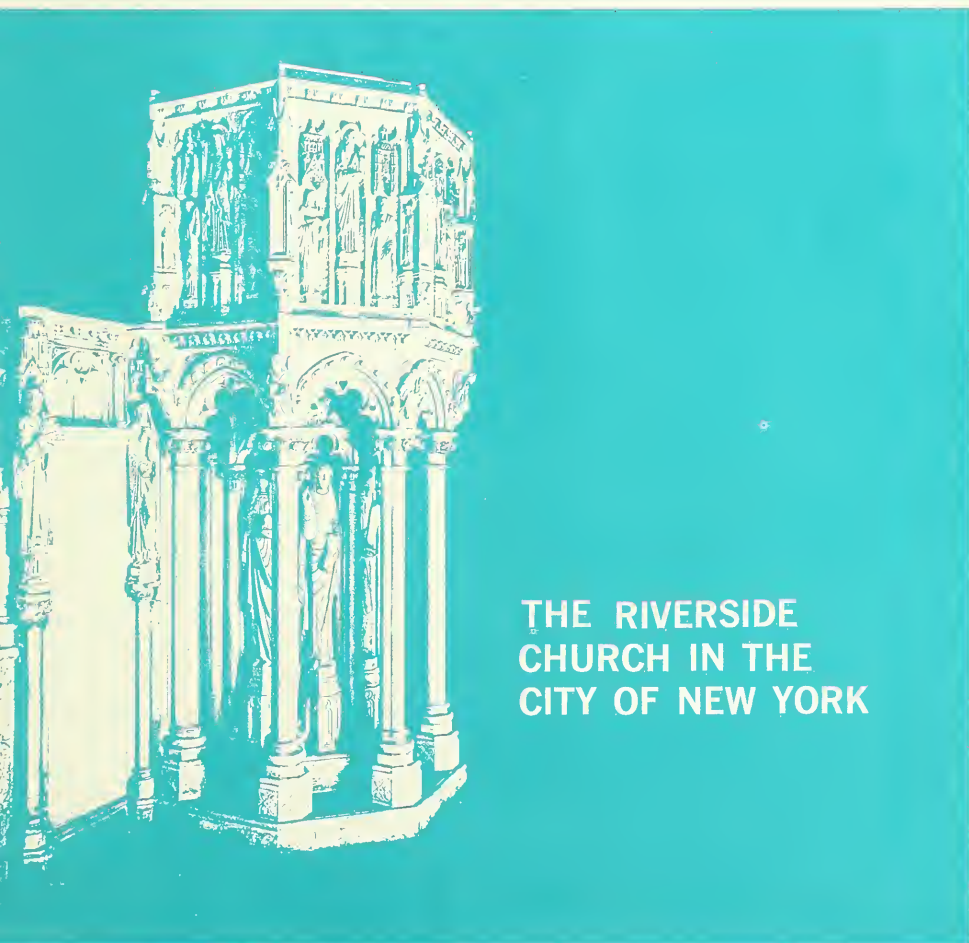


SERMONS

FROM RIVERSIDE


"AARON'S ALIBI"

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THE RIVERSIDE
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AARON'S ALIBI

"And I said to them, 'Let any who have gold take it off;' so they gave it to me, and I threw it into the fire, and there came out this calf." Exodus 32:24

Had Charles Dickens written this story the chances are that he would have called it "A Tale of Two Brothers." For the narrative to which we look today contains a pivotal experience in the lives of Moses and his older brother Aaron.

Perhaps the best way to break and enter the story is to see it for the contrasts it affords. There was an obvious contrast in geography. We might describe this happening as a "split level" drama. It features Moses in the upper regions of Mt. Sinai waiting for those marching orders and directions that would alter the face of history, and Aaron on the flats below joining with a chap called Hur to care for a bewildered people recently released from Egyptian bondage.

But the moral and spiritual contrasts are by far the more significant. There in the numinous overcast of Sinai a man of meek and humble spirit spent forty days and nights laying bare his soul before the imponderable God whose Covenant name was, "I will be what I will be."

Down below matters were altogether different. The people were fast losing their sense of destiny and becoming impatient. Forty days can be a long time when you are far away from home. There in the wilderness as the weeks slipped by Egypt looked better and better. The people craved a god that they could see and touch. After all, Egypt had a host of gods like that and Egypt had done pretty well! Why not a golden calf mounted on a standard? Enough of this spiritual religion! Let's get on with it! "Make us gods who shall go before us. As for this Moses, the man who brought us

up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him." (Ex. 32:1)

The rest is a matter of record and well known. Aaron acquiesced in their desires. He was their leader and he had to follow. He invited them to contribute the gold which was eventually melted down and shaped into the form of a calf.

Josephus believed that Hur was a brother-in-law of Moses. There is an inspiring tradition to the effect that Hur was killed at this time because he refused to support the people in their idolatry. Looking back, one good, clean, unqualified "no" from Aaron might have spared the people this costly misadventure. A man whom I respect as the president of one of our leading educational institutions, reflected on administrative policy one day and said, "You can always qualify a 'no' answer but you cannot qualify a 'yes' answer." And so, Aaron, who is first in every Bible dictionary, here comes in a dismal last!

* * *

The showdown took place when Moses showed up charged with indignation. The people got their god alright. They worshipped their idol and commenced to deport themselves in frivolous and sensual worship after the manner of the heathen. Only six weeks earlier they had received the Ten Commandments. Now they flagrantly breach the second of those ten.

Eye to eye the brothers stand. Moses addresses Aaron sternly, "What did this people do to you that you have brought a great sin upon them?" (Ex. 32:21) Aaron comes back with the lamest of all possible excuses, "I said to the people, 'Let any who have gold take it off;' so they gave it to me, and I threw it into the fire, and there came out this calf." He is feigning surprise. Some of our teenagers might caricature Aaron's position with a "Wha' happn'd?" Look what came out of the fire! Sorry, Aaron, but life is not all that chancey!

Someone there had an idea. Someone had a mould. Someone had the intelligence to achieve the desired end. The whole affair was hardly an accident. What the fire gets the fire gives. "And I said to them, 'Let those who have gold take it off;' so they gave it to me, and I threw it into the fire and there came out this calf."

* * *

What the fire gets the fire gives! Life is fundamentally reliable. One gets out of it what one puts in. One cannot get out of it what one does not put in. And while this quid pro quo may not be exact down to the fourth decimal place, life is essentially honest.

This is not an easy point for me to make or you to hear. Moral cynicism is the prevailing mood in what we like to call the "civilized" world. The innocent suffer while scoundrels go free. In common speech we testify to our cynicism with statements like this; "It's not what you know, but who you know." Or, "To get ahead one does not need push but pull." Or, "You can't fight City Hall." Or, "Everybody's doing it, I might just as well get a piece of the action myself."

Major scandals in the recent past in West Germany, Great Britain and the United States have not helped. Nor has the war in Vietnam, the protracted grief in Ireland, the recently reported inordinate profits of the world's major oil syndicates, the fall of the Allende regime in Chile, the nervous peace in the Middle East. And, closer to home, the theft of New York State Regents Examinations. And, more recently still, the accounting misadventures in the books of the City of New York!

Cynicism reigns! In fact, cynicism has hardened into a perilous cast of mind among us. We are not far from affirming what the writer of Ecclesiastes wrote on what was perhaps his darkest day. He got to the place where he could no longer believe that life was honest. "I saw that under the sun the race is not to

the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to the intelligent, nor favor to the men of skill; but time and chance happens to them all." (Eccles. 9:11) How can we live if we do not believe that effort is rewarded or evil punished? We shrug our shoulders and say in a thousand different ways, "What the fire will give, who knows?" Life is a matter of mystery and surprise.

The result of such an outlook is a twilight of values in which all cats are grey. Such conditions offer a field day for the leeches, parasites, anti-nomians, and ethical anarchists that prey upon society like looters after a fire or flood. If nothing matters, anything goes!

Riversiders know of my enjoyment of sports of almost any kind. As an incurable fan, it is my judgment that a weather dominated field always helps the inferior team. If the World Champion Miami Dolphins were to play a pick-up team from the colleges of New York, the best thing those young collegians could do would be to pray for heavy rain. With the field turned into a swamp, differences would be neutralized and mediocrity brought closer to a par with excellence.

Such is our day. Studying doesn't matter. Discipline doesn't matter. Second effort doesn't matter. Loyalty, integrity, self-control and dependability no longer count! If there is no correspondence between striving and achieving, if restraint does not issue in ultimate enjoyment, it would appear that we live in a capricious, unpredictable and often fraudulent universe. "And so I said to them, 'Let any who have gold take it off;' so they gave it to me, and I threw it into the fire, and there came out this calf."

* * *

But we can't be serious, can we, any more than Aaron was serious! Moses exposed and exploded Aaron's fantasy. We need someone to do as much for us. Aren't some getting more than they put in? That's an old

question, and yet a new one. Some are, but they are fewer than we suspect. I do not wish to be drawn into the game of trying to justify God by percentages. I am willing to concede that the picture is never quite as neat and tidy as the theologians might wish. But my question is, what are they getting, who we think are getting more?

My mind, of late, has drifted to a statement of Jesus' that occurs no less than three times in the Sermon on the Mount. It is that solemn, heavy, judgmental declaration, "They have their reward." He used it with regard to almsgiving. Apparently there were hypocrites in His day who enjoyed giving alms in a public place with much display. Jesus said, "Truly I say to you they have their reward." (Mat. 6:2) They are getting what they want but that's all they're getting -- the acclaim of people. Because their almsgiving is not of the Spirit, it is not anchored in anything durable or eternal. "They have their reward." What a cut-down that is!

Then, He said, there are those who like to pray in prominent places, whether in a synagogue or out in the streets. "They stand and pray," said Jesus, "that they may be seen and heard of men. Truly I say to you they have their reward." (Mat. 6:5) They are getting what they want. But that's all that they are getting for their prayers have no carry and do not register on eternity.

He also spoke of those who fast conspicuously by contorting and disfiguring their faces so that everyone around will know that they are fasting and hail them for their self-denial. "Truly I say to you, they have their reward." (Mat. 6:16) They get what they want but that's it. There is no more. In fact, in the same vein, Jesus went so far as to say that a man can gain the whole world. But that's all. In the process he can lose his soul. (Mat. 16:26)

My question again is, What are they getting who we think are getting more than they put in? The Presi-

dent may get his palatial villas in San Clemente and Key Biscayne but he may never enjoy a day in either of them without a burdened conscience. The rollicking playboy may enjoy multiple women in sequence or rotation but he will never have a permanent and mutually satisfying experience of abiding love. A hustler may finagle his way into a position of prominence and power but never will he rest at night with a sense of vocational fulfillment. "They have their reward."

* * *

But aren't there some who are getting less than they put in? Here, I think, we must believe that virtue, like faith, is its own reward. It isn't for anything else. It is not instrumental to some other end, however desirable. The nouveau riche may purchase costly collections of paintings through a catalog, but the true enjoyment of art still belongs, and can only belong, to those who give themselves to it fully and completely.

George Buttrick is probably the most stolen preacher in America. I am not pleading for sympathy, but I think you should know that sometimes a minister can read a whole book for a two-line quotation. Some clergyman sitting out in Des Moines, Iowa can get that sermon, lift those two lines, and go out and shoot eighteen holes of golf! Someone asked Dr. Buttrick one time if it didn't bother him that people were stealing his quotations and illustrations. The gifted master replied, "They may have my material and my illustrations, but they cannot have my agony." Justice has a life of its own, and while it may not always be legally or even visibly administered, it does and will prevail. "I said to them, 'Let any who have gold take it off;' so they gave it to me, and I threw it into the fire, and there came out this calf."

Paul put the truth even more plainly. In his Galatian letter he wrote, "Whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap." (Gal. 6:7) For better or for worse, either way. This is one of those control-

ling convictions so vital to life that we dare not yield it up.

* * *

But no minister of the gospel could stop at this point. No man who lives this side of Jesus Christ can ever speak of justice without a mention of grace. There is requiting in life, true enough, but there is also mercy. The consequences of our sin cannot be erased, but they can be redeemed and forgiven and transfigured.

The carrier of grace in the story of the golden calf was Moses. When the people sinned, Hur resisted, Aaron acquiesced, but Moses interceded. Even before he got to the plains below he sensed the anger of God, and he and Yahweh had this exchange. Moses approached the Lord and said, "Why does Thy wrath burn hot against Thy people, whom Thou has brought forth out of the land of Egypt with great power and a mighty hand? Turn, I beseech Thee, from Thy fierce wrath and repent of this evil against Thy people. And the Lord repented of the evil which He thought to do to His people."

(Ex. 32:11, 13, 14)

I know of no finer definition of providence than the one that Paul Tillich shared with the world in his book, The Shaking of the Foundations. If some of us feel closed in to the consequences of a wasted and futile life, I beg you to listen! "Providence does not mean a divine planning by which everything is predetermined as in an efficient machine. Rather providence means that there is a creative and saving possibility implied in every situation, which cannot be destroyed by any event." 1

The people repented. The covenant was renewed. Their future was restored. No soul need stay shut up to the consequences of its sin, for God is merciful. The cross of Jesus profoundly illustrates the truth that the Lord has a way of being at His best when man is at his worst! This is the Lord's doing and it is

marvellous in our eyes.

CLOSING PRAYER

*Establish us, O Lord, in the truth
of Thy word,
that when familiar lights are hidden
from our view we may stand and
not be afraid.*

*Speak in accents of judgment to all
who mock;
and in the winsome tones of forgiveness
to those who yet would be what
they are not.*

Through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

FOOTNOTE:

1. Tillich, Paul, The Shaking of the Foundations,
p. 106. Charles Scribner's Sons, New York 1948



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