

THE RELIGION OF THE RISEN LORD

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"On that day, that first day of the week, Jesus came and stood in the midst, and saith unto them, Peace be unto you." John 20:19.

If any one day is entitled to be called the birth-day of the Christian religion it was "that day, the first day of the week" when Jesus came forth, the first-born from the dead, declared to be the Son of God with power by the resurrection from the dead. To that day all preceding ones lead: and from it all subsequent ones proceed. It was the day which gave to the world a risen Lord, and came to be known among disciples as "The Lord's Day". It was observed as early as the third decade even among the Gentile churches; and there is every reason to believe that it was instituted by our Lord himself in his ministry between his resurrection and ascension, when "He used to show himself alive after his passion by many proofs, appearing unto them by the space of forty days, speaking the things concerning the kingdom of God; and being assembled together with them used to charge them to wait for the promise of the Father". There are just seven Sundays between Easter and Ascension day. There are just seven assemblings of Jesus the while with bodies of disciples too numerous to have met except by special appointment. There are just seven commissions, or excerpts from

commissions, in the very language of the Lord preserved to us as having been given by him at these gatherings with his disciples. The first two Sundays are expressly stated by the evangelist as used by Jesus for such meetings with his disciples; and it may be shown that ascension day was a Sunday as was also Pentecost; and so one may infer that the other four Sundays were used in a similar manner. Hence the belief that it was Jesus himself who instituted the first day of the week as the stated time for his disciples to meet with him as the risen Lord to experience his presence in worship and renewing of discipleship in his kingdom; The Lord's Day is an institution for the culture of messianic life, along with the Lord's Baptism and the Lord's Supper. The engagement to meet the Lord on his day still stands inviting his disciples to enjoy his presence; and the risen Lord keeps these appointments faithfully with his people and ever will. Let us appreciate more fully the Lord's Day for it is given us by him that we may the more appreciate Him in experiencing his risen presence.

The First Lord's Day

Of all the Sundays in history none can take precedence over the first, "That day, that first day of the week". It was full of perplexing problems, provoking to all kinds of questionings and communings among the disciples, as the news about the things that had come to pass drifted in among them. The empty tomb, the vision of angels, the epiphanies to the women, the visit of Peter and John to the sepulchre, the reminder of the appointment in Galilee, amaze them. They gather in groups, communing and questioning together as to what it all means; some disbelieving the reports as but idle tales, others half believing

because they but half understood. What does it mean that the Lord is risen? Hope that it was he who should redeem Israel died out with his crucifixion; but now refused to spring afresh into life at the news of his resurrection. In the afternoon Peter comes in, and announces that he has also seen the Lord; and it dispells all doubts as to the fact of his being risen from the dead. But what does it mean? The two going to Emmaus return at evening to find the disciples in the Upper Room assembled; and they tell how they had met Him in the way, and had experienced his presence as he opened to them the Scriptures showing how it behooved the Messiah to suffer these things and enter his glory, and how he was made known to them in the breaking of bread. They all now join in the glad acclaim, "The Lord is risen indeed, and hath appeared unto Simon."

But that raises but the more questioning as to what this means. They had seen him restore the dead to earthly life. There was Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead; and the son of the widow at Nain they had known after restored to life. He had in his missions sent them forth to "raise the dead". But these were so different from what now faced them. It was not so much the fact that there had taken place a resurrection; but the important thing was that it was Jesus who is raised from the dead. How shall they relate themselves to him in his risen estate? Why does he not come back, just as Lazarus did, and take his place in bodily form at the table as others. Surely the resurrection of the Lord means more than that; and it fills them with awe and amazement as to "what sort of things" these were that were coming

to pass. Never did a Sunday bring with it such communings and questionings as that which engaged them in the Upper Room on the "evening of that day, that first day of the week". In response to their communings and their questioning Jesus came and stood in their midst. He knows when his disciples need him. How often in his earthly ministry we are told that he "answered and said" in response to their questioning and communings. He still responds to this appeal of his disciples on his day. His presence is his answer to our questionings and communings; and his day is for the experiencing of his presence by those who wish to know his risen life. Never was there Sunday such as that for revealing the risen Lord to his disciples; and we love to go over its events again and again to refresh our minds and renew our hearts.

The Religion of a Personal Presence

But Christianity is not a religion of ceremonies and days, which are but "shadows"; but the body is Christ's". It is a religion of a personal presence; and is the only religion of this kind known in human history. Christ is Christianity. It is the Lord, who gives meaning and value to The Lord's Day. It is the risen Lord, personally relating himself to his disciples; that makes our religion. It is personal faith in the personal Lord, expressed in a fellowship of life and love, which makes our religion unique among the religions of mankind. In Christ men can by faith experience God; and it is better to experience God than to know all the world's theologies. The mystery of our religion, so incomprehensible to the uninitiated but so simple to those who give themselves to it in faith, is that God is in Christ functioning in the experiences of men unto personal acquaintance and fellowship of presence.

The value of religion is in empowering men to experience God; and this we do by our experiencing the risen Lord on his day. This experience is both personal and social; it may be realized both in private devotions and in public worship with the congregation. The religion of Jesus both regenerates the individual and socializes the group unto the higher things of life. This it does because it is a religion which works by inciting its disciples to experience the presence of God in the risen personality of Christ. Hence it is a dynamic religion, capable of most varied and versatile experiences, adjusting itself to all types and kinds of life and characters, the only truly catholic religion for the progressing world, a living God inciting and entering life as demand may be. And it is all this because of the fact that it is ever the reaction of the souls of men to the life of the Lord; and, because he lives, his disciples shall live also, and in them he will live and make his abode. The competency of Christianity to meet the world's demand is as great as the capacity of the living risen Lord; and the problem of living it everywhere and always is to experience the presence of the living Christ. To win Christ, and to know him in all the experiences of life, is its perpetual problem of surpassing worth, for which we may well count all other values as lost.

JESUS IDENTIFIES HIMSELF

Hence the first thing Jesus is careful to do in coming into their midst is to identify himself. This he does with the familiar eastern salutation, "Peace be unto you" (Salaam). When we are assembled to meet him, let us ever listen for his salutation. Let not our communings and questionings be such that we have no ear for his Salaam. He is careful,

not only to salute, but also shows them his hands and his side to assure them it is he. Many times he may have been in our midst, but we have failed to hear his salute, or attend to his identification of himself. Then we failed of the highest joy of worship; nor could we go thither saying, "We have seen the Lord, and he hath spoken unto us". "The disciples are still glad when they see the Lord". The purpose of the physical epiphanies of the risen Lord was to prove that what they saw was he himself; and thus to identify him as the Jesus they had known. Such an epiphany would be of value only to those who had seen him in his flesh, and could identify him thereby. Hence he showed himself only to those who had known him before his death, and could recognize him by his body. He does not seem to have showed himself to the Apostle Paul by an actual physical body of flesh and bones, he never having known him after the flesh; but he appears to him in a vision and other manifestations of his presence. So it would serve no good purpose to show you the risen body of Jesus, since you could not identify it or him thereby. I doubt not that it is for this reason that he does not do so. Yet we have other ways of realizing the presence of the Lord in our midst; indeed there are unlimited varieties of experiences which may serve to identify to us the presence of the Lord. Sometimes, like Jacob, after a season of experiencing his presence, we have gone away saying, "Surely the Lord was in this place though I knew it not". A fresh identification of the risen Lord each Lord's Day, and a renewing experience of his presence is of surpassing worth in cultivating life in him. Let us therefore listen for his Salaam and open our hearts to his identification and introduction of himself when we are assembled with him.

COMMISSIONED IN HIS MESSIANIC MISSION

Having identified himself to the joy of his disciples, Jesus begins to put himself into proper relation to them. That there is a logical connection between his identified presence and what follows is shown by the use of the connecting participle "therefore" by the evangelist. Jesus therefore said unto them again, Peace be unto you, (Salaam). As the Father hath sent me, even so send I you! No man can know the presence of the risen Lord without feeling his life linking up with him in some partnership; for he draws all men unto himself, and fills them out of his fulness. So he says to them in effect. "You have seen during my ministry how the Father hath sent me to do his will and accomplish his work; you have seen how the Father that dwelleth in me did the works and spake the words of my ministry; even so now I am sending you to express my will and do my works. I will be to you as the Father has been to me; and you will be to me as I have been to the Father." and so he canonized his life and ministry for them as their rule of faith and practice. Henceforth His mission is their mission; and they are to take up the work of the kingdom and carry on as they had seen him do. So the disciples find their life mission in the risen Christ, as by him they are commissioned with him in the kingdom of God. They are henceforth to be his body, through which he will express his life in the work of the kingdom in the earth. What became of the physical body of the risen Christ we may not know. It ceased to have any messianic significance or functioning after it had served to identify him to his own as the risen Jesus; and it is idle to speculate about it. Its functioning in the ministrations of his kingdom henceforth is taken over by his

church, his body, which will be to him hands and feet, tongue and ear ministrants in the temporal and material things of the kingdom. How human life is thus exalted and enobled with a worthwhile mission and meaning by being commissioned with the risen Lord; so that it is Christ that liveth in us, and the life we live we may live by faith in him. Such is one of the consequences of the risen Lord in our midst; such is the effect of our cultivating the experience of his presence. It is the risen Lord which calls this Convention here today on the tasks of His kingdom bent; and it will be through the experience of his presence that we shall succeed in our mission as his disciples, may He be here this work to do that our gathering be not in vain; but may we be each and all of us commissioned afresh with him in his great messianic task.

INSPIRED WITH THE MESSIANIC SPIRIT

But it would be cruel mockery of human infirmity for us to be commissioned to so great and hallowed a task without some bestowment of heavenly energy and wisdom therefor; and so the risen Lord hastens to breathe into those who he has commissioned with him in his messianic mission his own messianic Spirit. The gesture of breathing on them is very powerful. It is as much as to say, "Out of my fulness I will endue you with grace; because I live, ye shall live also, I will be your life, you may go forth to this task with my life in you, and I will be with you all the days." He does not force his life on them, but invites them to receive him as Holy Spirit. It has been a well authenticated tenet of the messianic hope of Israel as presented in the prophets, that God would pour out of his Spirit on all flesh in the messianic days; and now, as

the Messiah entering into his glory, he fulfills that promise of the prophets. It is the presence of the risen Messiah who bestows the Spirit; and it is the Spirit which makes us experience the presence of the risen Messiah. The Spirit takes the things of Messiah and shows them to us; and the Messiah breathes into us the Spirit of Jesus. This is a great mystery in the true sense of that word, a secret which can only be revealed by an experience of His presence; to whom, though hidden from the wise and understanding, it is revealed as unto babes. But since Jesus lives, risen from the dead, the Spirit of His power is breathed out on all flesh; and he so freely offers his risen life, that whosoever shall call on the name of the Lord shall be saved. Such is the meaning of the risen Christ to those who love his appearing, a free to all bestowment of his messianic Spirit to equip for the messianic task to which they are commissioned.

The Messianic Mission

Having made the disciples realize his risen presence, and having commissioned them with himself in his kingdom and imparted to them his Spirit, this messianic fraternity is ready for its task in the world. This Jesus presents in one of his sayings, so formulated as to present the greatest content of meaning in briefest compass of language, so coined and cast as to be proof against deletion from repetition and use, a striking Aramaic parallelism:-

"Whose soever sins ye forgive, they are forgiven unto them;

Whose soever (sins) ye retain, they are retained"

This, like his other "sayings," he doubtless often had used before in his teaching, and it is coined that it might circulate as one of the

"faithful sayings, worthy of all acceptance" to inspire and guide their service. Like these repeated sayings, it is so coined as to carry a content of meaning larger than that which is demanded by the immediate context in which it may appear, and it implies a previous history in their expounding the mission and function of his kingdom in the world as an efficacious remedy for dealing with the world's problems of sin, and he speaks in it "as one having authority and not as their scribes". The saying visualizes the work of the kingdom of God in the world of men. It is a regime pronouncing on human conduct correctly according to the standards of truth and righteousness; and disposing of life as the bequests of the righteousness would require. It is not a special grant of authority to forgive sins; for in the kingdom of God everyone has that authority, and is expected to exercise it just as the Father in Heaven does. A kingdom of grace and mercy is a regime of forgiveness; and the "golden rule" of Jesus is that we should "be merciful as the Father in heaven is merciful". The world needs to be rid of its sins. It needs to have them defined and evaluated, and they may be eradicated. The kingdom of God does that by its regime of mercy and grace; and so the vision is that of a messianic fraternity busy in discovering and putting away sins from the world of men as individuals and as an organized society. It is more than the salvaging of men as distinct persons from a crooked and perverse generation; it is the saving of the perverse generation from its perversion and crookedness. The messianic mission is the salvation of the world, and nothing less than that; and this it will do through the messianic fraternity commissioned with and inspired by the risen Lord in the experience of faith and fellowship in his presence. Such seems to be the special

pertinence of this saying in this context, where it appears as the index finger of the risen Lord pointing his disciples to their messianic task in the world's salvation and life. It is the world's only hope of riding itself from sin; and it is a sure and certain remedy in pronouncing thereon and disposing thereof. "It is a faithful saying, worthy of all acceptation,....that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners"; and it follows from this not only that he will therefore save each of us, even to the chief; but that he will through us save others and the whole world of men. Truly we have a task in the world as disciples of the risen Lord to bring in the reign of God and His righteousness to the world of men.

The "Comings" and the "Goings" of Jesus

A religion of a personal presence is a continuous series of conscious experiences as the personalities involved act and react on each other as life comes and goes in its conscious experience of fellowship. Jesus himself so presented his relations towards his disciples as "comings" and "goings". At the Passover banquet he said, "Ye have heard how I said unto you 'I am going away and I am coming unto you'. If ye loved me ye would have rejoiced, because I go unto the Father; for the Father is greater than I. And now I have told you before it come to pass, that when it is come to pass, ye may believe". Here he distinctly points to the time of his "comings and goings" as a part of his teaching already given in advance of the experience of them; and does so as a predicate for their faith in his competency and capacity so to function in their lives after his resurrection from the dead. In the same context,

speaking of his "Peace," his Salaam, (his "howdys" and his "Good-byes"), he said, "My peace (Salaam) I leave with you (my good-bye), and my Peace (Salaam) I give unto you (my howdy). Not as ~~the~~ world giveth, give I unto you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid." In this passage he refers to his "comings and goings" as greetings and parting salutations, different from those in the ordinary world experience, involving nothing which should trouble or alarm the heart; but they are "comings and goings" which should be the predicate of joy, because they meant a coming from and going to the Father, who is greater than He. Sonship with God is thus set up for us through the mediation of the risen Christ, whose comings and goings are expressed in a messianic fraternity in the enjoyment of His presence. Hence he has promised where even two or three are met in his name, to be in their midst. What greater invitation to meet than the promise of his presence. Having that, we have all things. This Convention is now invited to assemble with the risen Christ. It shall succeed only as it shall experience His presence. And hence I know of no better way to introduce its sessions with a message than to remind you that the risen Christ has promised to come and go to your sessions, and be in your midst as you shall commune and question together on the problems of life and service in his kingdom. May each of us bow before him in this opening session in response to his presence, and confess "My Lord and my God." For the divinity of our Lord is a truth which may not be known through objective reasoning and searchings, even by the wise and understanding; but it is easily experienced by even the babes who welcome his "comings and goings."