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Acts 1:1-11

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PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE

Religious people in general, and Christians in particular, are fond of referring to the accomplishments of the past which were inspired by man's faith in God. How often have we had pointed out to us that the world's greatest music, art, and literature are for the most part the work of religious men. We have had impressed upon us over and over again how poor our civilization would be save for the impact of religion.

All of this is true, probably far more true than most of us realize. Think of mankind's greatest accomplishments, and our culture's greatest advances, and you think necessarily of men and women who have been motivated by their religious beliefs and convictions. Man without religious faith is a pretty sorry figure to behold. Civilization without religion is almost impossible to conceive. There seems to be something in the very nature of man insisting that he set out on this quest for meaning, to search for whatever it is that will explain and interpret man himself, and the environment which surrounds him.

We have been warned many times to beware when we find what we are looking for. We look for something hard enough, and we are almost sure to find it. Even so, those interested in discrediting religion can find much in the history of religion to condemn. There have been persecutions in nearly every age, and by almost every religious group. Recall that speaker who spoke to a group of Baptists one day and drew applause when he said, "One thing you can say about the Baptists is that they have never persecuted anyone." When the applause died down he continued: "And they have never persecuted anyone because they have never been strong enough." Religion is closer to a man's heart than anything else. As a result, he is easily led to pride, dogmatism, and persecution.

But in spite of the dark pages, often blood-soaked pages, of religious history, and in spite of the superstitions out of which much religion has come, (as is true just as much in such fields as chemistry, astronomy, and the other sciences) religion is responsible for a tremendous amount of human progress, and for great insights into man's own nature and destiny. Religious motivation lies behind most educational institutions. Religion was the moving force behind innumerable hospitals, orphanages, and other charitable ventures. Religion has brought education, medicine, improved agricultural methods and health to literally millions of people, and is still doing so. There is no doubt about the past glory of religious movements, nor any reason for religious people today to be ashamed of their heritage.

II

But granted all of this, the question with which we in the 20th century are concerned is whether religion has any relevance to the life which we must lead. Christianity will not survive if all it can offer to men is an illustrious past. The religion which is adequate for today must be one which can help men find answers to their basic questions concerning life and its meaning.

The story is told of two men who met and were discussing the new minister who had come to one of the town's churches. "Is your new minister answering all your questions?" asked one. "Is he?" replied the other. "He's answering questions nobody ever thought of asking before!"

This can easily become the case. Religion can deal with dogmas and creeds, with subtleties of doctrine, that are really not consequential to any save philosophers

and theologians. It can ignore thereby the basic issues of life: Why am I here? What is my task on earth? Is my life important? Has my life got any ultimate meaning and significance?

Religion more than any other discipline must speak in words which modern man understands. Other fields of study may have their specialized vocabularies which only the highly trained can understand, but religion is not for the specialist. It is for every man, and every man is not going to bother with a religious faith that speaks a specialized language. He wants plain and simple answers to his questions concerning the basic issues of life.

Cardinal Cushing is reported to have told the story of the young priest summoned to minister to a man who had just suffered a heart attack in a department store. Going by the book, he asked the almost unconscious man, "Do you believe in God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Ghost?" The patient opened one eye and looking at the nurse who knelt beside him said, "I'm dying and he asks me a riddle."

Important as certain deep theological questions such as the Trinity may be, they must be translated into simple and relevant terms if they are ever to attract the interest and meet the needs of modern man. A recital of Christianity's glorious past is not going to hold his attention for long.

Now the basic task of religion remains the same in every age. Its purpose is to relate man to God. The British scholar, Ian T. Ramsey, has put it well when he has said the task of the Church is to give men "a sense of belonging, and a sense of what is permanent and abiding." Someone has suggested that if the Church does not do this, it will be made up not of God's "chosen people" but of his "frozen people." Frozen water is not very effective in meeting man's thirst and religion, frozen into hard forms, dogmas, and creeds, cannot be very effective in meeting man's spiritual needs.

III

What then can be said about an effective religion for the present and for man's future? A certain bishop not long ago who was, I am afraid, suffering from advanced senility, suggested that we earth people ought to be training astronautical missionaries to take the Christian message to other worlds when and if we manage to get to other inhabited worlds. It did not seem to occur to him that the men on those planets might have a religious faith and understanding far superior to our own.

Before attempting any missionary or evangelistic program on other planets man has a great deal to do here. The incident reminds one of the young couple walking on the campus on a moonlight evening in spring. The young man who usually found himself unable to say what he would like to say, suddenly became very courageous and poetic. "Let us sit on this bench and visit," he said. He took her hand in his and said, "Darling, if I had a thousand eyes, I would use everyone of them to feast on your loveliness, and to drink in your beauty. If I had a thousand ears, I'd use every one of them to listen to the cooing of your sweet voice. If I had a thousand arms, I'd use every one of them just to hug you tight." And then the sweet young girl replied, "O for heaven's sake, you are not even using what you've got!"

And it is certainly true that we Christians have never lived by all of the truth which we possess, and which we know is true. If we believe that the power of example is the strongest power in the universe, then certainly we had better concentrate on putting to work in our lives those basic principles and ideals which we in our best moments know to be absolutely real and eternally valid.

This then, it seems to me, is the basic task of Christianity and the Christian Church. It must relate man to God. It must show them the Way which will give to their personal lives meaning and significance. It must convince them of the necessity of committing themselves to the highest ideals and principles which man has discovered in the life of Jesus Christ.

Now you will note that I have said nothing about the Christian religion or the Christian church solving all the social, economic and political problems of human society. Personally, I do not believe that this is the task of the church. This is the task of individual religious men and women motivated by the church living out their faith in the midst of society.

Let me illustrate what I mean. Several persons in this church have asked me why I have not in this period of great racial crisis preached a sermon on race relations and civil rights. I do have some deep convictions on that subject, but whatever I had to say would be displeasing to some people; people equally sincere, people equally concerned about doing what they believe to be the right thing in the sight of God. I do not conceive it to be the minister's task to promote specific answers, particularly specific legal answers, to social problems. Rather I conceive it to be his task to preach the eternal truth that each man is a child of God, that each person in all his relationships with other persons ought to deal with those others in a spirit of love and good will. Not all of us will agree on specific applications of these truths, and am I to insist that my choice of solutions is the one and only Christian solution? This, it seems to me, is the kind of dogmatism that has indeed led to the persecutions of the past which all of us would like to erase from the pages of history. What such a point of view calls for is conformity. It asks all of us to think alike, not only as to the end we desire, but as to the means we use to attain that end.

Said Thomas Jefferson:

"Millions of innocent men, women, and children since the introduction of Christianity have been burnt, tortured, fined, imprisoned; yet we have not advanced one inch toward conformity."

The only result Jefferson could see was that it made one half the world fools and the other half hypocrites. For any man to insist that in his position "is the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth" and therefore, every other person ought to be forced to accept his position — such an attitude is in itself immoral. Dean Inge pointed out what would happen whenever the Church tended to identify itself with the spirit of the age, instead of being the Church. Said he, "The Church which marries the spirit of one age will find itself a widow in the next."

May I submit that one can search through the Gospels and through all the Letters of Paul and never find Jesus or Paul suggesting that it was the task of the Christian leaders to suggest specific legal remedies to the problems which beset mankind. Jesus told men how they as individuals ought to live in the sight of God and in relationship with their fellow men. He knew that ultimately the only kind of government that would ever succeed was self-government practiced by each individual. Lacking that, the most powerful, centralized government in the world will not succeed in causing men to live in happiness and peace.

This then, it seems to me, is the task of religion in the present and through the future -- to help man become his best possible self. This is the only final and satisfactory solution to every problem that besets mankind.

The Church cannot meet the needs of men if all it offers is a proud heritage. It cannot meet those needs if it urges men to rely upon the power of the state rather than on the power of God within them. The Church of the future is that Church which is successful in bringing the individual into a personal relationship with the God who made him. From that relationship all progress proceeds.

PASTORAL PRAYER

O Thou who art the fount of all truth, and who leadest us from day to day in the way of love, we bless thee that by faith we can know thee and lay hold on the truth that can shed light upon our way.

O God, we who are bound together by a covenant, we the members of this congregation, pray thee for a day of unclouded love. May no passing irritation rob us of our joy in one another. Forgive us if we have often been keen to see the human failings of others, and slow to perceive our own. Forgive us if we feel not the preciousness of each human soul in thine eyes. May there be, in our Church, and in our families, no sharp words that wound and scar, no rifts that grow into estrangement. May our love and devotion to thee be such that it shall bind us together in all our worldly relationships.

Fill our souls this day with truth, and love, and peace. Turn us away from that which degrades and destroys. Let us keep these bodies and these minds pure and undefiled that they may the better serve thee. Give us a devotion to righteousness and a dedication to the truth as we see it in Christ our Lord.

May the sick feel thy healing presence near to them. May the confused and despairing be strengthened and enlightened by thy presence. May those who long for thee with deep earnestness be rewarded by thy voice speaking to their inmost being in this very hour. O Lord, save thy people from ordinariness, and create in them clean hearts and pure minds which shall rejoice in thy loving service forevermore. Amen.