came to it with a fresh mind. After hearing him speak people went away commenting to each other: no one ever spoke like this man. He speaks with authority - not in the timid, hesitating, traditional manner of the Scribes.

The fact that we fail to remember is that He preached a Gospel that at once struck His contemporaries as revolutionary. "What is this?" they asked. "A new teaching?" As they watched His ministry develop, they exclaimed, "We never saw it in this fashion". So novel, so uncomfortably original were the nature and method of His mission that the question, "Why" followed Him about like a shadow. He was a disturbing personality, as all original thinkers are. More than once, He said: "You have learned that our forefathers were told....but what I tell you is....". And there and then they were confronted with a startlingly new approach to religion and morals. There is no denying the originality of Jesus, and it is obvious that people were attracted to Him because of it.

If only we had more of His mind and spirit in our churches! All too often we are hidebound by convention, wedded to tradition, fearful of innovation. Looking at some of us, it might be assumed that our golden rule is: "The thing that hath been shall be...". It would be wonderful if we could do what He did - get out of ruts, break fresh ground, open windows, shock some people instead of soothing them, substitute for the flute the trumpet. I think we fall into the very vice which Jesus most earnestly denounced - insipidity. We fail Him in what He exemplified most - enthusiastic creativity. The reason why so many steer clear of us and our churches is that we tend to be so tame and dull. If we kept closer to Him, we would be more like Him.

This is what was so refreshing in Pope John. He got out of ruts, broke ground, opened windows, shocked many of his associates. I'm sure that shivers went up and down the spines of many of the members of the Vatican hierarchy as they saw him shaking hands with Communists, visiting in prisons, cutting through red tape, striking an anti-Semitic phrase out of the liturgy. We, too, in the Protestant Church need to be more adventurous - to get out of our ruts, break new ground and have more of the mind and spirit of Christ.

HAPPINESS Another thing that drew people to Jesus was his happiness. And about this millions seem to know next to nothing. So many Christians have an impression of Jesus as one who was perpetually sad, even mournful. This is the Jesus we see portrayed on the screen in this new movie, "The Greatest Story Ever Told". The scenery is magnificent, but for three and a half hours we see this somber faced and doleful expression on the screen.

Palestine never knew a sunnier soul, a personality more infectiously joyous and radiant. His was a happiness derived from the realized presence of God, His Father, and from the consciousness that He was doing the will of God. He was too sure of God to linger in clouds of sadness and somberness. He lived habitually in the sun shine which surrounds those who know, love and serve God.

And as great as was His own happiness, he delighted also in the happiness of others. He was never one to quench laughter. His presence gave pleasure and many who regarded religion as a dull, spiritless thing entertained a new idea of it after spending time in His company. He spoke often with a smile; he made others smile, the sort of smile for which others are better at once.

People loved to be in his company for he had such joy and hope and enthusiasm. People whom the tribulation of life had left cold and bitter felt themselves thawing in the sunshine of His presence. Even his words had a certain humor and gaiety on occasion. Our familiarity with them blinds us to it. For instance, He compares the censorious person who is hard on others and easy on himself to the man with a great log or plank in his own eye painfully squinting to get a speck of sawdust out of the eyes of a neighbor.

Why are religion and gloom so often linked together. The woman, for instance, who said to her minister who was going to call on her sick husband, "Please pastor just don't speak to John about religion today. He's miserable enough as it is". Let me remind you that the New Testament is one of the most joyous books ever written. I really don't think a person has religion if it's all gloom. We read that the Apostles on the day of Pentecost were so elated that they were accused of being drunk. Is there anything about the average Sunday morning congregation to suggest spiritual intoxication. Very little. I wish some of you could have the view of this congregation that I have for there are Sundays when it looks pretty dull, stodgy, and tame. I think if we were keeping closer to Christ, we would convey less stuffiness and stodginess to the world.

MORAL COURAGE

A third characteristic that attracted people to Jesus was his moral courage. All of us admire a brave man, especially a morally brave man for moral courage is far more demanding than physical courage. It's on a higher level. Jesus, who did not lack physical courage, was morally daring. He was uncompromising and fearless. He spoke truths that were so obnoxious to those in authority that sooner or later they - the authorities - had to make a decision concerning Him. He was forever defying tradition and custom and yet never once do we catch a glimpse of panic on his face.

By comparison we are timid souls. We tend to play it safe. We're afraid to go out on a limb. Before we make a stand, we are careful to find out in which direction the wind is blowing. We run along with life, taking on the pattern of our environment, conforming to the world and its ways instead of moulding it. Not all of us, to be sure. There are some men among us who are not willing to play it safe, but to take a stand for what is right. We think of Martin Luther King - of his moral courage, of his willingness to defy old patterns, of his willingness to put his life on the line for what is right. A novelist writes about his leading character:

"People liked Henry, and he never said anything that diminished that liking. He never talked against nobody, he never talked for anybody. He smiled and he laughed. People liked him, but they never fell in love with him. Henry lived on top of the wave..."

He lived on top of the wave; the type is common. Christ was made of stronger stuff and we, as Christian people, should seek to resemble Him in our daily lives and we would....if we were keeping closer to Him.

APPRECIATIVENESS

Another characteristic about Jesus that drew the people to Him was his appreciativeness. It was a habit, an instinct with Him to see first in any man, woman or child what could be commended and not what was open to criticism. He went about looking for the good in people and finding it in the most unexpected places. Soon often we get what we look for in people - good or bad as the case may be. Jesus saw in shifty, unstable, unreliable Simon a man capable of becoming dependable and solid as granite rock. He saw in greedy little Zaccaeus the possibilities of a great and generous life. He saw in Mary Magadlene a woman not beyond redemption's point. His was so appreciative a spirit that he said not even a cup of cold water given in his name would go unrewarded and that if a person had two talents and used them well, he would be rewarded as much at the last as the person with ten talents.

It was because Jesus enabled people to see what was best in themselves that He did them so much good. Those who make us feel cheap or useless or hopeless only do us a disservice. Those on the other hand who believe in us can get us to do almost anything. I read recently that a marriage counsellor had both husband and wife write down on a sheet of paper the changes they felt they should each make as individuals in order to make their marriage more successful and happier. The lists were not long. And then he asked each mate to list the changes he or she felt desirable in the other partner of the marriage. You can imagine how long those lists were. Indeed, they were quite lengthy. Here again there is much for us to learn and practice. I'm sure that if each husband and wife present here this hour went home determined to show the other more appreciation and understanding, our divorce rate in America might begin to be lessened in some small but significant way.

Like the Master, we have to look for the good in people, in society - commend it, encourage it, and do all that lies in our power to nourish it and develop it.

DIVINITY

By now some of you may be saying in the privacy of your own thought:

"In dealing with the universal appeal of Jesus, you have spoken only about human characteristics - His originality, happiness, moral courage, appreciativeness - and have made no mention of His divinity. Do you believe in the divine manhood of Christ. If you do, isn't it more important to stress his divinity than his humanity?"

I do believe in His divinity. For me, He was more than just another good man, and the world has seen many good men. I do believe in His divinity - that He was more like God than any other human who has ever walked on the face of this earth, that God (as Donald Baillie of Scotland put it) "was in Christ"....at work in Him "reconciling the world..." He came to show us the way, to give us the ideals and norms of human behavior. Remember this that the roots of His divinity are intertwined with His humanity. He became a man to show us what divinity means and how the human may become divine. For many the divinity is meaningless because they have never appreciated the humanity.

The first disciples began with Jesus - as a man - but as their knowledge of Him deepened, they could find no words or categories great enough to exhaust his significance. And if I may say so, this has been something of my own experience. I started in my early teens with the Jesus of history, the man from Nazareth, but across the years as my own appreciation of His life has deepened, today I look upon Him not only as my leader, but my light and my Lord. This is how it has been with others. If you start with Him by reading in the Gospels about his earthly life, reading regularly and systematically, he will lead you on a spiritual adventure that will move you to say some day what one of the evangelists of the first century said of Him:

"The word became flesh; and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father". "In Him was life, and the life was the light of men".

PRAYER: Help us, O God, as we draw apart from the world during this season of refreshment and renewal, to see Jesus with new eyes and understanding, to find in Him that which make him unlike all others who ever lived. Help us in our daily lives to stand loyal to him who we know is the Truth and the Way and the Life. We ask this in His name. Amen