

“THE CHRIST OF THE GATHERING STORM”

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One of Holman Hunt's most famous paintings is entitled “The Shadow of Death.” It depicts Jesus in a carpenter shop at Nazareth about the close of day. The last rays of the setting sun are streaming in through the open door and the young carpenter who has been toiling at the bench raises himself for a moment from his cramped, stooping position and stretches out his arms. Just then the dying sun catches his figure and casts his shadow on the wall behind him, and its form is the form of a cross.

It is a most striking picture, and is the artist's unusual way of reminding us that right from the start of Jesus' ministry, death was in the air. In a way unlike any other person who ever lived, Jesus was born to die. From the very start, his end was certain. And there is evidence to suggest that Jesus was aware of this sinister shadow lingering over him during those silent years of childhood and youth.

His wistful answer to his mother in the temple, “Know ye not that I must be about my Father's business” seems to indicate he saw himself in the image of the suffering servant described in Isaiah 53. When Jesus downed the devil in that desperate dual in the desert, and refused to compromise with sin, his fate was sealed. The sign of the cross was indelibly traced upon his countenance, and from that time on he went forward to meet it.

James Stewart, to whom I owe a large debt for both the idea and outline of our message this morning, suggests in his little book, The Life And Teachings of Jesus Christ, that by the time Jesus was well into his public ministry the cross was something more than a shadow. But, as our scripture lesson points out, when Jesus began to share with his disciples the unpleasant news about his coming death, they refused to believe it. It was utterly incredible to them that he would die. Especially if he was the Messiah! It cut across their pre-conceived hopes and notions of

what the Messiah was going to be.

“Lord, this will never happen to you!” exclaimed Peter when Jesus spoke of his upcomig death.. And he said it with such vehemence, Jesus realized even this friend could be a tool in the hands of Satan to deter him from his holy mission, so he said, “Get thee behind me, Satan.”

The disciples just couldn’t believe their Master was about to die. And, even though he had warned them again and again, when the blow actually fell and he was nailed to a cross, it was the disciples, who most of all, were stunned and left utterly despairing. Only Jesus saw the cross as inevitable, and went unwavering toward it.

The Gathering Storm

Our purpose this morning is to trace the movement of the gathering storm of hostility that swirled around Jesus, and to study briefly the causes behind these clouds that ultimately culminated in Calvary. There were three sources of hostility focused on Jesus, and one of these was --

The Pharisees

It was by them that this attack upon the life and character of Jesus was first launched. And when you stop to think about it, this is really quite incredible. The Pharisees were the most religious people in the land.

“They were,” as Stewart point out, “ the true successors to such fiery reformers as Ezra and Nehemiah. They were the ones who were attempting to keep religion alive and strong in a day when it was so easy for it to grow weak and flabby. In every way they were true defenders of the faith. Righteousness was their keynote. The honor of the one true God their constant theme. And their holy intent was to keep the moral standard high.”

And yet, to the Pharisees, the sight and sound of Jesus proclaiming the coming of the Kingdom of God was a terrifying.

Why *was* that? Stewart suggests three sources of their hatred. The first of these was that --

They Believed Jesus to be an Imposter

From the very beginning the Jewish nation had placed their hopes in the promised Messiah. The Pharisees were among those most anxious for his coming. For that reason, when Jesus suddenly appeared on the scene they could not ignore him.

But there were certain things about him and his movement, which were repugnant to the Pharisees. For one thing, he had come from the ranks of the poor. The thought that their leader would not share their own cultural background, or ecclesiastical tradition, was beyond their comprehension.

For another thing, the kinds of people Jesus chose for his disciples also put the kiss of death upon him. It was inconceivable to the Pharisees that their Messiah would be an open friend of publicans and sinners. People that any self-respecting Pharisee wouldn't touch with a ten-foot pole, were welcomed with open arms by this peasant-preacher. So they could only come to one conclusion. It was as clear as day to them. This man was an imposter!

His Attitude to the Law and the Tradition

A second element in the conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees was his attitude toward the law and Hebrew tradition.

As James Stewart says,

“Punctilious observance of all the 613 commandments which made up the Jewish Law was the sum and substance of Pharisaic religion. Orthodoxy declared that these commandments contained the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. If you had ventured to suggest to a Pharisee that the teachers who had given the Law had been dead for years, whereas God was still alive and that therefore there might conceivably be this time,

be something to add to it, or if you hinted to him that a good many of his 613 commandments savored of an obsolete and pedantic legalism and ought now to be decently buried in order to leave room for new light and truth to come breaking in, he would have held up his hands in horror and called it rank heresy.”

But that is precisely what Jesus did. His startling teachings regarding the Law were like a relentless battering ram beating against the tightly shut minds of the Pharisees. And even as today, when if there is something we don’t like about someone we brand him a communist etc, so, too, the Pharisees were quick to call Christ a heretic.

He simply wouldn’t stand aside and keep still when people were obviously wrong. He persisted in talking about the spirit as well as the letter of the Law. And this was far too painful for the Pharisees to take, so they began to seek ways to do him in.

Universalism

The third charge in the Pharisaic indictment of Jesus concerned his universalism. To the average Pharisee, humanity fell into two groups. The true-blue Jews, and those they contemptuously called Gentiles. Between the two there was a wide, yawning gulf which no one could cross.

But Jesus did cross it! He refused to allow the Pharisees to maintain their religious monopoly. He declared that God was everywhere and for everybody. He preached and practiced the horrible heresies that Samaritans were no less God’s children than those born and bred in Jerusalem. He pictured a glorious day when people of every color, condition and circumstance under heaven, would march victoriously into the Kingdom of God. This universalism was a dangerous doctrine to the proud and exclusivistic Pharisees, so the man who proclaimed it could not be allowed to live.

The Sadducees

A second group of people who were concerned about silencing Jesus were the Sadducees.

Normally they were the traditional rival of the Pharisees, but their common hostility to Jesus was so great they were willing to forget their differences and band together in an endeavor to get him out of their hair.

James Stewart identifies three keys to the behavior of the Sadducees.

“They were an *aristocratic* party containing members of the old nobility. They were a *political* party, controlling the nation’s interest at home and abroad. They were a *priestly* party, holding the leading places in the Sanhedrin” (italics mine).

They were extremely secular in their outlook on life and were thoroughly materialistic in their sense of values. Religion was ever and always a means to the end, and they kept it subservient to politics. They recognized that their favored position was dependent upon keeping the riff-raff in line, so that the Roman rulers would let them share in the spoils.

Furthermore, whatever religion they had was pretty weak-kneed. For that reason, it was utterly inevitable that ultimately, the Sadducees and Jesus would come to conflict. As long as he was on the loose their little aristocracy was in danger. Should his teachings precipitate a nation-wide rebellion, their comfortable position would be destroyed. And, as always, there was the constant threat a *living* religion always is to a dead one. To borrow Stewart’s words again,

“The word of God in Jesus’ mouth was like a sword, piercing through shows and shams and unreality. It blazed with honesty. It made insincerity tremble. It was alive, incalculable, life-changing, revolutionary. Hence the Sadducees detested it. They detested even more the man who proclaimed it. They would have no peace, they told themselves, until the word was silent and the man was dead..”

The Crowd

The final factor behind the gathering storm which swirled about Jesus, was that many of the common people were turning against him. The enormous popularity of earlier days began to

wane when the people began to realize that if this *was* the promised Messiah, he was a very strange one.

Their Disappointment

For one thing, they were annoyed at the fact that Jesus refused to allow them to use him and make him their king. From every human point of view, he seemed to be the “captain” they needed to lead them in their insurrection against the wrongs imposed upon them by the Romans. But Jesus steadfastly refused to fit into their plans. As a result, they were disappointed in him.

The Success of the Pharisees in Poisoning Them

And then, of course, there were the Pharisees who were deliberately sowing seeds of suspicion among them. This is no small thing, for these religious leaders had a great deal of influence over the rank and file. The fact *they* were against Jesus subtlety and steadily poisoned the minds of the people against him, and the ranks of his admirers began to thin.

The Demands of Jesus

But perhaps the most powerful factor affecting the relationship of Jesus to the people, was the gospel he preached. It was no comfortable religion. His demands were great. As a matter of fact, they were unconditional. And then, as now, there were few who were willing to subordinate the desires of the moment for the rewards to come.

Today has always been eternity’s greatest rival. When Jesus began to speak about such things as self-sacrifice and surrender, many who previously had given him a rapturous welcome, now turned aside and chose to walk another way.

Hence the Gathering Storm

Thus it was that the shadows deepened, and the storm clouds gathered, about the Son of God. In the mind of Jesus there was no mistaking the fact that the hour for which God had appointed him was not far away. And so, “He steadfastly set his face to go to Jerusalem.”

With no weapon but love, no resource but faith in his heavenly Father, no purpose but to face and fight down sin, the heroic Son of God went forward with steady step to meet the entrenched and embattled forces of evil awaiting him.

No wonder Mark, the young evangelist, describing one stage of that last march, put it this way,

“Jesus went before them, and they were amazed, and as they followed, they were afraid” (Mk. 10:32).

Here was real heroism. Here was a brave, glad quality of life which our frail and flabby world needs desperately. Here, if you will, is the true meaning of Lent as this man, willingly and wholeheartedly, not as a futile sigh, but as a ringing battle cry, prayed, “*Thy will be done!*”

If we, who name his name, are to be worthy of our calling, we, too, must know something of the cross. We, too, must be willing to stand with our face toward the storm and not cower and cringe before it. For mark my word, if we take Christ seriously it will mean for us, what it meant for him. A cross! And dying daily.

But thank God that isn’t all. Beyond the cross is the empty tomb. Beyond Good Friday is Easter. After the storm, there is a still small voice saying, “Peace, be still.”