

HOW FAR WILL WE PERMIT OUR RELIGION TO CARRY US?

(Annual Sermon, Southern Baptist Convention, New Orleans, Louisiana, May 13, 1937; by Dr. Solon B. Cousins, Pastor, Second Baptist Church, Richmond, Virginia.

Scriptures—(1) "Jesus came into Galilee preaching the Gospel of God" (Mark 1:13; (2) "And they were in the way going to Jerusalem; and Jesus went before them; and they were amazed; and as they followed they were afraid" (Mark 10:32); (3) "And Jesus entered into Jerusalem" (Mark 11:11).

For our thought at this hour I raise this question: "How Far Will We Permit Our Religion to Carry Us?" It is vividly dramatized in three descriptive statements which Mark records touching the ministry and life of our Lord. First, Jesus came into Galilee preaching the Gospel of God. Second, And they were in the way going up to Jerusalem; and Jesus went before them; and they were amazed; and as they followed they were afraid. Third, And Jesus entered into Jerusalem.

He began in Galilee. He ended in Jerusalem. That, then, was the end of his patient, passionate pilgrimage. To follow understandingly that ascending road is to enter into the Master's secret, to see the goal toward which always He had been moving, to witness His tragic glory and the beginning of His triumphant, eternal reign. And more— it is to discover the heart of the Christian Gospel and to learn the privileges and obligations of Christian discipleship.

I.

The day Jesus entered Galilee preaching the Gospel of God, Jerusalem was foreshadowed, for the God He came preaching was too great for the frame in which His religious kinsmen had confined Him. The spear point of His teaching was that God loves the world and that was too inclusive for a generation that believed God spoke only the Hebrew language, had His settled abode in one Holy Land and communicated His will to only one race. In Mathematics the corollaries are quite as significant as the

theorem. Indeed, the theorem is sometime set to establish the corollaries. And it was the implications of the Gospel of God that disturbed his hearers, aroused their suspicions, excited their fears, and later inflamed their hostilities. For that radical Gospel added another dimension to their Deity. To Sovereignty was added Fatherliness. And if God is the Father of all mankind, that defines man's origin, every man's origin, his place in this universe, his value and the divine intention for him. That defined also the relationship among all men. They belong to one family. And that Gospel which Jesus came preaching in Galilee by the same token brought a new test for all institutions--religious, social, political, economic. And that test is: What do they do to people? That meant that nothing could be sacred to God that is not helpful to men----they being made in His spiritual image. That meant that we are tied up in the bundle of life together and no accident of race or color or condition or geography can ever free us from a family obligation. Then was the axe laid to the old genealogical tree. For His commission read "to preach the Gospel to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives, recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised, to free the oppressed, to proclaim the Lord's year of favor."

As the implications of His Gospel became clearer, the Jerusalem that was foreshadowed became the Jerusalem that was inevitable. Correctly the leaders in church and state foresaw that the spread of this new truth threatened their economic and political fortunes and foreboded the overturning of their most cherished institutions. Quite properly they sensed that if Jesus should have His way, nationalism would collapse, racial idols would be shattered, and an exclusive church become a "House of Prayer for all the nations." So--the allies in fear became accomplices in crime. Meanwhile, the hopes of Jesus for winning

His people to become the channels through which God could effect His purpose for the whole world were dissipated. The issue was drawn. He faced the inevitable alternative.

II.

The ghost of the wilderness temptation appears. Will He accept a shabby success, becoming a popular idol through acquiescence in a safety first policy? Be silenced by the intimidating voices of expediency? Use His conscious power for Himself or at all cost consecrate it "for us men and our salvation?" Go back to loved Galilee and in retirement accept things as they are and come to journey's end in comfort and tranquility?

With realistic prevision of what lay ahead and poignantly conscious of what He was leaving behind, He deliberately chose to go on. On that road was no frustrated dreamer, no disillusioned idealist, no helpless victim. I have power to lay down my life, and I have power to take it up." "I came ... I am sent ... He sent Me." Had he not said, "He that putteth his hand to the plow and turneth back is not fit for the Kingdom of God."

And the spot where Jesus took His first step away from Galilee toward Jerusalem is one of the turning points in the history of mankind. For a few miles on the journey Confucius, Buddha, Mahomet, and the prophets and seers can walk comfortably in His company. But not now. With His face steadfastly set toward the Cross, that is the difference between Jesus and other teachers, between reformers and saviours, between saviours and The Saviour, between a code of ethic and the religion of redemption.

III.

With characteristic vividness Mark portrays Jesus on the "last dark mile." Here is a scene waiting for some insightful artist. Look at it!

"And they were on the way going up to Jerusalem; and Jesus went Before them. And they were amazed and they that followed were afraid." Only Mark notes that Jesus was going before them. On many a tramp and trail in Galilee they had walked in happy comradeship. Now for the first time He walks ahead, as if a no-man's-land separated them. Something in His bearing was portentous. There was a difference in their Master. No wonder they were amazed, for as Jesus strode on before them a carpenter of an obscure village becomes the costly builder of a new world; the man of Nazareth is now the Son of Man indeed; and the teacher of Galilee is transformed into the Redeemer of the world.

The road is the oldest name on earth for religion. It is the favorite designation of the primitive mind, and the Eastern religions have appropriated it to symbolize their thought of God. Old Testament prophets described as one token of God's reign on the earth the making of a highway and a way where the redeemed of the Lord should walk. Jesus declared himself to be "the way." The early Christians were known as "men of the way." The writer of the Book of Hebrews, reflecting on the work of Christ, ~~de~~ declares He opened up a new and living way. The Prince of Glory must first be the Pioneer of Faith. Now as He enters Jerusalem, an old figure is clothed with new, pointed meaning: "If any man would come after me," He said, "let him take up his cross and follow me to the end."

He enters Jerusalem, having begun in Galilee. And it was His religion that carried him there. And the Gospel He preached was the religion He lived. At the Jordan He accepted His divine vocation and consecrated himself to the mission to which God had called Him. On the Mount He was assured that He was the fulfillment of the law and the prophets. Through the overshadowing clouds He heard the approving voice of His Father. The Cross which awaited Him would not break His fellowship with

God; the enormity of sin would not destroy his faith in man; nor would the conquest of his enemies conquer his confidence in the ultimate vindication of his truth and the triumph of his cause. And so, having loved his own that were in the world, He loved them unto the end."

IV.

How far will we permit our religion to carry us? That is our Lord's question to us—we being Christians. Every generation because of the particular context in which it is set and because of the problems which a ~~challenging~~ changing world thrust upon it has to face up to, and to come to terms with the living issues in which the Gospel is involved. The issue has varied. At one time it was the necessity for Christian to make clear to themselves, against the insuations of a cynical world, their doctrine of the Person of Christ. Again verbal battles have raged around the validity of Holy Scripture. Again the storm center has been the place and function of institutional religion. In dramatic fashion we have seen the fight for the freedom of the human spirit. And with the disclosure of nature's secrets there was the necessity for clarifying the relationship of science and faith. ~~And within our day skirmishes in the~~ ~~And with the disclosure of nature's~~ fields of psychology have sent us back to test the validity of religious experience. Now there are some battles which, praise God, we shall never have to fight again. There are some issues which are dead like the Egyptians on the seashore. But the issue which Christians must wrestle with today is: How far are we willing to accept the Gospel of Christ and its implications and relate them to the common and complex life of which we are a part?

What that Gospel is, what the ruling ideas are, and what its purpose is, we know. Thanks to the spade, we have silent confirmations of the facts, which have been reported about the world in which Jesus lived. Reverent scholars have placed before us his authentic words. Impartial

students have acquainted us with the formative factors of the Christian enterprise. Knowledge we have. We know Jesus as a Fact of history, a fact of experience, and a fact of conscience. And we know his proposal for the individual and for the whole world.

And we know the world in which we live. It is a world intellectually preplexed, morally muddled, economically insecure, and religiously wistful. Singularly enough, the ancient antagonisms which confronted our Lord when he entered Galilee preaching his Gospel confront us. They are mammonism, and added to these the increasing pressure of secularism.

If we are to live in a state of honor with ourselves and with Christ, we cannot evade the issues. We cannot be selective Christians. We cannot in sincerity magnify one aspect of the Gospel as though it were the whole Gospel. We cannot appropriate the consolations and ignore the commands. A citizen who selects the laws he obeys and only those is called an anarchist. A Christian who exempts any area of his personal or corporate life from the "hard sayings" of Christ and claims exemption on the ground that they are oriental imagery, timely for ancient Palestine, but irrelevant for a modern age, is a Christian reservationist, partially ~~Christian~~ ^{Christian}, conveniently Christian, fastidiously Christian. It is to travel the silver-ribboned roads of Galilee with Jesus but to turn back from the road to Jerusalem.

In a day when there is a protest against all authority and a revolt against objective standards of what is right and wrong; when a new-time spirit discredits moral standards for the home, the school, and the church; in a day when disciplines of any kind are disregarded and when the threshold of the church has been lowered to the level of the street, how far are we willing for our religion to carry us in personal ideals of character? How far in protests and in example?

As interpreters and exhibits of the Christian faith dare we preach

dangerously and live dangerously? A modest man from the Far East captures the headlines of the Press and the imagination of the Western World. His sensational impact upon the younger generation is explained by one fact: He courageously follows the implications of his religion. That accounts for Kagawa. He has won the right to preach the Cross, for having been crucified with Christ, Christ lives in him.

How far will we permit our religion to carry us in human relationships? Our Lord was allied with no political party and refused the role of a reformer. Nor did He promote any specific economic system. But because of Law of Love springing from his Gospel of God He established timeless principles which have timely reference to every problem where the rights of persons are involved. He was the champion neither of the "classes" or the "masses" as such, but of man. Will we take our stand with Him for economic justice, for racial understanding? Will we, looking through His eyes, see that every disturbance is a family trouble, and that only in him can all things and all peoples hold together? Will we being Christians, surrender our faith in the power and in the method of Christ to change human nature? And confess that brother must always fight brother? Shall our reliance for keeping the peace be the savagery of the sword or the spirit of the Cross?

Again, how far will we permit our religion to carry us in working with all other friends of Christ? Who but Christians in every land with the world in their hearts can create a new world-order? Who but brothers in Christ can assure a real brotherhood of man? Who but ~~xx~~Christians with ~~an~~experience of the Grace of God, have a tested, adequate and satisfying Gospel to offer as the hope of the world? How far, then, by counsel, cooperation and crusade will we go with all others who share as we do a common experience, face a common foe and seek a common objective?

Meanwhile facing inescapable issues and unavoidable choices we are confronted by man's oldest temptation. It is in essence the new worldliness; It is the temptation to be "afraid of that which is high;" to trust in cleverness, manipulation, technique, and legislation to accomplish what can be permanently achieved only through humble dependence upon God and obedience to His will as he revealed it in the "mind of Christ;" the temptation to adapt ourselves to the "time-spirit" by adopting the methods of the world, forgetting the while that Christians have power in the world only as they transcend the world.

Once more the old alternatives confront us: Christ or Caesar; the Acropolis or Golgotha; the Corsican or the Galileen; the daughters of Greece or the sons of Zion. Indeed going back to the Galilee or going on to Jerusalem.

V.

Our central thought this morning has obvious reference to our Baptist household of faith. We affirm we have no creed but the New Testament. So we say together "Jesus Christ is Lord." We avow that with an open Bible, a teachable mind, an humble heart and the Holy Spirit to guide, and individual can be trusted to work out his own salvation. Moreover our voluntary association of believers rests back not on a code but a covenant. And our covenant is to love on another, to work with one another and with Christ.

Now the corollaries of such a faith impose upon us exacting disciplines. We exalt our freedom. Thus we are on our honor. We stand for a spiritual religion. That presupposes a personal transaction with Christ, and our utter committal to His authority. Thus we are left without options for our procedures. Our commitments define our attitude and point the only way along which we can consistently move. Before every situation which ~~xxxxxx~~ this strange, confused time thrusts at our doors there is just one question we raise: What, in the light of His Word, His spirit,

and his example, is his ruling? And beyond all other authorities, his ruling is final. And there is just one thing for us to do (we being true to ourselves): to await his command and to follow him--at all cost.

VI.

"And they were in the way going up to Jerusalem; and Jesus went before them; and they were amazed; and as they followed they were afraid." Hesitant, dismayed, fearful, yet they followed. They could not see the scene, but they saw him going on before them. That was enough for them-- and it is enough for us. They discovered that the Cross was not the end of anything but the beginning of all things new, even as he said. "Wherefore God hath highly exalted him, and given him a name that is above every name."

This past year a broadcasting system was opened in Palestine. The first words of the announcer spoken in Arabic, Hebrew and English were, "This is Jerusalem calling." Centuries ago from that little land prophetic voices called a forgetful people to return from their detours to the highway of God. And now once more in a language heard and understood around the world, "Jerusalem is Calling." Jerusalem, the mother of us all, symbol of the Eternal, calling her sons and daughters back to faith in unseen and abiding realities.

But the highest broadcasting station in that Holy City, indeed the highest on this planet, "is a green hill without a city wall." And it rests on the spot where ended the long, costly, redemptive journey from Galilee to Jerusalem. And the Voice that calls speaks a universal language. And it is the Voice that long ago called men from the lake-shores to follow him on and up. And listening in, we hear it now. "If any man would be worth of Me, let him follow Me."

Come, my brothers, and

"In simple trust like theirs who heard
Beside the Syrian sea
The gracious calling of the Lord;
Let us, like them, without a word
Rise up and follow Thee. "

· So may God grant!