

March 26, 1972
Palm Sunday
Matthew 20:17-28
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PRINCIPLES OR PLATITUDES?

There is an interesting and intriguing story concerning a man who had the peculiar obsession that he was dead. No matter how much nor how forcefully his friends argued with him he would not alter his conviction that he was a corpse. One of those friends one day hit upon an idea. He and others went to the obsessed man and said to him: "You continually argue that you are dead and we have been unable to convince you otherwise. But will you now admit to us that a corpse does not bleed?" After a few moments of careful thought the man agreed to that basic principle--a corpse does not bleed. "Then," said his friends, "will you engage in a little experiment for us? Will you let us take this razor blade and gently slit your wrist? If you bleed you will agree that you are alive. If you do not bleed we will agree that you are dead." Again after a few moments of deep thought, the man agreed to the test. His wrist was gently slashed with the razor and out poured the blood with every beat of his heart. The victim looked wistfully at his bleeding wrist, then lifting his eyes until they met those of his friends he softly insisted, "What do you know, a corpse does bleed!"

That poor, unfortunate and obsessed creature was not much different from many of us who find little difficulty in altering our principles if they interfere with our wishes and desires. Rationalizing is a way of life with most of us and there are many people who seem to change their principles almost as frequently as they change their clothes.

Ten years ago every state in the union had a law making abortion illegal. Ten years ago if we had taken a poll in the congregation here assembled today, 90% would have been opposed to abortion. But today if we are like average Americans, and there is no strong reason to think that we are otherwise, 55% of us would favor the repeal of all laws against abortion.

What is it that has caused us to change our principle that abortion is murder? Is it the population explosion? Is it the women's liberation movement? Is it a decay in our national moral standards? Is it a new definition of life? Is it the progress of science which now makes abortion safer for the mother?

Whatever it is, the abortion fight has been lost and one more principle has gone down the drain into oblivion. All of which makes one ask, "What is a principle anyway?" The dictionary will inform us that a principle is a "beginning" or a "foundation". It is that body of convictions upon which we build our sense of values and ultimately it is that upon which we build society.

The Ten Commandments are a set of first principles that are the foundation, the starting point, upon which western society for 3,000 years has based its concepts of right and wrong, good and evil, wise and unwise. Someone has pointed out that Moses called them the Ten Commandments, not the Ten Suggestions. They are laws of human behavior upon which any just and free society which seeks to promote men's highest happiness must be based.

If what we call principles may be altered or ignored according to man's whim or convenience, they are not principles at all, but mere platitudes. And what is a platitude? A platitude is nothing but a dull, trite, commonplace, that carries with it no conviction and has no moral force or power in the life of him who utters it.

Church membership which draws men to church on Easter and Christmas, but is blithely ignored on the other 50 Sundays of the year, is a mere platitudinous genuflection toward the church which does little more than acknowledge that it exists.

A religion which pulls men to their knees in time of trouble, which turns them to God when disaster threatens, but the rest of the time touches the conscience not at all and encourages men to live as if they had no eternal soul, is not a religion based on deep and abiding principles but on empty and meaningless platitudes.

II

That of course is why Palm Sunday was so crucially important in the life of Jesus Christ. This was what we call the acid test. Did this man really believe all that he had said? Was he like the minister whose son, while being scolded, asked: "Do you really mean it, Dad, or are you just preaching?"

Now the fatal question had to be answered. This was, as they say, the moment of truth. Was this man's life based on principle, or was he too, like so many before and since his time, just uttering platitudes--lovely, high-minded moral strictures which when the cards were down could easily be rationalized away? Go to Jerusalem, and in compassion and love and concern for humanity, die! Or, follow the advice of your closest friends and companions, and retreat to a place where all is safe, secure, comfortable and convenient.

That is what Palm Sunday is all about.

III

We say that we admire men and women of principle. But in our own lives we so often live by our platitudes. How this world of ours needs men and women of principle, and how rapidly are principles collapsing all about us. How we rationalize, and make excuses, and become inured to evil and immorality and corruption. And the principal reason? Spiritual laziness, moral immaturity, and ego-centric greed.

Ask yourself this question today and answer it honestly as God is your witness: Is there any moral or religious principle you believe in so strongly that you would be willing right here and now to stand up and die for it? That is what Jesus did. "I must do the will of him who sent me." That had to come first before all else. And what was that will? It is epitomized in the concept of charity--outgoing, constructive good will toward all men, and no stopping to count the cost. "He that puts his hand to the plow and turns back is not fit for the Kingdom of God."

"Well," you may say, "I would like to ride victorious into some great city, have palm branches strewn before me (the ticker tape of 2,000 years ago), be welcomed with shouts of praise." Yes, the crowd does do that for a brief while. They love the man of conviction, the prophet, the potential deliverer, until what he says begins to touch home, begins to hurt, begins to threaten their comfort and security. Then it is not long before they turn and rend him to pieces, crying, "Crucify him, crucify him!" Ah, humanity, how fickle and how treacherous thou art!

It is easy to say, "I believe", and then utter a lot of dogmas and pseudo-convictions. It is easy in the safety of our present situation to affirm what we would do under dangerous and threatening circumstances. But would we actually do it were those circumstances to become real?

We talk about the sanctity of life and blame the politicians in Washington for the debacle in Vietnam. But what would we do if someone we loved very, very much had an unwanted pregnancy? What then would we say about the sanctity of that unborn life? Don't answer unless you have actually faced the situation and agonized over it.

We talk about honesty and integrity as a fundamental principle. Just how honest are we when we fill out form 1040? How honest are we when confronted with an opportunity to cheat? Don't tell me what you would do; tell me what you have done.

We talk about purity of mind and heart and complain about obscenity. But what kinds of books and magazines are we reading? And to what kinds of plays and movies and television fare are we exposing ourselves and our children?

We say all kinds of things about principles and morals and values, but just as "fear makes cowards of us all", so our actions often reveal our professed principles to be petty platitudes.

IV

We said a moment ago that Jesus' convictions were enshrined in the concept of charity. He said to his disciples, "A new commandment I give you, that you love one another." Palm Sunday revealed that to be not a platitude, but a principle.

A few weeks ago I quoted a passage from Herman Melville's short novel, Bartleby, the Scrivener. This morning I quote another which reveals Melville to have been a man of profound insight. Faced with a difficult choice, one of his characters comes to this conclusion:

"Aside from higher considerations, charity often operates as a vastly wise and prudent principle--a great safeguard to its possessor. Men have committed murder for jealousy's sake, and anger's sake, and hatred's sake, and selfishness' sake and spiritual pride's sake; but no man that I ever heard of ever committed a diabolical murder for sweet charity's sake. Mere self-interest, then, if no better motive can be enlisted, should especially with high tempered men, prompt all beings to charity and philanthropy."

Yes, even aside from higher considerations, the principles of the religion of Jesus Christ are wise and prudent. The world is so constructed and men are so created that nothing less than these principles can bring us deep peace and lasting joy.

There is only one Palm Sunday recorded in the Gospels. But in a very real sense, for you and me, every day is a Palm Sunday, every moment is the moment to decide: How do I live and how do I act, by principle or by platitude?