

PRELUDE TO VICTORY

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Matt: 28:1-8

The crowds of people who were intrigued by Jesus grew rapidly as some of His followers saw Him to be a logical candidate for their political leader. His many miracles had brought Him to the attention of the populous. In fact, He was something of a sensation, and looked like the kind of man around whom the people would rally when the hour of revolt against Rome arrived.

Others saw in His teachings a refreshing change from the stuffy religion of the Pharisees. Unfortunately, like so many of the superficial, they misunderstood His meaning. They thought that because He talked about God's forgiveness, He was making light of their sin. They mistook His meekness for weakness. Because Jesus summed up all of the Ten Commandments in one great declaration,

“Love God and your neighbor”

they thought He was giving them an easy way out. So they flocked after Him in droves.

Oh, there were a few who had a notion that He was saying something more. But, for the most part, the crowd which milled about Him was composed of

Political hopefuls

Curious thrill-seekers, or

Soft and crafty opportunists

in search of cheap redemption.

By the time He was to make His triumphal entry into Jerusalem, He was a celebrity. People lined both sides of the street shouting, “Hosanna to the Son of David”. Some of them took their cloaks and threw them in front of the donkey upon which He rode. Hundreds of others waved palms in adulation.

Yes, His popularity among those who were merely intrigued by Him was running high on the day we now call Palm Sunday, and there were many who would have made Him King.

It was a different story just seven days later. The crowds had vanished. The thrill seekers had turned tail to run. The opportunists had given up in disgust. Most of His disciples had melted away and, according to Matthew, two lonely, frightened, bewildered women—His Mother and Mary Magdalene—were the only ones who still cared enough to tend His grave.

Something happened between Palm Sunday and Easter which sent the self-seekers scurrying for cover. What was it? The crucifixion!

The cross has always been the dividing line between the sincere and the superficial. Between those who are merely intrigued by Jesus and those who are truly committed to Him. It has always been the tell-tale test which reveals a person's true nature.

In Pilate's case, it showed him to be a weakling who did not have the courage of his convictions. Three times he judged Jesus to be not guilty and, three times he chose the plaudits of people rather than the approval of God. As a result, he got neither!

The cross revealed Herod as a fun-seeking, pleasure loving charlatan who cared nothing for the feelings of others.

The cross exposed the chief priests as unscrupulous schemers who were willing to do anything to win their cause.

And, the cross revealed the crowd to be a calloused, unthinking mass of humanity which could quickly forget the past as it rushed off in search of some new fascination.

Yes, the cross has always been the dividing line. It has always marked the point beyond which

some were not willing to go.

And even as there were many who marched with Him on the day of triumph, but quickly forsook Him on the day of trial so, too, there are many today who are intrigued by Jesus until they see the cross. And then they say: "Thus far, and no further."

Jesus? Yes!

Calvary? No!

Self-satisfaction? Yes!

Self-denial? No!

The good life? Yes!

The Godly life? No!

But I say to you this morning, and I say it with utter sincerity and I pray absolute clarity, the joy of Easter can never be possible, let alone real, until you have been through the jolt of Good Friday. There is a prelude to victory which includes a cross.

What is that cross? I speak to my fellow Christians now. What is that cross? Well, it certainly isn't a wooden instrument of torture like the Romans used to carry out the sentence of death. Nor is it an irritating wife or intemperate husband. Nor is it some terrible tragedy like the one which has come to a young couple I must rush off to minister to right after this service whose tiny 2-1/2 year old baby just died of strangulation.

No! The cross of the Christian is not any of these things which people or circumstances impose upon us. In fact, it is not a *thing* at all.

The Christian's cross is an experience. A self-imposed experience in which we willingly, though

hesitantly, but deliberately accept a burden which we otherwise would never have to bear.

The Christian's cross is never imposed by others, or even by God! It never comes unsolicited. The Cross of Christ was the product of His own choosing. He could easily have avoided it. He could have summoned 10,000 angels to rescue Him from His captors. But no, Jesus was a willing sufferer! And, having borne His cross

Willingly

Deliberately

Courageously and

Uncomplainingly

He now says to us:

“If anyone will come after Me, let him deny himself, (not a denial imposed by other), and take up his cross, and follow me” Matt.

16:24.

I don't know what that cross is for you. I'm only just beginning to understand what it is for me. But I do know there was a cross before Easter and there have been crosses ever since. No matter how hard we try to camouflage it with Easter lilies and the like, the cross still stands there making its necessary and unrelenting demand. And we've got to face it. As George Buttrick says so succinctly:

“Christianity is not a success story. It is not the account of One who rose from poverty to a throne, but of a love, which for our sakes, came from a throne into our poverty.”

And, as the followers of One who lived out that love for our sakes, we must do the same for the sake of others.

There are three kinds of people in the world today.

Convinced communists.

Amiable non-entities and

Cross-carrying Christians.

If we choose to be the latter, we cannot remove all tension from our lives. We cannot tinker with our feelings, trying to gain a little peace of mind. As a matter of fact, we can never again know the shallow piece of the indifferent. The bovine complacency of phenobarbital religion has no place in the life of born-again Christians.

We cannot have “the power of His resurrection” without “the Fellowship of His suffering” Phil. 3:10. In the beautiful paradox of our Lord, we cannot live unless we are willing to die. (Matt. 16:25)

Fulton J. Sheen puts it this way:

“If we wish to save our life for eternity,
We must lose it for time.
If we wish to save it for the Father’s mansions,
We must lose it for this dull world.
If we wish to save it for perfect happiness,
We must lose it for the fleeting pleasures of mortality.

Unless there is a Good Friday on our life,
There will never be an Easter morning.
Unless there is a cross,
There will never be an empty tomb.
Unless there are scars,
There will never be a glorified body.
Unless there is a crown of thorns,
There will never be a halo of light.”

Unless you are willing to die to the world, you will never be alive to Christ. Unless you lose your life in Him, you will never find it again.

It's impossible, you see, to walk around the cross. Its outstretched arms will not permit it. You have two alternatives. You can turn your back and walk away from it or, you can climb over it. Climbing over it means death to self. But, and here's the glorious part, it also means life through the Savior. For when Jesus chose crucifixion, it resulted in resurrection. He did not stop at sorrow; He went on to singing. He did not stop at tragedy; He went on to triumph. And that will be your experience, too.

To quote Sheen again:

“One of the reasons some people fear death is because they have no practice dying. Most of us die only once when we should have died a thousand times. Indeed, we should have died daily. Death is a terrible thing for the person who only dies once. But, for the one who has died to himself many times before, it is beautiful.”

Following the memorial service for Harold Cuttle last Tuesday, his wife said, “Thank you, Pastor, for your message. It was wonderful.” I replied, “If that's true, it's because I had a lot to work with.”

She answered, “I know, and that means so much to me now.”

All lives are not like Harold Cuttle's. There are a lot of people whose grave stones can only read: “Born in such-and-such a year. Died at such-a-such a time. Period.” There's nothing more to say. And for the minister who conducts their funeral, it's an intolerable burden.

But thank God there are those who have entered into a Good Friday of self-negation and, for them, death is not the end but only the beginning. Because they have faced the crucifixion darkness, they can look forward to the resurrection dawn.

An American couple were visiting the Bavarian Alps to witness the passion play which is presented there every ten years. They were anxious to get some pictures and so the wife asked

her husband to stand beside the cross which was lying on the stage.

Alois Lange, the man who plays the part of Christ, was standing in the wings offstage watching. After the woman had taken one picture of her husband standing by the cross, she said, "Why don't you pick it up and put it on your shoulder. That would make a good picture."

The man reached down to pick up the cross, but he couldn't move it. Finally, he got down on one knee and, exercising every bit of strength he had, he managed to lift it to his shoulder. As he stood there stooped down by the terrible weight of the cross, Mr. Lange, the man who took the part of Christ, came over.

"Why do you use such a heavy cross?" the man asked. "No one would know if you made it hollow and it certainly would be easier to bear." Alois Lange answered, "My friend, you are wrong. Everyone would know. For I would never be able to portray Christ convincingly if I could not feel the weight of His cross."

My friend, if we call ourself Christians then it is our task to portray Christ to the world. We will never be able to do that convincingly unless we, too, feel the weight of His cross.

But when we bear that cross, when we get under its burden, we put ourselves in company with the Savior and, having endured a Good Friday of self-denial, we are ready for the glory of the Easter dawn.

The prelude to Christ's victory was His crucifixion. There is an old legend which says that one day the devil appeared to a saint claiming to be the Savior. The saint tested him by saying:

"If you are the Lord, show me your scars of love."

The time has come when we must show our scars of love. We can no longer be satisfied with a milk and water religion. It's too late for that. We are either part of the problem or we are part of

the answer. For, as I said at the beginning, there are three kinds of people in the world:

Convinced communists.

Amiable non-entities and

Consecrated Christians.

And woe to us if we come down from our private Calvary 1956 style with hands unmarked and white. For only by facing, lifting and mounting the cross will we join Jesus in His Easter triumph.

Having said all this to my fellow Christians, let me say a word to those of you who are still seeking. The cross for you is also a self-imposed experience. No one will force you to recognize your need, repent of your sin, and receive Jesus as your Savior.

These are decisions you must come to yourself. But may I also say, "The way of the cross leads home." It has always led home. It will always lead home. There is no other way.

The story of God's love for you is written across the expanse of the heavens in the heartache and heartbreak of Jesus. And, without the jolt of meeting Jesus at the cross, you will never have the joy of meeting Jesus at the empty tomb. But, praise God, there is room at the cross for you. For God's love is for all people in all ages and categories of sin.

An old reprobate of a woman was brought into Baptist Hospital in St. Louis. She was dying. A Christian nurse sought to minister to her in loving, caring ways. When the old woman asked her why she was being so kind to a total stranger, the nurse shared with her the story of God's love.

The old woman was strangely silent and then suddenly, she rose up on an elbow and said, "Tell it to me straight. Do you really think God cares for the likes of me?" The nurse leaned close so she might be one in spirit with this poor heart and then, lifting her soul to heaven for a moment as if receiving confirmation from God, she said, "I'm telling it to you straight. Yes! God cares for the likes of you." With a sigh, the old woman sank back on her pillow. "I wish I'd known that long before this." she said. And then, as the lines softened in her face, she added, "I'll love Him for all

eternity” and there was a quiet peace in the hush of death.

Do you know what I believe? I believe there is a golden thread binding that hospital bed to a cross on a barren hill outside a city wall.

To those of you who are seekers I say: This is the message of Easter. God cares for the likes of you. And, if you will let Him, if you'll meet Jesus at the cross, He will meet you and go on with you to and through the empty tomb into life abundant and ever-lasting.

Christ is risen! Hallelujah! Will you?