

"WHAT DO YOU KNOW - FOR SURE?"

INTRODUCTION

The sermon today begins from a word picture that Carl Sandburg drew of an incident in his early days of traveling by railroad.

This is what he wrote:

"I have always enjoyed riding up front in a smoking car, in a seat back of the railroaders going back to the home base. Their talk about each other runs free....Once I saw a young fireman in overalls take a seat and slouch down easy and comfortable. After a while a brakeman in a blue uniform came along and planted himself along side the fireman. They didn't say anything....the two of them didn't even look at each other. Then the brakeman, looking straight ahead, was saying, 'Well, what do you know today?' and kept on looking straight ahead till suddenly he turned and stared the fireman in the face, adding, 'For sure'. I thought it was a keen and intelligent question, 'What do you know today - for sure?'"

THIS QUESTION KEEPS COMING UP

This is a question that keeps coming before us in so many different areas of life today. "What do you really know - for sure?" So many of the old dogmatic certainties seem to come unstuck in the light of the fast breaking developments of our time. How many of us grew up in homes, where in response to some outlandish, childish request, we would hear a parent say: "Now you might as well expect to fly to the moon as to expect that!" A moon flight was the ultimate in the impossible and the incredulous. And yet here we are at the end of a Summer that saw two men walk on the surface of the moon.

Earlier this week I heard an advertisement on the radio for a new dictionary, distinguished by "hundreds of new words with new meanings". I looked at my dictionary on my desk, my trusted guide for over twenty years, and realized sadly that it may be facing an early retirement, because it is becoming out-dated and out-distanced in its offering of knowledge. So with the old text-books, the old magazines, the old maps, the old guides of any kind. Study them and see how far we have come in extension and sometimes in contradiction of the certainties that they have proclaimed. What Lincoln said one hundred years ago is true today in ways he could never have anticipated:

"The dogmas of the quiet past are inadequate to the stormy present"

MOOD OF SEARCH IN RELIGION

This mood of search and change, as you know, has penetrated into the life of the church and the realm of man's religious knowledge. No branch of the church has been exempt, but perhaps the change has been most dramatic in the Roman Catholic Church, which had accumulated a sizeable collection of dogma. Some of these have been declared obsolete, as with the demotion last Spring of venerable saints like St. Christopher and St. Nicholas. Small wonder that a friend of mine who is a priest reports the despair of an aged parishioner coming out of modern mass on a Sunday morning and saying to him, "But Father, where is the old church...." - echoes of which can be heard on occasion in this or any other church when people feel the winds of change and questioning blowing upon the old customs and certainties. Especially in the field of religion, more and more people are asking that railroad brakeman's question: "What do you know - for sure?"

Someone put the question to me recently while I was relaxing on the beach one sunny afternoon in Maine, someone reflecting upon the incredible event of

July 20th, someone searching apparently for a map and a compass for life's journey. And this friend in effect said: "Look preacher....don't talk to me now in terms of the creeds of the church, with long and learned statements by the theologians. Tell me, what can we know....what do you know - for sure?"

Any attempt to answer that question needs to be preceded by a word of caution - that in any realm knowledge has its limitations. It was the poet Coleridge who said it clearly: "Make any truth too definite and you make it too small." It reminds us of an observation offered to us by one of our present day scientists:

"Intelligence is almost useless to those who possess nothing else. The pure intellectual is an incomplete human being. He is unhappy because he is not capable of entering the world he understands".

This is especially true with regard to religion. No one ever comes to a mature, vital faith simply on the basis of an intellectual acceptance of a set of facts. There are other ingredients that are involved - emotions and experiences and risks and leaps of faith - God acting and man reacting.

Nonetheless, my friend's question is a valid one, and the attempt to answer is a healthy exercise for anyone, in appraising the foundations upon which the super-structure of his faith is built. "What do you know - for sure?" Each of us would put his answer in different ways and words, but here is one attempt to answer the question, and the answer comes in two parts.

POWER BEYOND MY OWN First, I know that there is a power beyond my own - a power which the generations have called God and which Jesus taught us to address as "Father". This power beyond my own leaves its signature in a variety of ways.

One of its signatures is in the world of nature and creation. I suppose that this is what Frank Berman was getting at when he said that his December flight through space simply strengthened his faith in God - the orderliness of it all - the stars in the sky - the planets in their orbit - and a man able to chart his course to the moon because certain factors are so dependable. "I saw the evidence that God lives" is what he said. And so on Christmas Eve last December one of the astronauts read from the Scriptures in space, "In the beginning, God". Kirtly Mather, the astronomer, at MIT once said, "Turn you telescope on the heavens and there you find the foot print of God". "When I look at thy heavens, the moon and the stars which thou hast established..." said the psalmist of old.

But I guess I respond even more to the signature that I find in a rose. Think about the way one grows a rose. It is, in a way, utterly presumptuous. There are a few little things one can do - in the way of digging and feeding and spraying. But the real miracle of a rose - the bush stirring from its winter sleep, the buds forming, the flower unfolding, the color and the fragrance added - all that is quite beyond our power to arrange. Somebody has said that if he were God, he would surely have a more active public relations department, with a sign on every tree and bush and flower. "This comes to you through the courtesy of the Almighty". The poet Wordsworth in Line From Tintern Abbey put it so beautifully:

"And I have felt....A presence that disturbs me with the joy
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime -
Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean, and the living air,

And the blue sky, and the mind of man:
A motion and a spirit, that impels all thinking things,
All objects of all thought,
And rolls through all things."

Then, I suppose that most of all I am aware of God's signature as creator when I hold a child in my arms, as last Sunday evening when a number of us celebrated the baptism of a little infant boy, or when I look, as I did the other evening, through the glass at the new born infants in the maternity ward of New York Hospital. The miracle of a person and all of the possibilities of personhood. "Thou hast made him a little lower than the angels, and hast crowned with him glory and honor. Thou hast given him dominion over the works of thy hands. Thou hast put all things under his feet".

But there are other places than nature and creation where one finds evidence of God's signature. There's a moral order at work as well. You can't always see it in the immediate hours and days, but you can see it in the years and the centuries. What a man sows, that he also reaps. If a house is built on sand, it falls. Chickens come home to roost. There are certain moral laws woven into the fabric of the universe and a man does not so much succeed in breaking them - as in being broken by them. Again - a person sees the signature of a power not his own!

There's still more to that signature than the evidence of a natural law and a moral law. There is the dimension to this power that is personal - sufficient love and grace and strength which comes to us - to meet us - in our personal lives. This power has different names and forms. Sometimes it is a conversion, when it means a radical change in a person's life. Dr. Fosdick knew the founder of Alcoholics Anonymous, and one day that man said to the preacher: "If ever you find someone who does not believe in God, send him to me. I know..."

More often, perhaps it is the gift of grace and strength beyond our own at some particular point of need in our lives. This is what Paul was singing about in a prison cell, of all places: "I can do all things in Him who strengthens me". Now a lot of us....as we look ahead at the assorted possibilities on the horizon of a new season aren't so sure that we are able for anything, even with Him who strengthens us. But then we look back and realize again and again, there has been love enough and light enough for some bend in the road and some steep stretch in the climb. There are moments, at least, when we catch the glimpse of the basis of that simple, old fashioned faith that Ethel Waters use to sing about in that old Gospel hymn:

"Why should I be discouraged? Why should the shadows come?
For his eye is on the sparrow, and I know he watches me."

"What do you know - for sure?" We describe it and express it in different ways, but many present in this congregation this morning could say that we know that there is a power beyond our own, and that this power which we call God is personal.

JESUS CHRIST PERSISTS There is a second aspect of my own answer to this question which is before us. I also know that Jesus Christ persists, reveals the best, and comes through to me in such a way that I respond "Master". There is, to my way of thinking, a certain miracle inherent in the simple statement that "Jesus Christ persists". How incredible that a country carpenter from a dusty corner of the earth should outlast and out-influence the Herods, the Pilates, the Caesars of the centuries. How can you describe it - the influence of that One Solitary Life? The world is not done with Him, and countless numbers still call him "Master".

We call Him "Master" because we glimpse that he is right in his guidance for our individual lives. We may follow afar off, but inwardly we know that He is right when He describes and demonstrates a life-style in terms like this: "If any man would find his life, he must lose it in something beyond himself". "He who is greatest among you must be your servant". "It has been said unto you, hate... but I say love..." "What shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world, but lose his own soul." That is the way he talked...and that is the way He lived... and we can never quite get away from the conviction that here is "the truth, the way, the life" that mankind so desperately needs.

Yes, we call him "Master" because we glimpse that he is right in His guidance for our world and our society. As we begin to see where the alternatives are leading us, he stands increasingly confirmed in such affirmations as "All who take the sword will perish by the sword...." "Blessed are the peacemakers..." "By this all men will know that you are my disciples if you have love for one another". "Inasmuch as you have done it unto the least of these you have done it unto me". George Bernard Shaw was not a churchman, not even an orthodox believer, but this is what he said:

"I am ready to admit that after contemplating the world and human nature for nearly sixty years, I see no way out of the world's misery but the way which would have been found by ^{de Kretz} Christ if he had undertaken the work of a modern practical statesman".

And we call Him "Master" because there is something persistently personal about his appeal to us. We see ourselves in the people that he helped back to heights and health. We hear his words as though they were addressed to us in person to person calls. We see ourselves standing in the light of the cross, named as beneficiaries of the love that shone through Him. When you look at Jesus it is like standing in a moonbeam at the seashore on a clear night. Move either way and it follows you. Move any way through life and he follows - personal, persistent.

I know that Jesus Christ persists, reveals the best, and comes through to many in such a way that we respond, "Master".

CLOSING

There are times when a person needs to stand back and remember that Christianity did not begin with a creed. It began with a person - One who came into the world and by the spirit and power of his life got through to an increasing number of people in such a way that made a decisive difference in their lives.

This is where vital, personal religions still begins. Let a person begin with what he knows - the reality of a power greater than his own - and the persistent relevance of Jesus Christ. These are twin realities - that taken seriously - and acted upon and lived out - could lead one on to some other great affirmations of faith, as for example, that declaration of Paul read earlier in the service: "I have become absolutely convinced that neither death nor life... neither what happens today nor what may happen tomorrow - nor anything else in God's whole world has any power to separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord!"

PRAYER

Open our hearts and our minds that we may be true to the highest that we know. Then keep us, we pray thee, growing in our faith and in our faithfulness in the days of this new season into which we now enter. In the name and spirit of Christ, we pray.

NAME

REFERRED TO

HOME ADDRESS

TEL.

FIRST ATTENDED

CHURCH BACKGROUND

OCCUPATION

SINGLE

MARRIED

CHILDREN

COMMENTS