

"WHATEVER HAPPENED TO SACRIFICE?"

TEXT: "Behold the fire and the wood; but where is the lamb?"
(Genesis 22: 7)

INTRODUCTION The story of Abraham offering up his son on Mt. Moriah is a classic. The language is majestic and the theme profoundly warm and human. This opening line sets it all in motion:

"After these things God tested Abraham, and said to him, 'Abraham!' And he said, 'Here am I'. He said, 'Take your son, your only son, Issac, whom you love and go to the land of Moriah and offer him there....'"

From there we're taken on a three day journey with the patriarch and the son of his latter years. Presently the critical site is reached where the lad asks with great innocence, "Behold the fire and the wood; but where is the lamb?" Abraham raises the knife in obedience to God's supposed command, at which time a ram is spotted in a near-by thicket. The offering takes place and the son is spared.

No sane person can come within reach of such a tale and not react. Some will want to fight and say "Rubbish. A God who orders a man to slay his son is more demonic than divine!" Others will see this drama as more the ordeal of Issac than the trial of Abraham. Kierkegaard viewed this episode as an example of the high demands of faith and gave it major treatment in his Fear and Trembling.

In that work, Kierkegaard has Abraham shift the burden, the charge from God to himself. At the right moment, Abraham turns against his son, seizes him by the throat, throws him to the ground and shouts, "Stupid boy, dost thou suppose that I am thy father? I am an idolater. Dost thou suppose that this is God's bidding? No, it is my desire". And then Issac trembled and cried out in terror, 'O God in heaven, have compassion upon me. God of Abraham, have compassion upon me. If I have no father up on earth, be thou my father!' But Abraham in a low voice said to himself, 'O Lord in heaven, I thank Thee. After all it is better that I am a monster, rather than that he should lose faith in Thee'.

For my part today, I simply want to underscore within the story one abiding truth, namely that sacrifice is a vital part of Biblical religion.

RELIGION WITHOUT SACRIFICE Religion without sacrifice is nothing more than an exercise in words and gestures. Let Issac instruct us here. He knew the purpose of this trip. On the third day he heard his father say to the two servants who had accompanied them, "Stay with the donkey, and I and the boy will go yonder and worship." There is no authentic worship ever without an offering up.

Out on Mt. Moriah the wood was assembled, the fire readied. Yet, something vital was missing. "Behold the fire and the wood; but where is the lamb?" The physical furniture was there. The props, as it were. The religious paraphernalia. The fixtures. Lacking still was a life symbolically or actually offered up. We have here a principle that runs through all of life - a truth that will never be out-grown.

NATIONAL LIFE It is this dimension of sacrifice that we abandon to our peril. One can sense its absence in our national life. "Behold the

constitution and the machinery of government, but where is the lamb?" That is, where is the willingness - in high place or low - to sacrifice for the common good?

Every culture is held together by commonly shared myths. Where are our centering myths today? We are divided and disillusioned as a nation because in government and industry the figures that so often seem to stand out in clear relief are the grasping, conniving, maneuvering types who never tire of pressing for personal advantage.

Instead of a George Washington praying in the snows of Valley Forge, or a Lincoln unburdening his soul "off camera" in an empty church, we have had a man in the White House in recent years obsessed with living like a king and converting his several residences into palaces that would do a monarch proud. ~~I share with you my feelings and say,~~ that as a citizen of this nation, I do not feel at all comfortable with the pardon and the proposed check for \$850,000 for expenses. I feel it is wrong. To me the pardon is the right act, but at the wrong time.

And what shall we say of industry. Back in mid-January, you may recall that the President of EXXON held a press conference and calmly acknowledged that earnings in the last quarter of 1973 were up 59% over the same period a year ago, and that earnings for the whole year were up 59% over the previous year. Most of these gains were registered at the very time when the nation was feeling the crunch of an energy crisis. One credits this executive for his courage. For all to hear, he said:

"I am not embarrassed....this is not a windfall. When we get the profits up we make our investments more attractive to the public."

How can we fault him? He is playing the same game we are, only more effectively.

Is this the myth? - the grasping, the conniving, the self-serving public-bemadamed entity? If so, it is not a conjunctive myth, but a disjunctive one. It wakens the worst in us all and arouses in every man the desire to get his cut.

"Behold the Constitution and the machinery of government, but where is the lamb?"

REFORMIST GROUPS

We sense the absence of sacrifice in many reformist groups.

"Behold the cause and the people; but where is the lamb?"

It's a common pattern. Some brave soul rises up with vision in his heart, powered by zeal and dedication, to set things right. In the early going devotion and commitment produce measurable gains. Then, alas, it happens, almost inevitably among Chicanos, Indians, blacks, welfare recipients, labor unions. The zealous leader is offered a position within the Establishment. He eases into the good life. A dream is slowly surrendered. The fires of an early passion are banked. Presently he finds himself aligned with the very forces that rip his people apart.

IN OUR HOMES

We sense the absence of sacrifice in our homes. "Behold the house and the furnishings, but where is the lamb?"

In many of our homes, we have wall-to-wall carpeting, our hi-fi and stereos, our colored TVs, our gadgets and conveniences and more than a fair share of the goodies we read about in the ads. And with what results? Bickerings, misunderstandings, cold wars, credibility gaps, estrangements, divorces.

You can mark it down when you see a happy family that it didn't get that way by accident. At least one person in that home has sacrificed time or energy or power or independence or the right to make unilateral decisions or convenience. "Behold the house and the furnishings, but where is the lamb?"

IN THE CHURCH At times I sense the absence of sacrifice in the church. "Behold the beautiful sanctuary, the sounds of the organ, the program, the related paraphernalia - but where is the lamb?"

The Christian Church has fallen upon some difficult days, some hard times. And I, for one, get a little tired of hearing the excuses that people are apt to offer, blaming it on outside forces: the spirit of the age, the time in which we live, the secular city, demographical data. I think the fault is largely in ourselves. We live in the era of the pampered athlete, the pampered executive, the pampered student, the pampered patient, and one might add - the pampered parishioner.

The exiled Psalmist could stand up and ask, "How can we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?" Our problem is far worse - for the land is not strange to us. We find it rather congenial to our flickering standards and uncertain values. We are not in Babylon. Babylon is in us.

I believe there is really nothing wrong with the church - in America or anywhere else - that sacrifice could not cure. For sacrifice is the sacrament of love, and love is still the strongest forces the world has ever known. Hence, I plead for some real passion on your part and mine as we begin another season.

I suppose if I had to choose between passion without organization and organization without passion, I think I would choose the former every time. That may surprise some of you who know how I like to get things organized and put together for good operation. A kind of sterility overtakes human endeavor that has reached a plateau of success. It can happen in a church and we must see to it that it doesn't happen to us. And so I plead with you today for some renewal of passion on your part as we go forward. Some willingness to sacrifice, to put one's self out for the church. You say...but I don't have time? I think one can always find the time for that which he considers to be vital and important.

Are we passing by Mt. Moriah? As though somehow by skillful manipulation of inheritance, of building, program and work of a few, we could get away without the sacrifice of ourselves. If we won't bestir ourselves to learn the meaning of our faith, if we will not give our money to the point of pain (give until it hurts as the southern Baptists say), if we cannot be counted upon to be faithfully present when the family gathers for prayer and worship, if we are intent on getting care rather than giving care, we don't deserve the right to influence the world for God - and we won't! Even God could not bid for the hearts of people without His sacrifice on Calvary.

"Behold the building and program and paraphernalia, but where is the lamb?"

MATHEMATICS OF THE KINGDOM Ever since I was a boy in Sunday School, I have always been intrigued by the mathematics of the kingdom. It doesn't take many. Just a few. Abraham engaged in the first instance of collective bargaining anywhere on record when he interceded for the city of Sodom. "If I find 50 righteous men will you spare it?" God answered "yes". "45?" asked Abraham. "Yes" was God's answer. Still sensing that he was a little high, he then asked, "What about 40?" Again God replied, "Yes". "30?" "Yes". "Twenty?" "Yes". "Even for 10 I will spare the city". Ten who really cared could have been the salvation of that city.

We read in another place, "One shall chase a thousand, and two shall put ten thousand to flight". We can tolerate the ice around the edges provided there is real commitment at the core. I believe life is responsive to our best efforts and that sacrifice still makes its mark.

I conclude with the story of Sallie Chesham, an officer in the Salvation Army. This young woman went out to the city of Chicago and started a coffee house for teenagers called The Old Hat. In her book, she tells how a young teenage black friend veered away from his good intentions and was stricken with a bad conscience. The boy's name is Terry. Terry has hugh hands, the hands of an athlete. Northwestern University, the White Sox, and the Chicago Bears were all interested in him. He had lifted a lady's purse out of a desperate need for money.

Sallie tells what happened. "I took Terry's big, ham hands that one day might carry a pigskin for the Chicago Bears and attempting to put my own about them, I asked my Lord to accept them and use them for His glory. Then Terry prayed a simple prayer as we stood there together -- something like this" -

"Help me not to be usin' them for bad - just good. Take my hands - all of me - and make me so I be doin' nice things for people....like old folks and small children. I like to help. Make my hands stronger so I can be a big help in the world. Amen, God".

"Behold the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb?" Sacrifice is a part of Biblical religion. A religious faith without it is nothing more than an exercise in words and gestures. How do we measure up?

PRAYER Forgive us, Lord, for wishing to achieve that for which we will not strive.

Where we have grown soft and indulgent and selfish.
Where we have babied ourselves and catered to our weaknesses.
Where we have wished to be coddled rather than challenged.
Where we have replaced a religion of conviction with a religion of convenience, smite us. Lift us up. Make us whole.

Through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen