

"THIS TOO SHALL PASS"

A Sermon By

Rev. Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church
106 East 86th Street
New York, New York 10028
Sunday, June 29, 1986

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INTRODUCTION

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DEVELOPMENT

The topic is suggested by our Scripture lessons for today which Julie read for us. It's one of those instances where the Old Testament lesson is the prophecy of the Kingdom of God and the New Testament lesson is the announcement of the fulfillment of that prophecy. The Kingdom of God will one day be here, Isaiah prophesies.

"The eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped. And then shall the lame man leap like a hart and the tongue shall sing for joy".

Then over to the New Testament where Mark says,

"Now let me tell you about this guy over in Decapolis. He was deaf, couldn't hear a thing, he couldn't speak clearly, his speech was always garbled. Then Jesus went over there to Decapolis, and he healed him. Just as Isaiah prophesied, 'the ears of the deaf unstopped, the tongues loosened to sing God's praise'. Now that man can hear and sing just fine."

That's the evidence that Mark gives that the Kingdom is here, that the Kingdom has come with the coming of Jesus. Isaiah said it would happen this way. And Mark says, it has happened...it's here. That's the point Mark wants to get across with all those healing stories. So to be Christian is to believe that the Kingdom has come. And to believe that the Kingdom of God has come is to believe that there is hope and possibility and great power available for all of us in this life. In other words, miracles can happen. Christians ought to rejoice and be glad and sing that the new age has come. The Kingdom's here.

And that's the message of the hymn we just sang, "O For a Thousand Tongues to Sing". It's been called the Methodist hymn, a sort of National Anthem for us. That's why it's Number One. It's reminiscent of Isaiah's prophecy of the Kingdom.

"Hear Him, ye deaf; His praise, ye dumb,
Your loosened tongues employ;
Ye blind, behold your Saviour comes;
And leap, ye lame - for joy!"

To be Christian is to believe that the Kingdom has come, the new age is here. There's new power and new possibility available for life that wasn't there before. All the promises of Isaiah and the other prophets have been fulfilled.

BUT, I HAVE TROUBLE

But I have trouble with that. I have trouble with it for the same reason that Sherwood Anderson said he had trouble with those who said Jesus was the Good Shepherd, who gathers all the stray lambs in His bosom and carries them safely home. Anderson once said, "I'll show you some lambs that Jesus missed."

Not everybody gets healed. We know that. This world may look the way Isaiah prophesied it would look sometimes, but sometimes it doesn't look that way at all. There are some lambs that Jesus missed. So while to be Christian means to believe that the Kingdom of God has come with the coming of Jesus, to be honest means that we must point out that sometimes the world doesn't look like it. The question is: how do you reconcile that?

The best Christian thinking says the Kingdom of God is here and not here. It's like the dawn of a new day. At the dawn the new day has come, it is here, there's no turning back now. The new has arrived. But it is not here in all of its glory, its splendor, its fulness. It's here and it's not here. So Christ brought the Kingdom, the new day. By that light we can see possibilities for human life we didn't know existed before. That light illumines new possibility for human life, but not enough light yet to dispel the shadows.

A MESSAGE OF HOPE Christianity brought a message of hope to a despairing world. The light has come into the world, it said. We see "By dawn's early light". But that was enough. Because of that light mankind would never be the same. They said if God visited our world in human flesh, then human flesh will never be the same. The early Church fathers put it this way:

"Because God became man, man can now become like God. We can even say that human possibility is limitless; we've seen it."

You and I have that great possibility. The light from the coming of Jesus into our world has shown us that.

Think of all of those healing stories in the Gospels in that light. To some He approached, He said: "Do you really want to be healed?" as if you had something to do with it. And to others He said, "Do you have faith?" as if faith had some relationship with health. To others He said, "Stop killing yourself. Your sins are forgiven" - as if guilt had something to do with disease.

There's enough evidence there to suggest that the New Testament healings were not so much done by supernatural power as by the release of natural power locked up in each one of us. As if faith and hope and love have something to do with health. So I thought up this axiom: "Immunology is influenced by theology". And if you don't want to write that one down, then I'll give you another one coined by Hoover Rupert. He once said this:

"That our task as Christians is not so much to believe in the future as to believe the future in"

I like that...amazing. And it's a good way to express the Christian confidence in the possibilities of human life when it's redeemed, when the Messiah has come.

He's come! The light has come into the darkness. The darkness could not put it out, according to the Gospel of John. The new is here. It's like the dawn of a new day. We can see things now that we couldn't see in the darkness. We don't have to live the way we use to. We can take up our beds and walk.

That's the first point of this message.

THIS NEEDS TO BE SAID

But then we need to say this, and this is just as important. To speak of the dawn is to speak of something that is both here and not here. It's here in the beginning. It's not here in its fullness. There's light enough to have hope, but there's not light enough to dispel all the doubts.

For instance, one can point to patients who survived cancers...who had the will to fight, confidence in the future, the ability to handle stress. What must also be pointed out is that there are a lot who didn't make it who had the will to fight, who had confidence in the future, and the ability to handle stress in their lives. I've seen it and I'm certain you have, too. Yes, there are some lambs that Jesus missed.

The Kingdom is here. That's true. And yet it is not here. We wait as often as we dance. We do without as often as we possess. We can control some things in our lives because of the great power that is given to us. We are controlled by some things in this life because of our impotence. We can do amazing things because of our intelligence. We still do some dumb things because of our ignorance. The Kingdom has come, so life is what it should be, now and then. But there are vast territories of life where it is not what it should be. So we still pray, "Thy Kingdom come. Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven".

THE NEW TESTAMENT AND OLD TESTAMENT

The New Testament is the time of fulfillment and the Old Testament is the time of waiting and of promise. That's why the Old Testament is a part of our Bible, because it describes the times in which you and I must live, some of the time. Times when what we hope for hasn't come - not yet. Times when the healing that we pray for and want so desperately doesn't come, and there doesn't seem to be anything that we can do to control its coming. Times when the world doesn't seem to shape up the way we want it to be, but continues to be messy. We wait as often as we dance for joy. It's like the times of the Old Testament, the time of waiting and the time of promise, when Isaiah said,

"Be strong. Fear not. Behold, your God will come and save you!"

And there are times when that's all the Christian faith can honestly say to you, "Be strong and fear not". You may have great power in some areas of your life, but in this one, where things are happening right now, it may be that they are out of your hands. So put them in God's hands. "Be strong. Fear not..."

A man named Edward Madden climbed the GW Bridge and sat on one of those girders up there. A crowd gathered, the police came and ordered him down, then a priest tried to talk him down. All were unsuccessful. Another man in the crowd named Homer Wright asked if he could go up and try to talk him down. They let him. You could see the two men sitting on a girder 450 above the river...talking. They started to climb down. Once down Edward Madden was taken away by the police to a hospital and the reporters crowded around Homer Wright.

"How did you get through to him?" they asked. "Well" he said, "I felt for the guy. He's got real trouble. But then I talked to him about my troubles. I said to him, "A man has to stick with it". Well, sometimes that's all the Christian faith can honestly say to you. "Stick with it. Don't give up. Be strong. A day at a time...that's all any of us can do....let go and let God". And remember, this too shall pass!"

Sometimes we see the evidence that the Kingdom is here. The ears are un-stopped, the tongues loosened, the lame leap for joy. And other times we see the evidence that the Kingdom is not everywhere, not yet. And we must still wait and be strong.

This sermon is preached to salute those who - in Christian faith - still wait for their Lord to come and save them, and who display a strength and a courage and a serenity every bit as much a testimony to human greatness and to God's grace as those who leap for joy.

We've seen enough of life to know that not everyone gets healed. Jesus, remember, healed precious few people, just a handful, I suppose, compared to the vastness of human misery that existed in His day. You see the healings were something of a hint of what was to come when the Kingdom comes in its fullness. Right now, it's just a hint. And what is even more important, Jesus identified Himself with the suffering of the world. He refused to run away from it. That's what the cross of Christ means. And that's why in Catholic hospitals they often place a crucifix on the wall opposite the patient's bed, so that the person lying there can see that Jesus bore His cross not so that we wouldn't have to, but because someday we may have to. The meaning of the cross, therefore, is not that we are relieved of that human, painful responsibility, but to show us how to carry it triumphantly.

OUR SITUATION TODAY

Our situation today is no different than it was in the day of Jesus. There are healings, miracles and we rejoice. And there are those in the vast majority who wait. In the first instance, their faith has made them well. In the second instance, their faith has made them strong and brave and beautiful. You've seen it and so have I. Marvelous, beautiful people. They don't boast how God has healed them. They speak softly about how God has strengthened them.

George Bernard Shaw carried on a correspondence with a cloistered nun over many years. In one of his letters he wrote this to her:

"Next time when I am in your neighborhood I will look through the bars of the window in your cell and see the freedom on the other side."

And I have felt that way about those who have lived in the prisons of bad health or prisons of broken dreams or all kinds of fate that they didn't ask for and they don't deserve. They don't complain. They don't have self-pity. Instead they have a kind of peace of mind and a patience and a courage that I must confess - I envy. I have looked into their lives, into their eyes and marvelled at the freedom on the other side. God has not passed them by. He has graced their lives with a beauty that I, in my health, don't have and want.

CLOSING

There's a story about an Eastern monarch who had a beautiful ring fashioned for him to wear by the skillful jewelers of His kingdom. The ring had space for a small message on it. There was space for about 16 letters. He summoned the Wise Men of his Kingdom; they came from over the land. Said to King to them:

"Provide me with a message that will fit in the space, 16 letters, a message that will speak to me no matter what the situation, whether I am in joy or in despair, a message that will speak to me at all seasons of my life"

The Wise Men departed and spent several days in deep thought pondering the message that would fit, that would be appropriate. They came back to the King a week later with only one suggestion and this was it:

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It was a message that would speak to the King at all times, and in all seasons - times of joy and times of sorrow, times of despair and disappointment. "This Too Shall Pass". Perhaps there's some one person in the congregation today who needs to hear that word and carry it out of here with him or with her today.

PRAYER Our lives are not always easy, Dear God, and we do ask for the faith and the strength, for the courage and the perspective to meet the difficult things that the days may bring to us.

Open our eyes to the shining things that lie ahead of us. Help us to put the past behind, and then to pour all of our energies into the race that lies before us, keeping our eyes steadfast on Him who for us is the Way, the Truth and the Life - even Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen

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