

"YOU SHOULD HAVE BEEN HERE YESTERDAY!"

A Sermon By

Rev. Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church
106 East 86th Street
New York, New York 10028
May 6, 1984

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

But there are people for whom fishing is a lively interest, if not a livelihood. Ardent fishermen often charter boats and venture out into the ocean for a catch. Their hopes often 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.

And in such a circumstance, his defense is both ancient and predictable. You can almost hear him saying,

"Say...you should have been here yesterday. What a day it was! The blues were really running. Never saw so many in my life...one school after another. You should have been here yesterday...what a day that was!"

DEVELOPMENT So much by way of introduction to today's meditation. 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 asks.

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.

Note carefully what they were doing. 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, my friend". "You should have been here yesterday...you should have been here when He was here. What a lift He gave us!"

COUNTRY Some there are who on occasion are tempted to feel this way about our country. We've been through some difficult days and years...from about the early sixties on. The myth of our national innocence has been rudely shaken and shattered for some...assassinations, Vietnam and Watergate. Many Americans, as you talk to them, live with a sense of vanishing glory. "It wasn't that way when I was younger...what went wrong...when and where did we drift off the track, the path?"

Our cities are in a fight for their lives. Many are hungry and without work. We read about a lack of integrity in high places. We're a violent people.

Then we recall the America of the Currier and Ives prints wherein everything seemed to hang together and serenity clothed our land. We recall the America that was given us back in Junior High School, the America of song and of ballad. We bring out the memories of the past. Remember the nostalgia back in 1976 - the year of the Bi-centennial...the year we re-opened Yankee Stadium. Remember how we brought back those great men out of Yankee history. "Those were the days" some were saying. And we retired a few uniform numbers. You should have been here then.

CHURCH Some there are who feel this way about the Church.

There's an event in the Old Testament that deserves to be better known among Christian people. It has to do with the return of the Israelites to their land following the years of captivity in Babylon. The Book of Ezra tells us how the re-gathered exiles were intent on rebuilding the Temple. The first thing that needed to be restored was not a fortress, but their place of worship.

So, the Elders and the people gathered together 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 voices when they saw the foundation of this house being laid."

You see, some of the "oldsters" who were present remembered Solomon's Temple in all of its splendor. Even though the trumpets blared and the cymbals clanged, their hearts were heavy. They were recalling a yesterday that made the present moment 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 use to have.

As for us, we sometimes are guilty of recalling an era when the Church, we claim, 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 when those great Cathedrals were erected, 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 - spiritual giants - walking the face of the earth. There were great preachers in our pulpits. Some may even be tempted to talk about the religious boom of the late forties and the fifties when we were building so many new churches out there on the landscapes of America.

You should have been here then. Those were the days - great days!

THEMSELVES Some there are who feel this way about themselves, especially about their experience of God.

Most of us carry around with us some solid and vivid memories of deeply moving religious experiences. If asked to talk about what God means to us

we're likely to say, "I remember when...." And that "when" might mean the day you joined the Church as a young person. 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 camp fire 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 amphitheater. 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 lift and the challenge that you felt when you watched a film clip of King speaking at the Washington Monument, or a movie on the life of Gandhi or Schweitzer. "I remember when....those were the days....you should have been here then."

NONSENSE And the whole thing really is not altogether that good or wise, in fact, it's a bit of nonsense. To idealize the past...to romanticize it....to downgrade 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 and unemployment and depressions and war. The money didn't seem to go very far and minority rights were consistently repressed back then.

And the Church even in its earliest years was riddled with problems, most of them people problems. Paul's Letters time and again focussed on people concerns. I'm sure there were times when Paul must have thought he was running a spiritual infant-Day-Care-Center.

And what about your own past - the one you clutch to yourself. It wasn't really all that good and that 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, or your arts and pleasures, and yes even your body. That past was never that good - not the nation's past, nor the church's past, not even your own past.

So, I guess what this is leading up to say is: take off your rose colored glasses.

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

In terms of the country, there is a strength - a moral strength - that continues to be felt in this land. There is a concern in this land among many that has to do 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 "havenots" are taken to heart with greater seriousness than here.

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. We spend less time focussing idly on the life to come than we use to and more on the present. And slowly but surely the Cross is reappearing in the Church's life.

And 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 to handle controversy than our parents and grandparents were? It use to be in the Church that I knew about that anything or everything controversial was kept outside. We had the peace of the cemetery within and we didn't want it broken.

But now we've learned to fight and to love at the same time, to wrestle and to work 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 awakening or revival in this country.

BUT BACK TO EMMAUS But back to the Emmaus Road and Jesus. Back to that beautiful scene of the post-resurrection appearance of our Lord, Jesus. 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...."

A beautiful line. The point is that He had not come to pass, but rather He had come to stay. And that's what we need to remember. 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" He said, "I am with you always". We need to remember that and take heart. "Lo, I am with you always." That's the "take-home" word today.

The times are not in competition with each other, for Christ is present in each. "You should have been here yesterday." Forget it, I would say. For I should like to believe that God is waiting for you here at this very moment, at this very place, and nowhere else. "As He broke the bread, their eyes were opened....and they knew Him."

PRAYER Make us sensitive to Your nearness in these moments, O God. Help us to embrace the presence with wide and welcoming arms...and to know it as Your dwelling place. Grant that no worship of the past may hide You from our sight - here and now.

Help us now to recognize you in the breaking of the bread and the taking of the cup even as did the followers of Jesus long ago in those days following His resurrection.

In His name and spirit we pray. Amen