

"THOSE WERE THE DAYS...."

INTRODUCTION All told, I suppose I have gone out fishing no more than a dozen times in my life. And in no instance did I ever pose a serious threat to anything that lives in water. To be truthful about it, my heart was never really in it.

But there are people for whom fishing is a lively interest - if not a livelihood. Ardent fishermen regularly charter boats and venture out into the ocean for a catch. Their hopes rest on the man who serves as guide and captain. He takes them to the right spot. At least that's the idea. However, there are times when the captain cannot deliver. Try as he may he cannot discover where the fish are running.

In such a circumstance, his defense is both ancient and predictable,

"You should have been here yesterday. What a day it was! That's when the blues were running. Never saw so many in my life. One school after another. You should have been here yesterday".

SO MUCH INTRODUCTION.

DEVELOPMENT If I grasp their conversation correctly that's what Cleopas and his friend were saying that day as they journeyed on the Emmaus Road. Travelling on foot from Jerusalem, they were overtaken by a stranger. It was late afternoon on the world's first Easter.

"What is this conversation that you are holding with each other as you walk?" asked the stranger. Irritated by what they took to be a rather stupid question, they replied, "Are you the only visitor to Jerusalem who does not know the things that have happened there these days?" But the stranger would not be deterred. "What things?" He asked.

And then - for themselves as well as for this stranger who had joined them in their walk, they reviewed their disappointment - concerning Jesus of Nazareth who was a prophet mighty in deed and word....but our chief priests and rulers condemned Him to death and crucified Him....we had hoped that He was the one.... it is now three days since it happened.

They were putting Jesus away into the past tense. The let-down and the sadness that they felt comes through with arresting force. "Those were the days friend. You should have been here yesterday".

COUNTRY Some there are who feel this way about their country. These are difficult days and difficult years for most Americans. The myth of national innocence has been rudely shaken...indeed, shattered...and one suspects, irreparably so. Many of our countrymen live with a sense of vanishing glory.

We wince at fresh disclosures of the antics of the CIA. Our cities are in a fight for their very lives. Many are hungry and without work. We've seen evidence of lack of integrity in high places. Watergate and Vietnam have left deep scars that will take years to heal. Did the 50,000 Americans who died in Vietnam die in vain?

Then we recall the America of the Currier and Ives prints wherein every-

thing seemed to hang together and serenity clothed our land. We recall the America that was given us in school - the America of song and ballad. We bring out the memories and the men of the past to re-open Yankee Stadium and it feels good. Ruth, Gehrig, DiMaggio, Mantle, Berra. What giants they were! There's a great deal of nostalgia in this year of the bi-centennial. We can only say in our present discomfort - "those were the days...you should have been here yesterday".

CHURCH Some there are who feel this way about the Church. The Old Testament gives us a highly dramatic rendering of an event that deserves to be better known among Christian people. It has to do with the return of the Israelites to their land following a period of captivity in Babylon. The Book of Ezra tells us how the regathered exiles were intent on rebuilding the temple. This was a theocracy. The first thing that needed to be restored was not a fortress, but the place of worship.

So, the Elders and the people gathered for the laying of a foundation for the new temple. Listen to how Ezra describes it:

"And when the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the Lord, the priests in their vestments came forward with trumpets, and the Levites...with cymbals, to praise the Lord according to the directions of David, the King of Israel....and all the people shouted with a great shout....because the foundation of the House of the Lord was laid.

But many of the priests and Levites and heads of fathers' houses, old men who had seen the first house, wept with a loud voice when they saw the foundation of this house being laid."

Some of the oldsters there remembered Solomon's temple in all its splendor. Even though the trumpets blared and the cymbals clanged, their hearts were heavy. They recalled a yesterday that made the present seem like a distant second. This is a fine temple that you folks are building, but it is not as good as the one we used to have.

As for us, we recall an era when the Church, we think, was more obviously endowed with the glory of God. We keep torturing ourselves over some imagined yesterday - the early Church, the beginnings of Christendom under Constantine, the middle ages with its untroubled certainties, the Reformation Era, the revivalist years under the irresistible, John Wesley, the beginnings of the modern missionary movement in the 19th Century. (In those days there were giants in the earth), or even the religious boom in American in the late forties and fifties.

You should have been here then. Those were great days.

THEMSELVES Some there are who feel this way about themselves - especially about their experience of God. Most of us carry with us some solid and vivid memories of moving religious experiences. If asked to discuss what God means to us we are likely to say, "I remember when...." That "When" can be the day you joined the Church as a youngster. That morning when people surrounded you with welcoming love; when Jesus was real and uncomplicated; when prayer was simple trust; when duty was clear.

Or, that "when" could be for you an evening in your teens when you sat around a campfire at a summer church camp and God seemed "nearer than hands and feet". That "when" could be for you the whole community at Chautauqua singing, "Day Is Dying In the West" under the rafters of that great amphi-theatre. Or, that "when" might have been hearing the "Hallelujah Chorus" on Easter Sunday following the death of a loved one. That "when" could be the ecstasy and the challenge that you felt when you watched a film on the life of Albert Schweitzer. "I remember when.....those were the days....you should have been here".

NONSENSE And the whole thing really is a lot of nonsense. It's a lot of rubbish. To idealize and romanticize the past and denigrate the present is a common, expensive human frailty. Yes, frailty - because the past was never that good and the present is never that bad!

The America of our school days was a noble republic to be sure, but it had its faults. There was corruption back there. There were some unjustified wars, too - not to mention some indefensible skirmishes with the American Indians. There were depressions back there. Minority rights back there were flagrantly and consistently repressed.

And the Church even in its earliest years was riddled with problems - most of them people problems. It would be interesting sometime to read Paul's Letters and ask what the questions were that he was trying to answer. Most of them were pretty simple. I think there were times when Paul must have thought that he was running a spiritual infant-Day-Care Center.

And what shall we say of the Christianity of the Eisenhower years? The Christianity of those years so identified faith with material well-being that people didn't know whether they were happy because they were "in-Christ" or because they were "in the chips".

And your own past, the one you clutch to yourself, was not really all that good and great. You had your doubts once the emotions finally simmered down. You knew that there were still many areas to bring beneath the rule of Christ - corporate ethics, for example, or race relations, your arts and pleasures, and yes - your body. The past was never that good - not the nation's past, nor the church's past, not even your own past! Take off the rose colored glasses. ++

THE COROLLARY The corollary, of course, is that the present is never that bad.

However unsettling it may be to belong to this Republic now, the nation is not without its merits. There is a strength - a moral strength - that continues to be felt in this land. Personally I believe it's wrong to say that the United States could not win in Vietnam. It is truer to say that we chose not to win in Vietnam. Moral forces were generated in this country that were given sufficient receptivity to keep this nation from using all of its hardware that it might have used to win.

There is a concern building in this country to do something about the enormous disparities of wealth and power that cause so much strife at home and abroad. And I doubt that there is a state anywhere in the world in which the concerns of the "have-nots" are taken to heart with greater seriousness than here.

One of our young adult girls, Judy Wilska, got married yesterday in Old Chatham which is upstate, just a few miles south of Albany. It was a lovely wedding. After the wedding, I drove into Albany. I've been wanting to see the new Mall that all of us have helped to build. Really something. But even more than wanting to see the new mall, I was anxious to see and poke around that part of the city that I new so well as a boy.

I was reared on the streets of Albany back in the late 30's and early 40's...I loved it....excitement of the city....trolley cars, big and busy streets, big buildings....hugh churches...

After I got home last night, I told my wife - the buildings aren't as big as they use to be....and the streets aren't nearly as wide as I remembered them....not as many people around. The brownstone we lived in and loved....run down. That hugh backyard where I first learned to play baseball isn't as vast as I had rememered it...PS 22 and PS 21 - the grade schools I went to...much smaller and the church there at Lexington and Clinton - much smaller than I remembered it.

Even that great, hugh statue of Moses in Washington Park that my father loved...and which I use to look up and see....it's been reduced in size...scaled down....

I guess I've been romanticizing a bit over the years. Looking at it through some rose colored glasses.

And the Church. I thank God that I am part of the church now. I don't spend much time reading about the history of the church. Most of us would prefer to make some history so that future generations can read about us. The Church is far less Gnostic today than it use to be - far less given over to idle focussing on the life to come. At high and low levels in the church's life we are coming to see that we are responsible for this thing called history. Slowly but surely the Cross is reappearing in the Church.

When it comes to "personal" religion, it's a hard thing to keep one's experience of God untrammled - to feel always at peace with the present situation. But are we not more honest with regard to our doubts today? Are we not better equipped than our mothers and fathers to handle controversy? It used to be in the churches that I knew anything about that everything controversial was kept outside. We had the peace of the cemetery within, and we didn't wish it broken. But now we've learned to fight and to love at the same time - to wrestle and to pray together. This is healthy and good. Most of the Christians I know are working hard to understand what it really means to be a responsible human being in a highly complex world. The present is not all that bad. There are some encouraging signs around us that we may be on the brink of a meaningful religious revival in this country.

BACK TO EMMAUS

But back to the Emmaus Road and Jesus. Back to that beautiful scene of the post-resurrection appearance of our Lord. The stranger went with them and interpreted for them their history. He showed them, as it were, the news behind the news. He stayed for supper, and as He broke the bread, we read that "their eyes were opened and they knew Him".

The point is that He had not come to pass, but rather to stay. Jesus who died is alive and His spirit is at work in the world. This is the grand theme that runs through the New Testament. "Lo - I am with you always". We need to remember that and take heart.

No past period that the world has known has been that worthy of being eternalized; that's why history rolls on. The times are not in competition with each other, for Christ is equally present in each.

"Those were the days" Nonsense! "You should have been here yesterday!" Forget it, I say.

I should like to believe that God is waiting for you here at this very moment - at this very place - and nowhere else!

PRAYER

Make us sensitive to thy nearness in these moments, O God. Help us with wide and welcoming arms to embrace the present - to know it as thy dwelling place. Grant that no worship of the past may work to hide thee from our sight - here and now. We ask this in the spirit of Jesus who said, "Lo, I am with you always". Amen