

"THE YEARS AGAINST THE HOURS"

INTRODUCTION

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DEVELOPMENT

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And so this morning I plead for the long view - not as a means of escaping some present crisis. Do not misunderstand this sermon. Never in my lifetime has there been a greater need for men and women of conscience and character and faith who are really struggling for the better quality of their own lives and of our corporate life as a nation and as a world.

The poet is right. A time like this does demand "sun-crowned" people "who stand above the fog in public duty and in private thinking". Never have I felt that more urgently - but agreeing upon that need, this sermon seeks to take another step and to say that beyond integrity and the mounting intensity of the present struggle, we also need sometimes to step back and look for the long view and listen to "what the years and the centuries say against the hours".

Especially as Christians, this is part of our heritage and part of our strength. The Bible abounds with this balance that we are talking about. The people of so many of its pages were deeply involved in some current crisis - working and praying to come close to their God-given possibilities in some hour of testing - but always seeing behind and beyond that to gain an additional perspective and peace. The Bible goes beyond Emerson when he said "The lesson of life is to believe what the years and the centuries say against the hours". The Bible says that the lesson of faith is to believe what the eternity of God says against the events of any given hour. And Paul provides us with a magnificent text for what we are talking about this morning:

"For we look not to the things that are seen, but to the things that are unseen; for the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal".

LONG-VIEW AND THE WORLD

Think about the importance of this long view at two levels of our lives. First, as we have already hinted, we need that long view with regard to the blaring and jarring headlines of the world around us.

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This was an incredible, audacious claim to make. Sometimes those men of God seemed like forlorn fools and failures to take on the headlines and head leaders, but they were right and now they stand taller by far than the alleged giants they were challenging. And I believe that the power beyond ourselves that governs the universe and brings men and nations to judgment has not abdicated. There is a quiet persistence to truth and justice and right. Said Emerson, "The lesson of life is to believe what the years and the centuries say against the hours". And the lesson of faith is to believe what the eternity of God says against the events of the day.

LONG-VIEW AND OUR LIVES

Thus far we have been thinking about the long-view in relation to what goes on in the world. Make it more personal now, and reflect in the second place that we also need this long view with regard to the problems and the crises in our own individual lives. Here, too, there is something more to be said and seen than the immediacy of some event - whether of great joy or of deep sorrow.

One of the dividends of a long pastorate is that some of us can look back over the time that we have spent together and recall some crises that we have shared together. All different kinds. Illness...grief...problems in our church... problems in our community....problems with our children...our parents...ourselves. And as we stand here and look back, we realize that however difficult or scarring those crises may have been, they did not represent the end of the line or the end of the light for us. There was something more to come - of beauty, of joy, and of purpose. How often over the years I have quoted to you and to myself those wonderful lines of Christopher Morley,

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I came across this tribute to a person recently. "He learned to live expectantly with deferred results". How about that for the Christian's long view of life. There are problems and crises and disappointments and discouragement all around us, and they are not to be ignored or glossed over. But a Christian sees through them and beyond them to expect something more in the way of purpose and joy and strength, so that even in the face of the ultimate defeat of death, a Christian is enabled "to live expectantly with deferred results". It was said of Rufus Jones, that great Quaker saint, that,

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PRAYER Eternal Father, strengthen our soulsight, we pray thee, lest the problems and the vexations of the moment blind us to thy eternal purposes. Keep us hopeful, humble and useful - ever confident that there is more to come which will reveal that divine justice and that divine love that never lets us go or lets us down. In the name and spirit of Christ, we pray. Amen

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by

Rev. Philip A. C. Clarke

Second Sunday in Advent
December 9, 1973

PARK AVENUE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

New York, New York

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"CHRISTMAS AND THE MODERN WORLD"

TEXT: "Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the King, behold, there came wise men from the East to Jerusalem" (Matthew 2:1)

INTRODUCTION

I've often wondered if Jesus had been born "in the days" in which you and I live, how his coming would have been handled by the press. Assuming, of course, that the news media had somehow been alerted to the importance of the event, how would it have been handled by the papers, by the television. Would they give it special treatment - a special edition perhaps, or a special program - or would it end up being placed in the midst of the routine news of the world.

DEVELOPMENT

A number of years ago, the editors of the St. Petersburg Times did a rather unusual thing with their Christmas edition. It had on Christmas Day two front pages. And the editors of the paper, in a box on the front page, explained the reason for this unique edition. Under the heading of "Good News Today", they said:

"In keeping with the Christmas spirit and tradition, the Times this morning has two front pages. Only good news and news in the holiday vein appear on this page. For full reports on other happenings around the world, please see the second front page, Page 3 A. Merry Christmas."

And true to their word, this one front page had nothing but good news. The large picture on the front showed Santa Claus, dressed in his red outfit and white whiskers stretched out on a patio chair next to a swimming pool, his boots off, his feet bare, enjoying the warm Florida sunshine. Other stories told of how "Pilgrims Enter Ancient Gates of Holy Land", of the way in which the Christmas spirit helped a needy family in the poverty belt of eastern Kentucky, of the Pope blessing the human family, of a first Christmas in Maine in the year 1604. All of it, of course, very cheerful and heart-warming.

The second front page had the news of the world. And it was quite a contrast. The headline of this front page read, "Cuban Freedom Fighters Praised by President Kennedy". And other headlines told of how "Masked Gunmen Grab \$100,000" in Chicago. Another story dealt with an account of a father and nine children burned to death in a fire in Nova Scotia. Still another headline dealt with a clash in the Congo and the growing threat of war in Viet Nam, and the crash of an airplane as it was coming in for a landing in Japan.

NOT TWO DIFFERENT WORLDS

Two front pages. Two different worlds - at least in the opinion of the editors of the St. Petersburg Times. In doing this, they were creating the impression that these two types of events had nothing to do with each other, that the beauty and the loveliness of Christmas could not be touched by the harsh realities of the modern world, also that the beauty and loveliness of Christmas would have been destroyed by being set side by side with the brutalities of the every day world. And by the same token they may have been creating the impression that there really was nothing in the Christmas story that could have any possible bearing on the events of the modern world. Two worlds - hence, two front pages.

Now I'm not quarreling with the editors for doing this. I'm sure they felt that they were adding to the joy of the Holy Season through this approach. Nevertheless, what a contrast between their approach and the approach of the writers of the Christmas story. Mind you - there are no two front pages in the Biblical account - one announcing the Holy Birth and the other dealing with the historical events of the day. In the Bible, the two accounts are interwoven, kept side by side. We find the haunting loveliness of the Christmas story set down in the very midst of the chronical of human folly, violence, hatred. Perhaps the writers of the Christmas story were trying to suggest that these two worlds be kept together - thereby saving faith from a vapid sentimentality and the world from a suicidal folly.

BIBLICAL SETTING

Remember this that the Holy Birth did not take place in some "never-never" land where no problems existed, where all was serene and ideal. That event took place in a far-out province of a great imperial power which was ruled by rough and ruthless men. And that land in which it took place was small in size, weak in resources, and its people had known nothing but suffering and heart-ache for generations. They had been a pawn in the game of power politics and the tides of war had surged across their land many times. Their memories were bitter; their hopes were fragile.

Luke, in his gospel account, anchors that event in history by recording that the decree for taxation went out "in the day of Caesar Augustus". Matthew, in his account, nailed it down in history by saying that it took place "in the days of Herod the King". Herod - the King. The world has known many a tyrannical ruler - men intoxicated by power, greedy for gain, cruel in method, ruthless in holding on to power. But few rulers have been able to match Herod's record. He massacred priests and nobles; he ordered the strangulation of his favorite wife. His own sons were but a few of those who fell victim to his cruel ways.

Matthew, in his gospel account, also tells of the fear that Herod had when he heard the news of the birth of Jesus. He responded to it by having all the male children in Bethlehem under two years of age slain. The slaughter of the innocent children in Bethlehem is a terrible backdrop for the softness and tenderness of the manger scene. No special page in the Bible for it. It's right there - anchored in the heart of the Biblical account of the birth of Christ. "In the days of Herod, the King"....the record seems quite clear in suggesting to us to keep these events together, and to not let them become separated, divided, set apart from each other.

A TEMPTATION TO SEPARATE

Of course there is a temptation on our part to separate the two, a temptation to keep our religious faith separate from the events of the every day world. There's a temptation to become sentimental about religion, and this is always apt to be a bit stronger at Christmas. The joy, the goodwill, the gaiety - it lifts our spirits. For some it is a bit of an oasis in the midst of life's weary desert. We know we cannot preserve it. But for a few days, at least, we would like to forget the world and center our attention upon the loveliness of this Christmas story.

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The mood is understandable, and perhaps it is good for us to be reminded that angels did sing of peace and goodwill, that men followed a star, that shepherds came to worship. It helps to keep alive in our hearts the reality of the world of the spirit, to remind us that this world does touch our world with gleams of aspiration and with hints of hope.

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There is a danger if we permit ourselves to go too far in letting our religious faith be turned into sentimentality. This is never the vindication of faith, but rather it is the debasement of faith. To become sentimental and unrealistic is not to make the spirit more real, but it is to deny the spirit's relevance for man's daily existence. A sentimental religion has little power to deal with the daily events of men's lives. It has no word to speak to cruel tyrants, no judgment to pronounce upon society, no hope for a divided world. It lives in a little dream-world of its own creation, where all is lovely and harmonious, and hence has no ability to deal with the ugly realities which are a part of our human existence.

What I wish to stress today is:

ANCHOR THE EVENT OF CHRIST IN THE EVENTS OF THE DAY

The person of mature Christian faith anchors

the event of Christ in the events of the day and is bold to affirm that those events find their ultimate solution - their redemption - in the event of Christ. How many there are who refuse to let the Christ Child grow up. For some the extent of faith is apt to be centered in the lovely picture of the Holy Family - Mary, Joseph, the infant child - all touched with such great beauty as on our Christmas cards. For some - it stops there.

But that child grew up into strong, robust manhood. The soft cries of the infant faded and in its place those stirring and haunting words of the Man of Nazareth echoed across the hills of Galilee and found lodging in the hearts of men. "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God". "A certain man had two sons...." "A man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho....and fell among thieves". "Blessed are the peace-makers, for they shall be called the children of God". "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you". "Love your enemies, pray for them that despitefully use you" The songs of the angels died out in the Judean hills and some thirty years later the raucous shouts of the people of Jerusalem rang through the streets of the city, "Crucify Him, Crucify Him". The manger was replaced by a cross; the stable by a garden.

Those penetrating words of George MacLeod of Scotland come to mind:

"I simply argue that the cross be raised again at the center of the market place, as well as on the steeple of the church. I am recovering the claim that Jesus was not crucified in a cathedral between two candles, but on a cross between two thieves, on the town garbage heap; at a cross roads so cosmopolitan that they had to write his title in Hebrew, Latin and Greek (or shall we say in English, in Bantu, in Africano?) at the kind of place where cynics talk smut, and thieves curse, and soldiers gambled - because that is where he died and that is what he died about, and that is where we should be and what churchmanship should be about".

He came into a world filled with darkness and cruelty, a world very much like our own. He faced it with courage, hope, and patience, and we must do the same.

HOPE And as we face our modern world, with all of its complexities, hostilities, and problems, we face it with undiscouragable patience, unlimited good will, and uncalculated generosity - because we have hope. There can be no healing of the wounds of our world except as God himself comes to us. And this - this is the glory of Christmas - that God has come to us in this man called Christ, in that incomparable life lived long ago. He came to us, into the heart of man's

desperate need, with the power of a great love. "Peace on earth - good will to men".....this is the message of hope which Christmas celebrates. And again this year, as was true last year, and for so many Christmases in the past, we celebrate only the hope and not the reality of peace on earth. For in the midst of our affection, there is violence and conflict. In our city of affluence, there is poverty. In our thriving center of culture, there is loneliness and sadness.

The magic of the Christmas season will serve us well if we treat it as an introduction, not a conclusion, to the duty and privilege of Christian discipleship. We come here this hour to adore Him, and that is all to the good if we depart from here determined to serve Him. The hope of a darkened world still rests with Him, born in the manger of Bethlehem, of whom it has been written:

"Here is a young man who was born in an obscure village, the child of a peasant woman. He grew up in another village. He worked in a carpenter's shop until he was 30, and then for three years he was an itinerant preacher. He never wrote a book. He never held public office. He never owned a house. He never had a family. He never went to college. He never put his foot inside a big city. He never travelled 200 miles from the place where he was born. He never did one of the things that usually accompany greatness. He had no credentials but himself.

While still a young man, the tide of public opinion turned against him. His friends ran away. He was turned over to his enemies. He went through the mockery of a trial. He was nailed to a cross between two thieves. While he was dying, his executioners gambled for the only piece of property he had on earth, and that was his coat. When he was dead, he was laid in a borrowed grave through the pity of a friend.

Nineteen wide centuries have come and gone, and today he is the central figure of the human race and the leader of the column of progress.

I am far within the mark when I say that all the armies that ever marched, and all the navies that were ever built, and all the parliaments that ever sat, and all the kings that ever reigned, put together, have not affected the life of man upon this earth as has that One Solitary Life"

LET US PRAY O God, as we try to find our way through the world in which we live, help us to remember how into our imperfect world thou didst once come - simply and quietly - and how the spirit of Christ comes again and again to us, and through us to others to save their lives from sickness and sin, pride and prejudice, fear and faithlessness. Let this spirit, O God, be in us this Christmas time. In his name we pray. Amen