

"YOU SHOULD HAVE BEEN HERE YESTERDAY"

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 I confess to a serious threat to anything that lives in water. To be perfectly honest, I would have to admit 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 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 can almost hear him saying:

"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."

DEVELOPMENT So much by way of introduction to today's sermon. 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, friend. Oh, 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 feel this way about their country. We've been through some difficult days and difficult years. The myth of national innocence has been rudely shaken and even shattered for some. 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 it happen?" Where did we go off the track?

001 | We wince at fresh disclosures of the antics of the CIA. Our cities are in a fight for their lives. Many are hungry and without work. We've been shaken by the lack of integrity in high places. We're a violent people.

discuss 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 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 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 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. 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 back there. There were some unjustified wars, some depressions, the money didn't seem to go any further. 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 your own past, the one you clutch to yourself, was not really all that good and all 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, 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.

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

However unsettling it may be to belong to this Republic now and a resident of this city, the nation and the city are not without their merits. There is a strength - a moral strength - that continues to be felt in this land. There is a concern in this country 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 "have-nots" 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. The Church is far less given over to idle focussing on the life to come than it use to be. At high and low levels in the life of the Church we are coming to

see that we are responsible for this thing called history. And 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 untrammelled - 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 were to handle controversy? It used 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 wish 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 revival in this country. Indeed, it is taking place.

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. 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.

The times are not in competition with each other, for Christ is present in each. "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 your nearness in these moments, O God. Help us with wide and welcoming arms to embrace the present - to know it as your dwelling place. Grant that no worship of the past may work to hide you from our sight - here and now. We ask this in the spirit of Christ who said, "Lo, I am with you always". Amen