

March 19, 1967
John 12:23-32
Norman S. Ream

FIT FOR THE FUTURE

It is, I believe, inconceivable to many people that Jesus, or any other man, could actually make a choice which he knew would lead to a painful and ignoble death. Yet this is the choice which Jesus made and which we commemorate on Palm Sunday.

The Gospels tell us that near the end of his ministry, Jesus finally concluded that the only way to accomplish his purpose and fulfill what he deeply believed to be God's will for his life was for him to go into Jerusalem where the leaders of the Jewish religion would find it both expedient and possible to get rid of him once and for all.

How, we ask, can a man make such a choice? Where does he find the power and the courage to sacrifice himself in such a fashion? A father or a mother might conceivably make a total sacrifice for a child. A lover, or even a friend might lay down his life in such fashion. But to do it not for one person, not for a beloved child or friend, but for a race of people, a generalized mass of humanity, this is, for many, inconceivable.

Where does one get the power and the courage to sacrifice himself in such a way? I would suggest that it has two sources. First, it springs out of one's deeply held convictions and principles. Secondly, it is only possible in one who has absolutely no fear of death.

II

Let us speak first of principles. Do you have any you would be willing to die for? Not many people have in our day. Would you be willing to lay down your life for your country? Does the United States of America and all for which it stands mean that much to you? Is your religious faith more important to you than your life? Would you rather die than betray that in which you most firmly believe? I caution you to answer carefully.

St. Paul himself was amazed by this willingness of Jesus to die, not for someone he loved, but for something in which he believed. He wrote of it to the Romans.

"Even for a just man one of us would hardly die, though perhaps for a good man one might actually brave death; but Christ died for us while we were yet sinners." *

I have suggested that we ought to think carefully about our own willingness to die for principles, ideals, convictions. Indeed we should. It is a bit difficult to believe that those modern Americans who look upon conformity as the great goal of existence could believe in much of anything strongly enough to die for it. Most of us don't believe in anything strongly enough to live for it.

* Romans 5:7 (New English Bible)

Young people, who tend to be the most idealistic of the human species, often dream of sacrificing themselves for a cause. Some of them will picket and protest en masse at the drop of a hat. But how many of them would be willing to take the same stand if they had to stand alone? Very few of them, I dare say.

Those of the older generation address the younger generation in terms of how things used to be and how important it is to refuse to conform if conformity means compromise of principle. But where and from whom do the younger generations learn how to compromise and conform, if not from the older generations who are past masters of the art.

Jesus was one of the very few men in all history, including modern history, who had deep and abiding convictions about life, its meaning and its purpose, and who found death preferable to dishonor. Because his life was grounded on certain strong principles, Jesus could find the power and strength to face the agony of the cross.

I say to you this morning that the time for dying comes to all. But the time for dishonoring one's self ought never to come. If we have no convictions, we have no basis for honor. If we lack the strength of our convictions, we are already dishonorable men and women. Those who have no honor will always be cowards in the face of danger and difficulty.

Would that it could be said of all men what Kipling wrote on the death of his admired brother-in-law:

"He scarce had need to doff his pride or
Slough the dross of earth--
E'en as he trod that day to God so
Walked he from his birth;
In simpleness, and gentleness, and honor
And clean mirth."

This was the first secret of Jesus' courage--honor--conviction!

III

The second secret was Jesus' utter confidence that death was nothing to be feared.

"Death, be not proud, though some have called Thee
Mighty and dreadful, for thou art not so;
For those whom thou thinkest thou hast overthrown
Die not, poor death; nor yet cans't thou
Kill me."

Death is never anything to be feared. It can only be one of two things: Either it is a nothingness, a sleep and a forgetting; or else it is something God has planned, and like all he has planned, it is good.

Dying may sometimes be hard, but death is always easy. The famous surgeon, Dr. William Hunter, on his death bed whispered:

"If I had strength enough to hold a pen, I would write how easy and pleasant a thing it is to die."

Most ministers have shared the experience of Dr. Leslie Weatherhead, sitting with a dying patient and gripping his hand: "Don't hold me back," said the dying man, "it looks so wonderful further on."

The poet, John Oxenham, sought to enshrine this truth in poetry, as he put into the mouth of a man afraid to die these words:

"Shapeless and grim,
A shadow dim
O'er hung the ways,
And darkened all my days.
And all who saw,
With bated breath,
Said, 'It is death!'

And I, in weakness
Slipping towards the night,
In sore fright
Looked up. And lo!--
No Spectre grim,
But just a dim
Sweet face, a sweet high mother-face,
A face like Christ's own mother's face,
Alight with tenderness
And grace.
'Thou art not death', I cried;--
For life's supremest fantasy
Had never thus envisaged death to me;--
'Thou art not death, the end'.

In accent's winning,
Came the answer--'Friend,
There is no death!
I am the beginning,
--Not the end!'"

Yes, death is easy. It is life that is difficult. Certainly Jesus found it so. It is not and was never meant to be a bed of roses. God made this world, from man's point of view, an imperfect one, a world wherein man could suffer and know pain. But from God's point of view, and with God's purposes in mind, this is the best of all possible worlds. For it is the world most suited to the development of man as God finally intends him to be. It is a world in which character can be formed, a world in which we can grow and mature until we do indeed become the children of God.

IV

I must confess unto you this morning that I know only one thing about life after death: I know that it is, and I know that because it is in the hands of God, it is good.

That is all I know about life after death. It is all I need to know. I am confident of one other thing, however, and that is that the quality of eternal life has its roots in this life. There is, of course, an area in which all of us must be agnostics and admit that we do not know all that there is to know. Perhaps we shall never know. But I for one, as long as I have breath, am going to search diligently for all the truth that God is willing to reveal. When I find the truth, or that which seems to be the truth, I am going to try to incorporate it into my life and live by it. There is a great longing in my life, as I am confident there is in yours for that which can fill the emptiness, the desire to know, the longing after meaning and significance.

It is the task of life to discover the answers, this is why we are here. Glance through the New Testament and whenever you read of eternal life, you will see such words as "strive", "press", "lay hold of", "seek", "knock", "run". All of these terms are terms of positive action which give the lie to any comfortable philosophy that you and I are going to enjoy a rich eternal life in the arms of God in spite of ourselves. The immortal rests upon the mortal. The quality of eternity depends upon the uses of time. God is a God of justice. He gives no man what he does not deserve.

John Caird has put it well:

"To whatever world death introduce you, the best conceivable preparation for it is to labor for the highest good of the world in which you live. The change which death brings be what it may, he who has spent his life in trying to make this world better can never be unprepared for another Let love to God and man be the animating principle of your being, and then let death come when it may and carry you where it will, you will not be unprepared for it."

V

This it is then, that made it possible for Jesus to "stedfastly set his face to go to Jerusalem." He had principles and convictions in which he believed with all his heart, mind, soul and strength; and he was not afraid of death.

What is the lesson for us? The lesson is this: Pursue as a dying man among dying men the reality of God. You will find Him in all that is good and true and beautiful, and you will find Him in your life of prayer and meditation. This discipline will make you fit for the future, and someday when the earth and all within it seems to tumble down, the heavens will open up.

Dear God and Father of all mankind, as we worship together on this day, that which is foremost in our minds is the greatness and the beauty of the life of Jesus Christ. We have come together as his followers, to thank thee and to praise thee for the example he did give us of what our lives could and should become, and with thy grace will become. May his life, and his teachings, be forever our model and our inspiration. So may we, as he, be pleasing unto thee.

We thank thee, O God, for this life which thou hast given us; for all its beauty and goodness, for its challenges and opportunities, for the strength and courage that enables us to overcome difficulty, sorrow and loneliness. It has been thy presence, and our faith in thy goodness and mercy, that has enabled us to do the good we may have done, and kept us from succumbing to temptation and evil. It has been thy mercy that has enabled us to endure in the face of hardship, suffering and loneliness.

Thou art the eternal and universal presence. May that presence be real to all thy people everywhere. May it be the strength of the weak, the health of the sick, the companion of the lonely and discouraged. May it lead each of us into rich and meaningful fellowship with thee, and finally into thy eternal kingdom. Amen.