

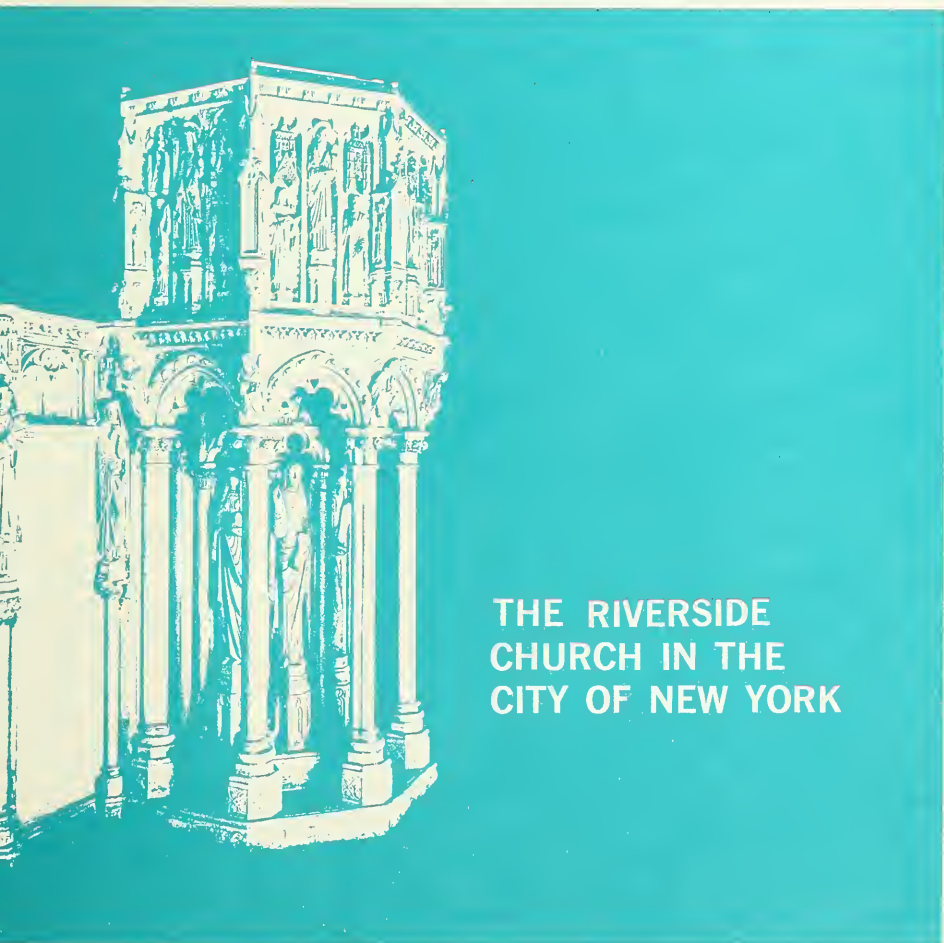
SERMONS

FROM RIVERSIDE

"MANGER POWER"


*"She gave birth to her first-born son
and wrapped him in swaddling cloths,
and laid him in a manger." Luke 2:7*

Dr. Ernest T. Campbell



THE RIVERSIDE
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MANGER POWER

*"She gave birth to her first-born son
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It is considered a compliment in our society to say of another individual, "He knows where it's at." This may be colloquial speech but it communicates with clarity and force. To know "where it's at" is to be urbane and wise. To be privy to the centers and corridors of power. It is to know the right people and to understand what's really going on. To know "where it's at" is to be as current as the latest book and as relevant as socks to shoes.

In short, the man who knows "where it's at" is "with it." And we like our politicians, our corporations, our schools, yes, and even our churches to be "with it."

* * *

As one who spends most of his waking hours attempting to know and live "where it's at," I want to confess that the manner of Jesus' birth makes me wonder whether I am altogether on the right track!

Consider one of the best known verses in the nativity story: "She gave birth to her first-born son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger." Stripped of all subsequent art and oratory, what we have here are three powerless people outside a second-class hotel in an undistinguished province of a remote sector of the Roman Empire!

No reporters of distinction would have been on the scene that night. Those who were on hand were assuredly inside and not outside in the cattle shed. And what were the "with it" people talking about that night? They were talking about taxes and census taking. They

were talking about internal politics, the cost of fertilizer, the price of grapes, whether the Roman senate was going conservative or liberal.

Meanwhile, out there in the stable a power unrivalled in magnitude was born. What irony that the shepherds who were not "with it" got it, while the worldly-wise who knew "where it was at" missed it. It would seem that manger power eludes the grasp of the wise and the prudent and reveals itself to babes.

* * *

Manger power is the power of God at work in the world. I'd like us to examine it more closely, especially as it contrasts with the world's way of understanding power.

Manger power is modest not pretentious. Its credentials are innate not conferred. It depends not on trappings but on truth. The less secure we humans are the more we rely on such superficial props as rank, title, degree and wealth.

A few days ago John Reed gave us an editorial that the New York Times printed in full. It bore the engaging title, "Pomp and Politicians." The writer made the point that in virtually no other part of the world do people give such adulation and pay such tribute to their political leaders as we do in the United States. The pomp with which our political personalities are adorned is in a class by itself. He cited the fact that it costs more than \$500,000 a year to support Mike Mansfield -- chauffeured limousine, large staff and all. It is estimated that it will cost the taxpayers of this country some \$8,000,000 in 1972 to underwrite the cost of the White House staff. Apparently it doesn't matter which party the President belongs to. He seems to assume it to be his right to commandeer an aircraft or two, a navy ship, helicopters, limousines, huge retinues of aids and servants anywhere he goes.

If we are suffering in this country from a crisis of trust in our elected officials, one thing we might do to re-establish trust would be to rid ourselves of this phoney pomp and circumstance. Reed wrote, "To use Shakespeare's phrase, 'Away with pride, pomp and circumstance.' Abolish the 21 gun salute, the honor guards, the red carpets, the elaborate state dinners, the presidential hideaways, trade in the long black limousine for a modestly priced compact." 1

Manger power is always modest, never pretentious. Jesus' entire ministry was consistent with his modest beginnings. His was, in the parlance of the day, a low-profile. He made very few demands on life. He had no place to lay His head. He made no effort to curry the favor of the power people of His time.

It didn't take long for the soldiers to gamble away His possessions. All that He had at the hour of His death was a seamless robe. He didn't develop an entourage of celebrities or encourage a large camp following. Jesus belonged in the succession of Amos and Jeremiah rather than that of Ahaz and Solomon. Manger power is modest, not pretentious.

* * *

Moreover, manger power is more concerned with quality than quantity. It is very much at home with small numbers. It is comfortable with minority status. "Not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble are called." (I Cor. 1:26)

For better or for worse, in our era the phenomenon of Public Relations has come into its own. It is a widely accepted axiom that "It's not what's there that counts, it's what's projected." The essence of an individual, an institution or a corporation is not what matters. The image one communicates to the public at large is what counts.

One result of this travesty on truth is that non-

events can be inflated into happenings of earth shaking prominence. An oil company currently changing its name is spending millions of dollars to get the point across. Some poor soul here from another planet, seeing the ads and listening to the commercials, would think that this business move was of vital importance to the life of the American people. In truth, it doesn't amount to much at all!

Those of us who have an allegiance to the manger and an affinity for manger power must not be deceived. Repetition and multiplication are no substitutes for veracity and worth. Zero times ten million is still zero.

We had a service in this church last Sunday evening in remembrance of the two students who were slain at Southern University in Louisiana. The following day neither major newspaper in this city saw fit to write so much as a word about that significant occasion. What events were deemed more newsworthy cannot be precisely identified.

Manger power must be concerned with quality more than quantity. Even within the church we are caught in a painful dilemma at this point. We want the church to come of age. By this we mean, in part, that we want the church to avail itself of modern methods of communication. But at what point does our interest in modern communication become mere gimmickry and a substitute for the quiet effectiveness of the truth that Jesus came to bring?

I notice in my circle of outside responsibilities that Public Relations is becoming increasingly important to all manner of boards and agencies. The new person at stated meetings now is the photographer. One would think that one or two pictures would do it. But no, the shutter is flicked twenty to thirty times or more. We are intent on getting the right pictures out to the right people.

But quantity is not the only measure, and surely not the most important. There are such things, after all, as truth, and love, and faith. And these have ever been frail commodities. At some point we must hold on to our integrity and not sell our souls. I like the statement that a jeweler made awhile ago as he spoke of his vocation: "If you sell diamonds you cannot expect to have many customers. But a diamond is a diamond even if there are no customers." Manger power is more concerned with quality than quantity.

* * *

Finally, manger power is attractive not coercive. The child in the manger on the world's first Christmas grew into a manhood that refused to do violence to the personality of others. To put it differently, "force" was not in Jesus' vocabulary. He would not force faith by leaping from a pinnacle of the temple. He would not force faith by using his power of miracle in the manner of a vaudeville performer. He would not force faith by calling down fire on His enemies. He would not force faith by bargaining down the demands of the gospel. He respected the rich young ruler's right to value his property above his soul.

It needs to be stressed today as people grope for a new life style for our new age (whatever that is) that Jesus' life style was fundamentally and consistently non-violent. Not only in the physical sense, that He struck no one. But also in the deeper psychological sense, that He refused to run roughshod over the personalities of those he came to save.

I have a weakness for the ocean and a particular fondness for freighters. I confess that every so often I take out my field glasses and try to catch the flag on a freighter heading up or down the Hudson right outside my window. Freighters are rated by displacement. The thousandsof tons of water they displace are the measure of their weight and a hint of their power.

Last summer we came down the Hudson River on a freighter that sailed out of Albany. I recall how gently the pilot steered that ship, and how he kept the engines down. The Hudson River was never designed for heavy freighter use. We were careful and slow because with its thousands of displacement tonnage and all the power at that ship's command, the little ships along the shores would have been smashed had we opened up!

The soul who is in touch with manger power takes care not to harm others by his displacement. Some people reach the top in their chosen fields but on their way to the summit they make a shambles of the lives of other people.

McGraw-Hill has just announced a new title for our Christmas buying called The Art of Getting Your Own Sweet Way, by Philip Crosby. The publishers blurb says, "Here's the scientific method for getting what you want ... and getting other people to do what you want them to." This is to be indifferent to your displacement and its effect on other people. Alas, there are ministers in the church who have taught that the Christian faith can be used in this very manner. They have psychologized our religion in the direction of manipulation. File their work under "Jesus, Americanization of."

Has it ever struck you as strange that Joseph put up no fuss at the door of the inn that night? Sometimes I wonder about his masculinity. Surely he could have implored the innkeeper to at least clear a little space in the lounge for the comfort of his wife who was heavy with child. Even at the moment of His birth Jesus displaced no one. He was born outside the inn. Later he would die outside the city.

Manger power is attractive not coercive. But the question we Americans insist on asking is, "How effective is it?" If it works, fine. If it doesn't, who needs it? Well, is it effective? In a way, no! Jesus

died at the age of 33 and as his life expired on the cross, Rome still bestrode the world like a mighty colossus. His ranks were thin and undistinguished.

Is it effective? In a way, yes. The glory of Rome for all of its pretension, size and coerciveness is but a memory. Christ is still loved and very much revered. Rome continues as a city not because of its previous connections with the empire but because of its later associations with the Christian faith.

I'm prepared to argue that the quiet energies of history represented by the manger are far more effective in shaping our destiny than we might first think. Certainly this is clear at the personal level.

Some years ago many people read a fascinating book entitled, My Six Convicts. It was basically the story of a psychologist who decided to make a prolonged visit to a prison to study six representative inmates. He had free association with these men. They had free association with him. He decided to keep his notes overnight in a locked box. Result? The lock was picked and the notes rifled. He tried next a locked desk drawer. Result? The lock was forced and the notes scattered. Finally he tried a safe. Result? The safe was opened and the contents disturbed. He got the message. He found himself a modest shoe box and a piece of string, made of them a file and placed it on an open desk. His notes were not touched again.

I was interested in the testimony of a beefy 260 pound defensive end in the National Football League. What makes men like this come out fighting week after week? How do they "get up" for every game? What drives them to put out? This player confessed that what did it for him was the intimate association that he had with the owner of the team. "I'd sit there before a game and know that the boss was going to be coming through and that he'd lean over me and he'd say, 'Let's have a good game.' Not a pep talk -- nothing like that. But he said it in a way that you knew you

meant something to him, that you weren't just another carcass. That was something I waited for every Sunday. It wasn't much, was it? But afterward I felt like going out and ripping up the stadium for him." 2

Does it work at the corporate level where rank injustices cry out for correction? In a day of power-consciousness and confrontations, what can manger power contribute?

When the history of the twentieth century is written up I believe that it will show that three people above all others were the movers and the shakers of our time: Mahatma Ghandi, Martin Luther King, Jr. and Cesar Chavez. All three are identifiable with the non-violence that the manger signifies. Other styles of leadership may have their place, their day, and their function, but when all is said and done what is any reformation worth that does not touch the heart? And what can touch the heart as deeply as one who is willing to bear the afflictions of his people without responding in kind?

Lest you think that this style of leadership is an easy alternative to the real thing, I would remind you that non-violent leaders are always the objects of scorn and the targets of abuse. In recent years the most vituperative yellow journalism that has reached my desk took direct aim at the late Martin Luther King, Jr., and Cesar Chavez. We can live with tyrants who come at us with a show of naked power but we seemingly cannot cope with the apostles of non-violence. We find it necessary to villify them, assassinate them or crucify them.

But I think we know in our wiser moments that if we sin against love we do not destroy it. We only take away from it the power to redeem and sanctify us. Manger power is attractive not coercive.

* * *

Religion has been described as a way of valuing.

The religious man lives in the same world as the irreligious but he places different values on the forces that manufacture history.

Christmas is a quaint story that claims us by its rustic charm. But Christmas is more than that. It is an event that asks us to declare the kind of power we really believe in. There is a worldly power that is pretentious, popular and forceful. There is manger power that is modest in its bearing, true in its essence, and non-coercive in its method. To which does your preference run?

"She gave birth to her first-born and wrapped him in swaddling cloths, and laid him in a manger."

"Like you this manger power or not?
It may be false but will you wish it true?
Has it your vote to be so if it can?" 3

CLOSING PRAYER

*Lord, show us what we are
by revealing the power
in which we trust.
Where our confidence is low
in the kind of power that
our Savior taught and lived,
grant that this hallowed season
may restore our faith and
make us believers again.
Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

FOOTNOTES:

1. Reed, John, "Pomp and Politicians,"
The New York Times, December 8, 1972, p. 45
2. "Sports Illustrated," December 18, 1972, p. 95
3. With apologies to Robert Browning

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