

"WHY BOTHER ABOUT GOD?"

INTRODUCTION

The sermon today begins with a story about a young couple. You all know them, the only thing is that the couple you know is not the same one that I know. The couple that I know are both well born, both come from fine families; both are, relatively speaking, well off. They have no financial worries or pressures, none, at least for the present. Both of them are unusually attractive, and both well educated, having been educated in the best schools their parents could find. Both of them were reared in the Church, not in the same denomination of the Church, but both of them were raised in the Church of their parents, and now they belong to a Church that they rarely, if ever, attend. They are happily married, and as far as one can tell, they are devoted to each other and they have two adoreable children, one boy and one girl - four and six.

On one occasion they tried to tell me why it was that they seldom, if ever, go to Church. They began with the fact that Sunday is the one day - I won't finish the sentence because you have heard it many times, and you know what the rest is likely to be. Sunday indeed is the one day, I was tempted to add before they finished the sentence, but I like them so much I wouldn't want to embarrass them for the world - Sunday indeed is the one day that the Church asks you to give to God. But I could partly, if not completely, understand their predicament, and I respect their sincerity and honesty. And so they went on to say that Sunday is the one day that they can sleep late, the one day that the husband can putter around the house. And besides, they added, Saturday night is likely to be a late night; that's another factor in the picture they went on to say. Some Sundays they go out to the country visiting relatives or pursuing recreation. And on the Sundays that they are in the city, they relax at home with the newspapers. And so it is that the Church has been virtually eliminated from their lives.

DEVELOPMENT

I am not describing this situation with any intention of scolding the couple concerned, or of criticizing them. I know enough about life to sympathize with them and I tell it because I am trying to see what lies behind it. I know enough about myself to know that I like to have one morning each week to sleep an hour or so later, read the papers, and do some puttering. I think if we put our imaginations to work for a few minutes on this situation, we will discover behind this an attitude that can be summed up in this fashion:

"Why bother about the Church? Life's complicated enough as it is with our short, busy weeks and our long weekends, without taking on some church responsibilities. And why bother with Christianity anyway? We've got enough to think about without getting caught up in something that is difficult to understand let alone practice. And besides we got enough religion when we were youngsters to last us a lifetime. Our parents made us go to church"

And if we press this further, I think we will discover an even greater question involved - the question that I have chosen as the subject of this sermon, "Why Bother About God?"

"Yes....why bother about God? Nobody has ever seen him? And no two people ever seem to agree either as to what he's like! Why bother about God. It's all so vague, and besides he's been wrapped up in so much mystery. Why bother about Him.....especially when we seem to be getting along so well without Him. We're happy. We have a good life, plenty to eat, and plenty of good friends, and none of them seem to be too concerned with Him. Why take on something else that's just going to raise questions, cause disturbances, give us additional responsibilities to carry, and so many unpleasant things to do? Why take on that extra burden?"

And so this couple, although they would never put this question in so many words, is saying practically the same thing that the French scientist Laplace said to Napoleon the First when he asked him what room he had left for God in the cosmology of his celestial mechanics. He replied, "Sir.....I have no need for that hypothesis".

WHY BOTHER ABOUT ANYTHING?

"Why bother about God?" I suppose my question to that couple and to the thousands of people who share that point of view would be something like this: why bother about anything in life except those things that make life possible and pleasant? You never stop to ask yourself, why bother with food? You have to. It's necessary. A person can't live very long without it. Those of us who are baseball fans never stop to ask ourselves, why bother about baseball? We bother about it simply because it brings us a great deal of pleasure. I have a friend who raises fish. She spends a great deal of time and money on those fish. Although I can't share her enthusiasm for the fish, I suppose she bothers about the fish because they bring her a great deal of pleasure. But God? that is another matter. We can live without God. We can live without paying any attention to the things of God. Thousands of people are existing without God, and some of them seem to be doing quite well. In a sense you can live more comfortably without him. Without God, there is no one to needle you from above, no one to nag you from on high, no one to make you squirm when you feel you have done something you shouldn't have done.

The assumption behind this whole point of view is that the only things that you bother about in life are the things that make life possible and pleasant. But on the other hand, isn't it true and interesting, that some of the things that some people have bothered the most about and cared the most about have been things that were neither necessary or pleasant. Gandhi was one of the most conspicuous figures of our time and he bothered himself all his life of seventy years about the freedom of his people. It gave him little pleasure; it brought him contempt at home and abroad and ultimately assassination.

Perhaps we could say the same thing about our late President. John Fitzgerald Kennedy, coming from a background of wealth and privilege, certainly didn't have to go into public life. It was not necessary to his existence; he had plenty to live on without doing it.

As far as giving him pleasure, it got him into situations in which the acrimony and bitter anger of some people were heaped upon him. He could have stayed at home, made a good living as a lawyer, and been alive today.

Today the Negro in America is, in certain areas, at last beginning to get some breaks, to have some opportunities to better himself, to enjoy the fundamental rights that are his under the Constitution of our land, largely because a young Negro clergyman by the name of Martin Luther King has bothered. It certainly hasn't been necessary to his existence, and it certainly isn't anything he enjoys. And he has certainly risked his life on more than one occasion. And we do not have to look only at famous people to see this, you know. There are people in this congregation who have bothered about children that didn't seem to deserve their attention but were unbelievably thoughtless. They have bothered about people and causes that were on their mind not because they were necessary to their existence, not because they gave them pleasure, but because something in them responded to something high above them.

And so I would like to say this, and if you remember nothing more from this sermon than this one thought, then I will be satisfied. The thing that makes a man a real man is his desire to bother about things that are of no earthly benefit to him whatsoever. And if I could say to my couple and to the others who share this point of view, what I would like to say, it would be something like this. If you have settled down to bother only about those things that make life possible and pleasant, and to do only those things that bring you immediate pleasure and physical satisfaction, then you need to be shaken before you get settled in that rut which can be deeper than any open grave. For when a man is willing to settle for a life that requires little more than an animal's existence, you can be sure that he is on the way to becoming little more than an animal himself.

WHY DO PEOPLE BOTHER ABOUT GOD?

So far this morning, we have been asking this question, "Why bother about God?" as though it were paraphrased, "Why should a person bother about God?" Suppose we turn it around and put it into a different form: "Why do people bother about God?" Let me suggest to you several reasons.

First: they bother about God because they have to. What I mean by this is that there's something in all of us that responds to that which is over and above us all. All of us, at one time or another, crave God and need God. To be sure, we aren't always aware of this, and this too (and I may be wrong) - sometimes we need God a great deal more than we think we do. This desire may be expressed in different ways. For instance, when a person comes to that point in life, when he wonders what it's all about, - life - with its moments of confusion and contradiction; when he stops to wonder if there's any meaning or any purpose, whether life's worth living or not, then he's beginning to reach out for God. When a person looks for meaning and purpose, then he's looking for God, for whatever else God may mean, he does mean purpose, meaning, and order. Do you see what I'm driving at. Let me offer another example. Take a person

who has been thrown around by the storms of life. He's in trouble... having a difficult time of it. He begins to reach out for something to hang on to, to cling to in one of the storms of life. When he reaches out for something to hold on to, he's reaching out for God - for the security of the Most High. When you say to yourself, in one way or another - how can I face the dark...how can I step into the unknown future? - you are reaching out like a child reaching out his hand for the companionship and association of the Divine.

Therefore, to this couple and to you, I would say that one of the reasons you do bother about God as much as you do is because you have to. There is something in you that needs Him, that wants Him. Even when things are going well, and you are not aware of Him at all, you want meaning - purpose - help. When things do not go well, then you cry out for Him. I wondered to myself as I sat there at the table that night in the home of this attractive couple what would happen if one of their children was suddenly taken dangerously ill and did not recover, whether they would bother about God, whether they would have the inner strength to sustain this burden. Where would they look for help? Would they be able to come through the storm.

Another reason why people bother about God is once again because they have to, although in a slightly different sense from the preceding reason. There's something outside all of us that we can't get away from no matter how fast we try to go or how far we try to run. It's hard to explain. You're familiar with the story of Adam and Eve and how they tried to get away from God and how they met him in the cool of the day. God never confronts us in such a dramatic fashion. He seems to get through to us in a much more subtle way. We can never completely get away from Him... no matter how far or how fast we try to go. In the long run, sooner or later, this God that we thought we didn't need to bother about suddenly looms up in front of us. You may know what I'm driving at. Perhaps you've experienced it. In some unexpected crisis - moral or otherwise - this reality...this presence....this power you have tried to avoid stood squarely in the path.

And in a deeper sense, the Christian bothers about God because God has bothered about him. This is a third reason. He has shared his life with us....given us a portion of his own divine freedom so that we can be ourselves, live our own lives, make our decisions. He has shared his mind with us through the inspired minds of the prophets of old. He has shared his love with us. At one time in history he came and lived among us revealing to us the ideal norms of human behavior showing us what life can be like when it is lived under Him. And if somebody has bothered that much about you, then it's a little difficult not to bother about Him. And so, even though it is beyond our comprehension and complete understanding, we should bother about God and the things of God, because he has bothered about us. The psalmist put it this way: We love God (or should love God) because he first loved us.

I fled Him, down the nights and down the days;
I fled Him, down the arches of the years;
I fled Him, down the labyrinthine ways
Of my own mind; and in the mist of tears
I hid from Him, and under running laughter.
Up vistaed hopes I sped;
And shot, precipitated,
Adown Titanic glooms of chasmed fears,
From those strong Feet that followed, followed after.
But with unhurrying chase,
And unperurbed pace,
Deliberate speed, majestic instancy,
They beat - and a Voice beat
More instant than the Feet -
"All things betray thee, who betrayest Me"

LET US PRAY:

O God, in this moment of quiet, after we have given ourselves once again to Thee, listened to Thy word, Help us to realize in our own lives some of the things to which we now aspire and accept our intentions for achievement and help us to grow more and more in our appreciation of Thee. This we ask in the spirit of Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen

I close with those words from "The Hound of Heaven" by Francis Thompson....familiar, perhaps, to some of you. You remember the life of Francis Thompson....born and reared in a good home, privileged, studying medicine, quarreling with his father, giving up medicine, going to London. There he lived in poverty, drowning himself in alcohol, opium, becoming an addict, brilliant, a touch of genius in his nature....his words in "The Hound of Heaven" autobiographical....