

“THE CHRIST OF THE BUSY STREETS”

Dr. John Allan Lavender

Mk. 9:9-29

The Rhythm of Life

“And coming down from the mountain. . .they came to the disciples.” In selecting my text I have telescoped verses nine through fourteen in order to give you a sense of the incredible contrast between the mount of transfiguration and the valley of despair.

Raphael has captured some of it, when in his masterpiece The Transfiguration, he provides us with what many feel to be the finest “exposition” ever given of this segment of Jesus’ life.

On his invaluable canvas Raphael has blended together the glory of the high hour and the gloom of the valley. Along the lower portion of the painting Raphael has placed the figures of a father and his demoniac boy. Surrounding them are the impotent disciples unable to heal. Some are engaged in heated debate over the cause of their impotence. Others are pointing frantically toward the summit of the mountain where the transfigured Christ is shown in dazzling array.

Thus, with magnificent insight, Raphael unites the valley of pain and the mountain of glory. On one all-inclusive canvas he portrays *both* the problem and the answer as, with masterful strokes, he attracts our attention to the striking contrast between the impotent disciples and the imploring father, and the empowered Christ.

Now, actually, this is nothing more or less than a painting of the rhythm of life. For there is in the experience of all of us an inevitable vacillation between exhilaration and humiliation, between the high tide and the low, between the vision of glory and the valley of gloom.

And however hard we might try to escape this rhythm and remain on the mountaintop we are doomed to failure. Life simply isn’t on the mountaintop experience. It consists also of the

sorrows and sufferings which clog the busy streets below.

The life of Jesus was not one of detached glory. It often rubbed shoulders with some of the saddest and most sordid human situations. And the same must be true of us. Oh, the high hours of the heart are there. Thank God for that. They stay our arm and nerve our soul. They give us moments to remember when life comes tumbling in. But the vision soon fades when the valley needs call, and we are challenged to turn inspiration into perspiration, and faith into works.

The transfiguration was in one sense an end in itself. But in another sense, it was a means to the end, that thus infused with power and renewed purpose, “The Christ of Celestial Glory” might become “The Christ of the Busy Street” bringing help and hope and healing to the hungry-hearted masses down below.

And this must be the outcome of our high hours too. “Faith without works is dead,” the Bible says. And our worship is sterile unless the power and insight we gain through it is turned to good, for God’s sake and man’s sake, in works of love.

I think this rhythm between worship and service, inspiration and perspiration, mountain-vision and valley-need, is illustrated in the form of worship used by some of our mission churches in the small villages of Indonesia.

As I understand it, the practice is this: Each member comes to the church with an empty oil lamp. As they enter the crude little chapel, the minister greets them at the door, fills their lamps with oil, and lights them. Then they place the lighted lamps on the floor in the form of a cross and, sitting on the ground around the cross, (there are no pews or benches in those primitive churches) the people listen as the pastor proclaims the good news of Jesus Christ, the light of the world.

Then, as the minister pronounces the benediction, the people take up their lamps and go out of the church bearing with them -- into every corner of the village -- their small part of the great gift of light to the world. This, it seems to me, is the true meaning of the church. The real purpose of

worship. The real significance of those high-water marks of the heart which God is sometimes pleased to bestow upon us. A vision without a task makes a visionary. A task without a vision makes a drudge. But a vision *and* a task makes a life full of joy as we translate the glory of the mountaintop into glowing service on the streets down below.

There is an old phrase, “going downhill,” which we’ve always used in a rather derogatory way. Whenever we’ve said of somebody, “He’s going downhill” we’ve meant he’s seen better days. But one commentator suggests there is a nobler meaning to that phrase. The meaning *Jesus* gave to it when --

“He spent his whole life *going downhill* from the high and lonely places where he held communion with God, to the level, crowded places of human need. There are those who spend much of their time in the fine art of going up hill. Climbing to some height of advantage, power, position, or wealth, and pay little or no attention to this much finer art, the art of going downhill.”

But it was the lifelong descent “from the place of vision to the place of deed, from the hill of privilege to the plain of need” which occupied the life of our Lord. And this must occupy *us* if our religion is to be more than a Sunday go-to-meeting sort of thing, which has nothing to say to that larger part of life which is lived outside our church, on the busy streets.

True religion, says the Bible in James 1:27, is not only a matter of keeping one’s self “unspotted from the world.” It also includes the very practical business of “visiting the fatherless and widows in their affliction.” Which is simply the Bible’s poetic way of saying we must maintain the rhythm of life between worship and service, inspiration and perspiration, faith and works, or our so-called “spiritual gymnastics” are unacceptable in the sight of God.

The Impotent Disciples

But there is another side of the coin. For if the sequel to the transfiguration is service, then there

is the inevitable implication that the preface to effective service is a transforming encounter with the living God.

A few moments ago I pointed out the contrast between the vision of glory and the valley of gloom. But there is another contrast. Just as stark and just as real. It is the contrast between the troubled boy and the impotent disciples. Here was a poor, wretched, lonely youngster who had been robbed of rapport with society by a dread disease which alienated him from his fellows. But in the face of such desperate need, the disciples were unable to do anything about it. They were utterly and unequivocally defeated.

But before we judge them too harshly, it might be well for us to take a long, hard stare at our own lives. For it seems to me that the curse of the church today is that, like the disciples of old, we are impotent in the face of evil. Is it not true that as a church we are often stung to the soul by the accusing finger and slurring voice of society as it asks, “Do you have any word from the Lord? Or are you simply parroting pronouncements of the luncheon club? Do you have any really Christian answer to offer, or are you just another part of the problem?”

These are the painful questions with which the world is confronting us. But I fear that for the most part we are just like the disciples and we spend our time *discussing*, arguing and debating, but not acting to bring release from the evil which clutches society in its calamitous convulsions. Having caught a glimpse of the glory of God as revealed in the face of Jesus Christ, like the disciples of old, we cringe in fear before the needs and hurts of our fellow sinners. We spend our time talking instead of acting. Philosophizing instead of evangelizing. Debating instead of engaging in hand-to-hand combat with the demons which would destroy us and others.

“What are you *discussing* with them?” Jesus said to his disciples. Why, in the presence of deep agonizing, desperate need, do you waste time with rhetoric? He was saying this poor boy needed more than debates and rebuttals, more than words, words, words. He needed power. Power to heal. Power to strengthen. Power to put first things first.

And that’s what the world needs today. A church full of power. A people like us. People who know who we are. What our ministry is. Why we’re here and where we’re going. People, who in the face of unspeakable need do not spend time debating and discussing, but courageously confront a world caught up in the convulsions of evil, with *deeds* instead of words, and *power* instead of impotence.

Someone has said that when a man’s house is on fire he doesn’t quibble about the price of the house. And it seems to me that in the perilous times in which we find ourselves we must not be content with “arid verbiage.” The whole world is on fire and what it needs is some strong repellent. Some deterrent. A fire extinguisher, if you will. A force so powerful it can quench the flames which would devour the world and dispel the devils which now inhabit it.

“What are you *discussing* with them?” said Jesus to his disciples. And that question still rings in our ears as “The Christ of the Busy Streets” confronts us with the necessity of being doers, and not debaters, of the word.

The Answer

Why this impotence, this fearfulness, this defeated attitude on the part of the church? Our Lord gives the answer in Mark 9:29 when he says,

“This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer.”

Unconsciously the disciples had lost their power. They had previously been commissioned by Jesus to cast out devils, *and they had!* But unconsciously they had allowed their faith to wane and the power to diminish.

Like Samson of old, “who knew not the power had left him,” the disciples were unaware of the fact that through the almost imperceptible process of slow deterioration they had grown impotent, because they had not made enough of prayer.

Could it be that that is your problem? I know it's mine. I used to wonder why it was that sometimes when I preached there wasn't any power. That I seemed to be beating my head against a stone wall. While other times the very floodgates of heaven were opened and the good Lord poured out a blessing upon us we could hardly contain.

I talked it over with my ministerial friends and discovered they had the same problem, although no one could provide an answer. And then one day while discussing this with an old, gray-haired preacher from Texas he said, “John, have you ever tried to breathe out three times while only breathing in once?” “No sir.” He said, “Try it.” I did, and found it can't be done. “It's impossible,” I said. He replied softly, “John, that's your answer.”

And dear hearts, as Christians we cannot hope to go on giving out unless we pause to breathe in, through prayer, the Holy Spirit's power. Someone has said,

“Prayer is power. Much prayer is much power. Little prayer is little power.
No prayer is no power.”

And if we don't find time to pray, then sooner or later we're going to join the disciples in wondering “why could we not cast out the devil?” And Christ's answer, though trite, is true, “This kind comes out only by prayer.”

When the father of the boy found the failure of the disciples, he began to lose confidence in their Lord. And we read in verse 22 that he came to Christ with something more than just a bit of uncertainty and said, “*If thou canst do anything, have compassion on me.*”

That's the tragedy of our impotence. It reflects on our God. For every person who reads the Bible, there a thousand people who read our lives. We may be the only Christian some people ever see. If we are weak in faith, weak in courage, weak in commitment, they will not only doubt *us*, they will also begin to doubt the saving power of *Jesus*, whose name we bear.

Such was the case with the father in our text.

“If . . . thou canst do anything. . . have compassion.”

And Jesus responds,

“If? If *I* can do anything? My friend, it’s not a question of if *I* can, but if *you* can. If *you* can believe, all things are possible.”

You see, dear heart, the final answer to all of life’s ills lies not in God’s almightiness, but in our own willingness to, by faith, unlock God’s power.

“If *you* can believe, all things are possible.”

And the father cried,

“Lord, I believe, help my unbelief.”

How close to home that pitiful prayer comes! All of us are a troubled mixture of belief and unbelief. All of us have suffered from the anguish of this schizophrenia of the soul. There are some days when we sing with sweet assurance,

“On Christ the solid rock I stand,”

and then, there are other days when under leaden skies the ground beneath us turns to sinking sand, and we can only cry out,

“Lord I believe, help my unbelief.”

But if we pray *that* prayer with the same desperation of soul, and spirit of concern, as this anguished father, we will be heard and heeded. Christ will bring wholeness and healing to our fragmented, fractured, frantic, frustrated lives. And best of all, we, in turn, will be empowered to bring his healing touch to others. To cast out those dread demons of disaster which “cannot be driven out by anything but prayer.”

“Prayer makes the darkened clouds withdraw;

Prayer climbs the ladder Jacob saw;

And Satan trembles when he sees

The weakest saint upon his knees.”