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John 16:22-33
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ONE LONELY MAN

" . . . I am not alone, because the Father
is with me."

--John 16:32

On the wall of my study there ordinarily hangs this picture of Jesus painted by Salvadore Dali, Spanish painter of the surrealist school. Most people react to it: they are either very much taken by it, or strongly dislike it. I am one of those in the former class, and although it is difficult to say that one "likes" such a painting of abject cruelty, symbols of the evil of which men are capable, it nevertheless appeals to me as revealing the stark reality of the crucifixion and its significance.

We Christians often tend to talk about the birth, the life, and the death of Christ in such theoretic and philosophical terms we get lost in an abstract contemplation of it all and forget that it was indeed a reality.

A number of years ago an older woman came into my study, took one look at this picture and exclaimed, "I don't like it." When I inquired as to why she didn't like it, she responded, "You can't see his face."

That is probably one of the best things about the picture. No matter what face Dali might have put on Christ, large numbers of people would have objected and insisted, "That's not what I imagine Christ as looking like." The chief defect in most portraits of Christ is that they make him look either like a weak and feminine person and not at all the rugged outdoor man he actually was, or they put a wild gleam in his eyes and make him look like a fanatic.

But when this lady made her complaint, an answer suddenly formed itself in my mind, and I said to her, "No, you can't see his face--not until you get on your knees." This picture makes us want to fall on our knees before the feet of Christ, look up into what must have been a most kind and compassionate countenance and confess, "Lord, forgive me my sins, which are the same kind of sins that put you on that cross."

Another thought comes to me as I look at this picture--the words of Jesus to his disciples, "If I be lifted up I will draw all men unto me." For 2,000 years since he was put on that cross he has been doing precisely that.

II

Jesus wasn't born in the beautiful, clean, sweet-smelling stable that we so often connect with Christmas. He was born into what, by our standards, would be an extremely poor family, belonging to a poor, old backward country. He and everything surrounding him was thoroughly Jewish and thoroughly oriental.

We don't really know very much about Jesus. What few facts we do have are sometimes confused and contradictory. No respectable historian today, however, denies that he was an actual, living person. And this man about whose life we know so little, because of what he taught and how he lived, divided all of human history into two parts. Human life on this earth, because of him, can never again be the same, even though those who hate him do their utmost to destroy him.

One tries many times, as have thousands of others, to try to understand just what it is about Jesus that makes him the keystone of civilization. It is hard to capture the significance of his life in a few words, but surely we can say this about him: Here was a man who said with absolute honesty and conviction, "Regardless of what anyone else does, regardless of what anyone else says, I am going to be wholly God's man."

Because Jesus succeeded in becoming wholly God's man, he could truthfully say in response to Phillip's question, "Show us the Father", "He that hath seen me hath seen the Father."

Whereas most of us when we ask people to do things are much of the time asking them to do that which will redound primarily to our own benefit, Jesus never asked anyone to do anything except that which would be of primary benefit to them. He wanted all men to become wholly God's men, for he knew and understood that only as we become God's men and women, can we know the fullness of joy and the abundance of life God intended us to know.

It is in this sense one can truthfully say that Jesus was the greatest individualist that ever lived. Today we are being told over and over again that his Gospel just will not work in our modern complicated society. Everything must be organized. Society is responsible; society must act; the individual is helpless. Jesus would answer with an eternal "no" to that philosophy, and insist that one man with God is always a majority. With God's love and God's power, one man who dedicates himself to being God's man can, over and over again, change human history, as Jesus himself did.

III

W. F. Ashley-Montague once wrote: "Every human being is a problem in search of a solution." How true that is, and how true it also is that the answer to every human problem lies in the philosophy of Jesus Christ.

Jesus conceived the will of God and the purpose of God in terms of love--the expression of constructive good will toward every other person, including one's self. He gave, as the answer to the human problem, the eternal, everlasting love of God.

Jesus was, of course, a lonely man. He was lonely because he found no other person who could understand and appreciate the love of God and his commitment to it as he understood it. But in spite of

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being lonely he was not alone, because he had the greatest awareness of God's presence any man ever had. "I am not alone, because the Father is with me." One man with God; an unbeatable combination! One man with the absolute conviction that God was love. The world of his day needed desperately that one man with that one conviction. The world of our day needs it no less desperately.

Saint Exupery, author of Wind, Sand and Stars, tells of a trip he took by train from the Ruhr Valley to Poland. Some Polish miners and their families were on the train being repatriated. He walked through the cars as they were sleeping. He stopped by the seat where one father and mother and a little boy were asleep. He writes of his thoughts as he looked at them:

"A golden fruit had been born of two peasants. I bent over the smooth brow, over those mildly pouting lips, and I said to myself: 'This is a musician's face, this is a child Mozart. This is a life full of beautiful promise. Protected, sheltered, cultivated, what could not this child become? When by mutation a new rose is born in a garden, all the gardeners rejoice. They isolate the rose, tend it, foster it. But there is no gardener for men. This little Mozart will be shaped like the rest, by the common stamping machine. This little Mozart will love shoddy music in the stench of night dives. This little Mozart is condemned. What torments me tonight is the gardener's point of view--it is the sight a little bit in all men, of Mozart being murdered.'"

No doubt Saint Exupery is right. But the event which we celebrate in Advent tells us that it need not be so. The fullness of God's love is a potential in every child, and you and I and all of the followers of Christ must dedicate ourselves to realizing that potential of love in ourselves and every other human being.

People today of course know and understand that the stars are always in their places and only seem to disappear during the daytime. But there was a time when men believed the stars went out during the day and were lit again at night. Perhaps you may have had the experience of being at the bottom of a deep well or at the bottom of a narrow canyon at one time or another. In looking up into the sky at such a time, when so much of the light of the sky is shut off, you can see a bright star shining in the middle of the day. Then you know from your own experience that the stars also shine in the daytime.

How unfortunate it is that so many people have to be lowered into the black abyss of sorrow, unhappiness and despair before they finally discover that God's love is always there, day and night, and nothing can ever separate us from it. This was the message of Jesus, this is what he lived and died to teach men. This, he said, is all you really need to know in order to make your life worthwhile and meaningful and purposive. There is in the universe a supreme, creative spirit that cares about you. Because this message gives a new dignity and a new value to human life, and inspires men to be at their best, this message put him on the cross.

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There is an old legend which tells us that when St. Paul died and approached the throne of judgment he was asked to relate what he had done with his life. He began the story of how the love of God had driven him to give his life unselfishly for his fellowmen--three times beaten with rods, stoned by an angry mob, shipwrecked three times, in constant peril--all because of the love of God working in his life. When he had finished the heavenly hosts joined together in one mighty chorus and began to sing; "Oh Paul, oh Paul, it's almost like Jesus. Oh Paul, oh Paul, it's almost like Jesus."

On this first Sunday of Advent, I wish everyone of us in this nave would figuratively fall on his knees before this man, this life, and pray to God that they might discover the love that would enable them to so completely dedicate themselves and devote themselves to becoming God's man that God's love might come down this Christmas as it has never come down before, and that all the infant Mozarts and all the infant Schweitzers and all infant Christs everywhere might be born into a world where love is the supreme quality of man.

This man was a lonely man, but he was not alone, God was with him. Yours may be a lonely life. If you do what I am suggesting this morning it may become even more lonely, but you need never be alone, for God is with you.