

## "FOR THOSE WHO FEEL THEY DON'T BELONG"

"...and finally he was seen by me also as though I were born at the wrong time." I Cor. 15:8 (Goodspeed)

A Sermon by  
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A man's asides are frequently more edifying than his formal discourse. Parenthetical remarks have a way of letting the personality of the writer come through. Such is the case with St. Paul. The fifteenth chapter of I Corinthians is the spinal column that supports the New Testament case for the resurrection of Jesus Christ. This Chapter is used at more funerals and preached from more often on Easter Sunday than any other chapter in the Bible. But there is an aside in this Chapter at the eighth verse that I wish us to fasten on today.

Paul is recounting those who had seen the resurrected Christ - Peter, the Twelve, the Five Hundred, James, the rest of the apostles. He then goes on to say, "Last of all as to one untimely born, He appeared also to me." (I Cor. 15:8 - RSV)

"As to one untimely born." What sort of self-reference is this? The King James Version renders it, "Last of all he was seen of me also, as of one born out of due time." (I Cor. 15:8) The Greek behind this thought is based on the word "aborted." Moffatt, therefore, renders it, "By this so-called abortion of an apostle." So-called, that is, by his enemies, for in classical usage the word had reference to senators whose appointments were irregular. This then would suggest the suddenness and violence of Paul's apostleship; one day a persecuter, the next a burgeoning disciple.

Goodspeed, in my judgment, comes closer to what Paul had in mind. He renders it, "And last of all, He appeared to me as though I were born at the wrong time." Now if one feels that he were born at the wrong time, it can only mean that he thought of himself as having been born either too late or too early. Did St. Paul feel that he had been born too late? He entered the kingdom on this side of the Ascension and therefore missed the earthly years of the greatest life ever lived. Others had been allowed to progress and mature gradually in their Christian experience. This man was converted and summarily called to a position of leadership in the infant church. One gets the feeling that this man was always under a sense of handicap because he had arrived

too late, the way we feel when we miss the first act of a play, or the way a college student feels when he enrolls two weeks late.

Or did the apostle feel that he was born too soon, that visions had been granted him for which the world was not ready? Victor Hugo, in a well-known line said, "More powerful than an army with banners is an idea whose time has come." But it is an exceedingly lonely beat for the man who has received those ideas whose time has not yet come. For example, Paul had a confrontation with St. Peter over the fact that older forms of discrimination were no longer valid. In contending for his point of view, St. Paul was ahead of his time. He tells about it painfully in his letter to the Galatians, "But when Cephas (Peter) came to Antioch I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. For before certain men came from James, he ate with the Gentiles; but when they came he drew back and separated himself, fearing the circumcision party. But when I saw that they were not straightforward about the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas before them all, 'If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews.'" (Gal.2:11, 12, 14) Christopher Morley, with a smile on his pen, described prophets as "Those who were twice stoned - first in anger. Then, after their death, with a handsome slab in the graveyard."<sup>1</sup> The man of religious temperament always lives out of alignment with his times. He never quite feels that he belongs. It is a telling insight into Paul's own self-understanding that he never really felt that he belonged either to the church or to the world. He felt like a man who was born at the wrong time.

This aside of the apostle finds us sympathetic, does it not? We ask ourselves, "If a man of St. Paul's stature could feel this way, what hope is there for the rest of us?" Frequently, one encounters people who, in one way or another, by word, by gesture, by sigh, indicate that they feel that they were born at the wrong time. The conservative always feels that he was born too late. This is true of the economic conservative, the political conservative, the theological conservative. He is obsessed by the idea that the golden age has already come and gone, that the present age is not congenial to his style or interested in his values. Pity the man of conservative temper! He was just getting used to social security and they've gone to Medicare. He was just getting used to miles per hour and they've gone to miles per minute. He was just getting used to props and they've gone to jets. He was just getting used to the cold war and they've gone to the hot war. He was just getting used to area codes and they've gone to zip codes. He was just catching on to automation and they've gone to cybernetics. He was just getting used to the five cent stamp and they've

<sup>1</sup> Christopher Morley, "Prophet". A Dictionary of Wit, Wisdom and Satire. Harper and Row. 1962. p. 224.

gone to the six cent. He was just becoming accustomed to Martin Luther King and they've gone to Rap Brown and Stokley Carmichael. He was just catching up to Honest to God and they've gone on to the death of God.

I've always been drawn to the ministry of Richard Cardinal Cushing, a man who exemplifies the pastoral heart par excellence. I doff my hat to this pillar of the Roman Catholic Church for the candor of a recent statement made in answer to the question of why he would seek retirement in two years at the age of seventy-five. Said Cushing, "Things are changing. The whole world is changing. Priests are changing, nuns are changing. People think the church is changing. Well, I hope all these changes are for the better. But my problem is: I am not prepared to meet these changes. I am not a scholar. I am not a theologian. I am not a doctor of divinity. I'm simply a humble man trying to practice caritas, charity, not merely from the point of helping this cause or that cause, but from the viewpoint of helping individuals."<sup>1</sup> The man of conservative temper is always beset by the feeling that he was born too late.

The man of liberal persuasion always feel that he was born too soon. He is sensitive to injustice, inequities, suffering. He wants to see war abolished, and the slums cleared. He wants to see world law established. He wants to see poverty eradicated. He's well aware of the flaws in the system and is vexed by the fact that he cannot effect change as fast as he would like. For both the conservative and the liberal temperament, therefore, the times are out of joint. Each for a different reason feels that he was born at the wrong time. Each lives with the uneasy feeling that he really does not belong.

What does our faith have to say to all of this? I think it says emphatically that change is an inevitable ingredient of Christian experience. Inevitable because of pressures from within and pressures from without. The pressure from within rises from our need to grow. Growth belongs to the nature of faith. There's a sense in which we are not Christians, we are only becoming Christians. The capacity for growth is one of God's primary gifts to the church. Jesus said, "I have yet many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, He will guide you into all truth...." (Jn. 16:12,13) It is on the strength of that kind of word that the Christian must always be ready for something more, something new and something different. Everything has not been said that needs saying. Everything has not been done that needs doing.

We must recognize that a certain amount of pain is attendant upon this kind of growing. We are familiar with those words from the second

<sup>1</sup>Richard Cardinal Cushing. The New York Times. October 24, 1968. p. 34

chapter of Luke, "And Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man." (Lk. 2:52) The verb "increased" indicates pain, effort, struggle. A. T. Robertson says Jesus "...kept cutting his way forward as through a forest or jungle - as pioneers did."<sup>1</sup> The center of our faith is set, but the circumference is not. The aim of Christian living is to relate the expanding edges of Christian experience to the center which is firmly established. Lesslie Newbigin speaks to the tension that is implied here when he says, "To know God, the living God, means to live in the constant expectancy of what is new, yet in the constant certainty that nothing which happens can contradict the reality of what has been revealed."<sup>2</sup>

Fixed spheres are out. The closed mind. The concept of a finished church. We are called upon to keep revising ourselves. To unlearn some things that we were previously taught and to learn God's new in this present time. The most unpreached verse in the New Testament, I believe, is that word from Paul to Timothy, "I suffer not a woman to teach in the church." (I Tim. 2:12) I've never known a minister yet who had the courage to tackle that one! Even at a men's breakfast we wouldn't dare do it. If women were not allowed to teach in the church today where would Christian education be in this or any other congregation? So, we had to unlearn this. This was something that clung to the insights of Paul, not from God, but from the culture around him.

We have problems, like the problem of euthanasia. How long and with what measures must a doctor keep a person alive? We have vast questions that arise out of the whole concept of body donation. Western jurisprudence has rather consistently given survivors control over the dead. What rights do I have to indicate where I wish my body to go when I am gone? And then there is the attendant question as to how we establish the order of priority that will determine which individuals may receive these vital organs?

It is painful to dismiss the old and take on the new. I'm afraid there are people in every church who feel that ministers rather enjoy change. I can testify that this one does not. I think, for example, of the whole field of homosexuality. Most of us were trained to recoil from homosexuals and homosexuality. Yet, recently a study group was appointed by the Anglican church to search this subject. The preliminary report of the committee was to the effect that we should not think of

<sup>1</sup>A. T. Robertson, Word Pictures in New Testament. Harper and Brothers Publishers. 1930. p. 35

<sup>2</sup>Lesslie Newbigin, Honest Religion for Secular Man. SCM Press Ltd. London. 1966. pp. 97-8.

homosexuality in terms of crime and punishment, but in terms of alienation and sickness and the need for reconciliation. It isn't easy to make this kind of adjustment.

I'm not suggesting that everything that makes for change is right or good. We are not espousing neolatry, the worship of the new. One is suggesting, however, that rigidity of thought and outlook is an enemy to growth, and that Christ is calling us not to stay as we are but to grow in grace and knowledge. The Holy Spirit keeps working on the living edge of truth and if that Spirit is working in us we are destined to live with the awful feeling that we were born at the wrong time, that we do not quite belong.

The pressure from without rises from history itself. The United Presbyterian Church in introducing some new curriculum material recently said in part that the Christian must not only be aware of the living Word, he must also be aware of the living world. History is not cyclical, it is linear. It is going forward to an end, and we participate in this forward motion. Revelation and history are not separate or separable. There is a constant interaction between the two. As history moves on we are being prodded to growth and change.

A few summers ago at a ministers' conference we were discussing the ecumenical movement. When it came time for questions and answers a somewhat disturbed minister went to the microphone and said it was his judgment that some of the interest of the Roman Catholic Church in ecumenicity was the result of that church's declining power in places like the Philippines, South America, and India. The implication was that until, and unless, the motive is pure, it is suspect. I have no way of knowing whether our Roman friends are in trouble in India or the Philippines or South America, but, no matter. It is precisely through the pressures and exigencies of history that God speaks to His church.

We must keep going forward. We can't go back. The Hebrews had a mild crisis with the death of Saul. David was selected to be king but there were some who didn't like the thought of royalty and preferred the good old days. They banded together in a kind of third party movement and said, "We have no portion in David and we have no inheritance in the son of Jesse, every man to his tents, O Israel." (II Sam. 20:1) Let's go back to the way it used to be. Let's return to an agrarian economy and be done with the monarchy. But God's purposes were with the monarchy.

There are too many people who should know better, waiting for and banking on a return to the way things used to be. There are ministers and priests waiting for the return of docile congregations. They wait in vain! There are churches in my knowledge that are waiting out a particular pastorate in the hopes that when that man goes the kind of minister will return that they used to know. They wait in vain! Or we keep thinking that with a new president America will get back to what it used to be. Or that with a new superintendent of schools education

would become what it used to be. These are misguided and unworthy expectations. Men, including Christian men, prosper or fail according as they move with the times.

The nature of the Christian life with its pressures from within and the nature of history with its pressures from without conspire to disrupt our ease. We will always feel that we don't quite belong. Not for us is the snug comfort of a good fit.

"And last of all, He appeared to me as though I were born at the wrong time." Let us say to St. Paul's credit that this was only an aside with him, it was not a permanent stance toward life. Looking back we can see, even if he could not, that he was indeed the right man for that time. Let's face change not fear it. Christ is more than Lord of the conscience, although He is that. More even than Lord of the church, and surely He is that. He is also the Sovereign Lord of history, the Omega point of all our strivings.

"...Our times are in his hand  
Who saith, 'A whole I planned,  
Youth shows but half; trust God;  
see all, nor be afraid!'"<sup>1</sup>

#### Closing Prayer

O Thou who dost give to each his time and  
place in life's unfolding drama,  
Help us to accept with thanks the work to  
which we have been called,  
Be pleased to advance Thy purposes through us,  
that we may know the joy of standing  
with Thee where the already and  
the not yet meet.  
Through Jesus Christ, our Lord,  
Amen.

<sup>1</sup>Robert Browning, "Rabbi Ben Ezra," The Complete Poetic and Dramatic Works of Robert Browning. Houghton, Mifflin & Co. Cambridge, Mass. 1895. p. 383

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