

SERMONS

FROM RIVERSIDE

THE CRAVING FOR CLARITY

"If you are the Christ, tell us plainly."


John 10:24b

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Some wag in a moment of pique declared that every profession was a conspiracy against the layman. He went on to elaborate by suggesting that lawyers keep us dependent on their services by embalming the law in "legalese," a mix of ancient English and encrusted Latin. That doctors keep us in our place by using long and technical words to describe our ailments. That scientists keep the little man at bay by resorting to symbols and language that only the initiate can understand. And, what is important for our purposes, that theologians and ministers in particular, and the church in general keep themselves in business by deliberately confounding the simple verities of religion; faith, hope and love.

This last charge is not unlike the charge that was leveled at Jesus that day in the temple. It was winter and he and his followers sought the shelter of Solomon's porch. The Feast of Dedication was being celebrated. Suddenly Jesus found himself hemmed in by angry Jews who turned upon him and said, "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Christ, tell us plainly." This word "plainly" is one of John's favorite words, he uses it some nine times in his gospel. It means "without the obscurity of a parable," "openly and publicly." "If you are the Christ, tell us plainly."

This question might have been raised to bait Jesus, to have him declare himself categorically so that an arrest could be made. On the other hand, the request might have been born out of a deep desire to understand who He was. Let us be generous and concede the second motive.

But Jesus would not oblige! The lack of communication implied in their question did not lie in his inability to tell but in their inability to hear. It is

true that nowhere in His earthly ministry did he say to these people flatly, "I am the Christ." He didn't wish to do this, in part because it might have led to crucifixion prematurely; and in part because the term Christ or Messiah had been given so many different meanings that He might have been misunderstood. We cannot really answer another man's question until we understand the other man's meaning of that question.

On the other hand, Jesus had referred to Himself as the bread of life, the water of life, the son of man, the good shepherd, the light of the world. He had done many mighty works. He had forgiven sin. "If Thou art the Christ, tell us plainly." Apparently he had been plain enough for James and John and Peter and Andrew, plain enough for Mary of Magdala, the Demoniac of Gadara, Zacchaeus, for Mary and Martha of Bethany and a host of others.

Communication is not achieved by clarity alone. The question of one's affinity for truth is also in the picture. We come at truth with a mind set, either to receive or to reject. Jesus spoke in parables so that those who wished to hear might hear, and those who had no disposition to hear could not. Notice these words from the eighth chapter of St. Luke, "To you it has been given," said Jesus to the disciples, "to know the secrets of the kingdom of God; but for others they are in parables, so that seeing they may not see, and hearing they may not understand." (Luke 8:9)

We must meet truth part way. We must come to it with readiness, expectation and imagination, and the willingness to participate in it. We suffer in our society from a lack of imagination. Auden has traced the blame for this to the advent of television. In the old days of radio one had to meet the program part way. I had my mental image of what Amos and Andy looked like and you had yours. I had my picture of the Lone Ranger and you had yours. We met the program part way. But with television, it is all there before us, and the imagination goes to sleep. We are not induced, except

on rare occasions, to participate. Jesus in effect is saying that the truth about who I am has been sounded but you have not heard. One thinks of a tourist in the Metropolitan Museum standing before a masterpiece and saying "I don't see anything in that." Another tourist whispers in reply. "Don't you wish you could?" "If you are the Christ, tell us plainly." The answer is clear: "When you are ready to hear, you will."

This same demand for clarity is made on the church, and not without justification. "If He is the Christ, tell us plainly. Our times are out of joint. We are hungry for a word. If He is the Christ, tell us plainly." It is in order that the church repent for having failed to declare the message of Jesus Christ with greater clarity. We have developed a jargon that speaks to those on the inside but says precious little to the man outside.

Did you ever sit down in the wee hours of Christmas Eve to assemble a toy that you had purchased for one of the children? A note on the carton declares that a child could put it together in five minutes. You come upon a sleazy diagram that looks as though it were the last copy coughed up by a tired A.B. Dick machine at the end of a long run. "Tell us plainly," you whisper hopefully. And the instructions come: "Take cross-bar A and fasten to upright C, keeping the flanged edge to the lower center. Tighten Ferguson bolt making sure lock washer is facing bar B. Insert bracing rod into opening C making sure corner braces are at 90° angles to tube D. Snap end rods in place by pressing with thumb at point A-2. Attach wheels as marked."

The world turns to the church and says "If He is the Christ, tell us plainly." Karl Barth answers with eleven thick volumes of Church Dogmatics. Tillich answers with three closely reasoned volumes of theology. Bultmann answers with two volumes of New Testament Theology and a complicated work on demythologizing. "Tell us plainly." They ask for bread and we give them a stone, they ask for fish and we give them a scorpion.

Perhaps most of the blame lies with us who are ministers at the local level for it is part of our job to understand what the theologians are saying, break their language down, and share it with our people. Unfortunately, we pastors are frequently as obtuse as the theologians. I remember the feeling of let-down that overtook me when the father of the bride slipped me a book following his daughter's wedding. It was entitled Write Clearly, Speak Effectively. How did he know, he had never heard me preach!

T. S. Eliot comments on this precarious business of word selection when he writes in "Burnt Norton:" "Words strain, crack and sometimes break, under the burden, under the tension, slip, slide, perish, decay with imprecision, will not stay in place, will not stay still." 1

Our speech must be clarified and also our understanding of the meaning of what we say. It is the theologians task to clarify the church's talk about God. The linguistic analyst in turn helps the theologian clarify his talk about God by asking repeatedly "What do you mean by that?" And all of this is to the good, for density is not a virtue even when practiced by Christians. "If he is the Christ, tell us plainly."

It is in order that the church repent, but only up to a point. For there is an important sense in which the world's craving for clarity is a craving that we should not and cannot satisfy. Should not, because the kind of clarity that Mr. average man is seeking is what might be described as "computer clarity." There is grim point to that computer joke in which a man stands before this massive machine and asks, "Is there a God?" The answer comes back, "There is now."

Computers are eminently helpful with questions of fact and quantity, but what about questions that partake of mystery because they deal with loyalties and relationships. The church is always tempted to give easy answers to hard questions, to succumb to the here-

sy of exactness. There are questions of the heart that cannot be answered with the plainness of a TV commercial. The Bible is not an almanac nor the minister an answer man.

My friend over at the university was right when he said that there are certain parts of life to which a man must respond as a poet. There is a dimension of depth and mystery to life that we dare not compromise. What is a tear, for example? Here it is right from the latest unabridged dictionary: "A tear is a drop of the saline watery fluid continually secreted by the lacrimal gland between the surface of the eye and the eyelid, serving to moisten and lubricate these parts and keep them clear of foreign particles." ² This is a tear?

A while ago the pages of the "Saturday Review" carried a question from a disturbed mother who wanted to know what she should say to her pre-school daughter who had asked, "Where was I when you were a little girl?" Two answers came in. One woman said, "I had a four year old boy who asked me that and I told him the truth. Half of you was a little tiny egg without a shell waiting in a very special place inside my body all the time Mommy was a little girl. Then, when I became a lady, God helped Mommy's body to make a soft, warm place for you to grow, and your father planted a little seed that made your egg whole, and you grew." The other answer was sent in by a teaching nun in Missouri. "Where was I when you were a girl?" The answer is simple: "In the mind of God." ³ Both answers have their place. But I suspect that the second is truer to life because it guards the mystery. The first is so factual that it obscures a deeper truth.

Moreover, we cannot because the gospel to which we are committed is itself a mix of light and mystery. It is true that St. Paul understands the gospel as the unveiling of a mystery. He writes to the Ephesians, "For he has made known to us in all wisdom and insight the mystery of his will, according to his purpose which

he set forth in Christ...." (Eph. 1:9) But this same apostle acknowledges in another place that we see as through a glass darkly and know only in part. Hugh Thompson Kerr in his very helpful book, Mystery and Meaning in the Christian Faith,⁴ points out that at every stage of Christian experience there is both meaning and mystery. It is not the case that if I study hard enough and discipline myself sufficiently light will break and all mystery disappear. No, at every level of Christian experience there is both meaning and mystery.

Historically, the Roman Catholic Church has tended to perpetuate the mystery and Protestants have tended to emphasize meaning. This is why we are so word oriented in our Protestant tradition. We set out to explain it all. Isn't this basically what the word "obscure" means, to unbare that which rightly should be hidden. In our zeal to declare the truth we must remember that words alone cannot do it all because words tend to dissipate the very mystery in which we must participate.

Verbal exactness can be misleading. This is why we need to enlist the help of the poet, the dramatist, the artist, the musician, the dancer when we desire to communicate. A while ago Robert Frost's brief poem, Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening⁵ was analyzed by John Ciardi for two and a half long pages. People began writing in to ask that certain of Frost's images be defined. Frost, however, refused to be pinned down. He wished his readers to grapple with mystery themselves. This is why Lesslie Newbigin reminds us that "To see the whole truth of the situation you must read the fiction of our time as well as the scientific and technical journals. You must attend the theatre as well as the seminar. You must consult with the psychiatrist as well as the cyberneticians. When you do this it is clear that there is another side to the picture."⁶

Take for one example the mystery of good and evil. G.K. Chesterton wisely noted that "The troublesome thing about life is not that it is rational or irrational but that it is almost rational." Berdyaev said, "I should say that the problem of evil is a scandal to all monistic philosophy and so it is also to the traditional doctrine of Divine Providence." 7

Job grappled with the problem of how God could be reconciled to evil in the world, but was never given an answer. He was simply taken to a place where the mystery no longer disturbed his faith. We Christians get into real trouble when we attempt to interpret somebody else's providence to him. We have a way of rushing in where angels fear to tread. We would do well to remember a line from the hymn just sung. "Blind unbelief is sure to err, and scan his work in vain; God is his own interpreter, and he will make it plain." 8

A friend of mine killed a German soldier head-on in World War II. In some ways as he tells it, it was an unnecessary killing, at least it was to him. The fact that the victim was an exceedingly youthful man burdened his conscience all the more. Presently he was given a Silver Star for this "achievement." But the Star hung heavy on his uniform and he sought counsel of three different chaplains. Admittedly distraught, and beside himself he walked into the office of the first chaplain, flung the Star down on the desk and said, "Here, justify this!" The chaplain's answer was simply, "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's." My friend grabbed the Star and said, "To hell with Caesar!" He went into the quarters of the second chaplain and the answer there was "Onward Christian Soldiers." He took the Star and went off to the third who happened to be a Southern Baptist preacher. "Justify this." The chaplain broke down and cried. Then they wept together. Finally they prayed. The soldier's question called not for clarity but for empathy.

"If Thou art the Christ, tell us plainly." "If He is the Christ, tell us plainly." We work to clarify our words and meaning but we let the mystery stand.

President Pusey of Harvard has said, "It would seem to me that the finest fruit of serious learning should be the ability to speak the word God without reserve or embarrassment, certainly without adolescent resentment; rather with some sense of communion, with reverence and with joy." ⁹ Surely we can wish this for ourselves and others.

CLOSING PRAYER

O God we thank thee alike for words of piercing clarity that light our way, and for every intimation of the mystery that over and around us lies.

So monitor our speech that we may neither overstate, nor understate, mis-state nor leave unstated, the truth that has made us free.

Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

FOOTNOTES:

1. Eliot, T.S., "Burnt Norton" - Saturday Review, Nov. 5, 1966, p. 29
2. Random House, Unabridged, 1967
3. "Letters to the World's Editors," Saturday Review, Dec. 9, 1967, p. 51
4. Kerr, Hugh Thompson, Mystery and Meaning in the Christian Faith, The Ryerson Press, Toronto, 1958
5. Frost, Robert, Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening
6. Newbigin, Lesslie, Honest Religion for Secular Man p. 31, SCM Press, Ltd., Bloomsburg Street, London
7. Berdyaev, Nicolas, The Beginning and the End, p.141 Harpers
8. Gowper, William, "God Moves in a Mysterious Way," #87, Pilgrim Hymnal, The Pilgrim Press, Boston, 1958
9. Nathan, Pusey M., The Age of the Scholar, p. 145, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1965

