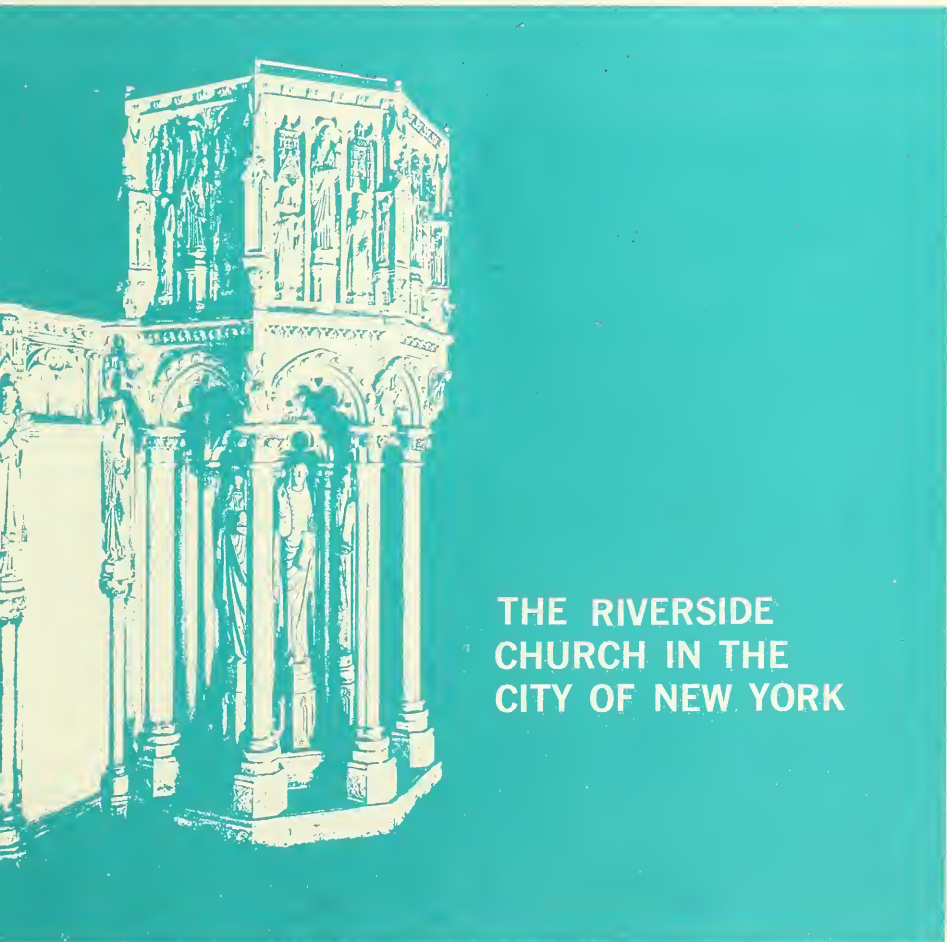


SERMONS

FROM RIVERSIDE

ON LIVING OUT OF PHASE

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THE RIVERSIDE
CHURCH IN THE
CITY OF NEW YORK

JULY 9, 1972

ON LIVING OUT OF PHASE

We are under constant pressure as Americans to believe that happiness comes from throwing in with the majority. If an advertiser can give the impression that people are stampeding to his product, he will soon have it made. No one likes to stay on the outside of a good thing. The fear of being out of step with other people influences our buying habits, our politics, and, on occasion, even our religion.

Being something of a maverick myself I should like to suggest that living out of phase has its advantages. Non-conformity can be rewarding. Some of these rewards are financial. One can save money by buying his Christmas cards on December 29th. It costs less to get a furnace cleaned in the summer than in the dead of winter. Florida in August is cheaper than Florida in January - you had better believe it! If you wait a year before buying a new book you are less likely to purchase a dud.

Other rewards for living out of phase cannot be measured in dollars and cents. One can get a choice table at a good restaurant by dining at 5:45 rather than 7:00. One can accomplish a lot by working on a holiday. No telephone. No interruptions. One can catch the wild beauty of the ocean by hitting the boardwalk at Atlantic City in February. New York City basks in an elegance all of its own when one takes to its avenues and parks over a long weekend when multitudes are heading out to nearby lakes and beaches. It makes for easier driving on the Henry Hudson Parkway if one can manage to go north in the morning and come south at night.

Whether you choose to live out of phase in matters such as these is really a question of personal preference. But something more than personal preference is involved when one discovers that living out of phase belongs to Christian discipleship.

Let's start at the only rightful starting point - with Jesus himself. Clearly Jesus lived out of phase with his times. He came to his own and his own received him not. We are told that he had no place to lay his head. He could not reach an acceptable accommodation with any extant philosophy, ideology or religion.

Jesus' life style was at odds with conventional practice and expectation. In short, he was an enigma to his contemporaries. Always his emotions seemed to be out of phase. On Palm Sunday he wept while the multitudes filled the skies with their hosannas. On another occasion some of John's disciples came to him saying, "'Why do we and the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?' And Jesus said to them, 'Can the wedding guests mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them? The days will come, when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast.'" (Mt 9:14-15)

It was the prophet in him that made him thus. Have you ever noticed that the prophets were almost always out of phase with their time? When society around them was rejoicing, the prophets tended to be sad. When society was sad the prophets managed to be hopeful. Perhaps the most striking aspect of the Book of Amos is the fact that that prophecy was delivered at a time of unprecedented prosperity. While Israel took delight in the increase of its gross natural product Amos had the perception to say: "Flight shall perish from the swift, and the strong shall not retain his strength, nor shall the mighty save his life; he who is stout of heart among the mighty shall flee away naked in that day, says the Lord." (Amos 2:14,16)

Yet, when the people were thrown into despair over the visitation of God's judgment, Hosea could come along and counter that mood of dolefulness with words like these: "Come, let us return to the Lord; for He has torn, that he may heal us; He has stricken and he will bind us up. After two days he will revive us;

on the third day he will raise us up, that we may live before him." (Hosea 6:1,2) Jesus lived out of phase with his times.

But more, Jesus set his followers in motion against the prevailing currents. "You have heard that it has been said.....but I say unto you." No less than six times that formula is used in the Sermon on the Mount. "You have heard that it has been said," you know what the traditional understanding and perception of life is. "But I say unto you " In other words, they were to break with popular custom and opinion.

Indeed, Jesus warned His disciples against popular acclaim. In one of the most under-treated "woes" of all he said, "Woe to you, when all men speak well of you, for so their fathers did to the false prophets." (Luke 6:20) Jesus made it clear that the road to destruction was wide of gate, broad of way and heavily travelled. We are called to be different. That's the sum of it. As St. Paul put it, "Don't let the world around you squeeze you into its mould." (Romans 12:1-Phillips)

* * * *

In the light of this apparent[!] truth, how do we measure up? Not too well, I fear. At the level of our individual commitment we have a way of expecting that faith in Christ will help us to get on in the world. If those "Truth-in-Packaging" laws were ever extended to include the Church, we would be in trouble. And this because of all the times and ways in which we have presented Christ to men as the bringer of success. The popular assumption is that if one comes to terms with Jesus he will be able to make his way more effectively in the world. Instead of Jesus putting us "at odds" with life, He will help us to "cash in" on life. This is the common understanding.

It is no secret that Church people have a way of becoming incensed when a minister tries to speak to the distance between personal and national goals and

the will of God. I do not know the Reverend Wilbur Rees of Pocatello, Idaho, but I welcome him as a brother under the skin when he suggests that sermons ought to be rated the way movies are so that people going to Church will know what to expect. He proposes that we ought to mark some sermons "G - Generally acceptable to everyone. Full of inoffensive puerile platitudes such as 'Go ye into all the world and smile' and 'What the world needs is peace and motherhood.' This sermon is usually described as 'wonderful' or 'marvelous.' Others ought to be labeled M - for more mature congregations. At times this sermon even makes the Gospel relevant to today's issues, in subtle ways, of course. It may even contain mild suggestions for change. This sermon is often described as 'challenging' or 'thought provoking' even though no one intends to take any action or change any attitudes.

"Other sermons should be labeled R - Definitely restricted to those who are not upset by truth. This sermon 'tells it like it is.' It is very threatening to the comfortable. It is most often described as 'disturbing' or 'controversial' and usually indicates that the preacher has an outside source of income. Finally, there are sermons that ought to be rated X - positively limited to those who can handle explosive ideas. This sermon really 'socks it to 'em!' It is the kind of sermon that landed Jeremiah in the well, and got Amos run out of town, and set things up for the stoning of Stephen. It is always described as 'shocking' or 'in poor taste.' The minister who preaches this sermon had better have his suitcase packed and his life insurance paid up."1

We are to be in the world but not of the world. Surely we believe what we do as Christians not because it is easy or rewarding, but because it's TRUE!

* * * *

At the level of our corporate programs and pronouncements we have a way of going along with prevailing liberal sentiment. Most of the public stands

we take as Christians are predictable and lacking in uniqueness. Let me cite two areas in particular where this is so.

In our desire to see the wealth of the world more evenly distributed we have come dangerously close to implying that the good life consists of material well-being. I am as zealous as the next man for economic and political reform. I believe, moreover, that the Church has a legitimate role to play in political and economic reform. I find C.S. Lewis too conservative though clever when he observes that "Most political sermons teach the congregation nothing except what newspapers are taken at the rectory."²

My heart reaches out to welcome with enthusiasm the insight of Camilo Torres who said, "It is not the time to discuss whether the soul is immortal or not; there is something concrete which we must all understand: that hunger is mortal."

I grieve as many of you do at the way in which the Church across the centuries has so spiritualized salvation as to neglect the weightier matters of justice.

But the question that keeps storming my mind and heart is this: Can we participate in reformist movements and still retain some reservations about their scope and adequacy?

Or, to put it differently, is it possible for us to become thus involved and still maintain the Christian differential? Granted it is dangerous to spiritualize salvation. But is there not a kindred danger that comes with trying to understand salvation in altogether materialistic terms?

Saul Alinsky, who was taken from us only recently, asked with his characteristic bluntness and realism, "Do you know what the poor of America or, I might add, the poor of the world want? They want a bigger and

fatter piece of these decadent, degenerate, bankrupt, materialistic, bourgeois values and what goes with it."3

Can we critique the wants of the poor while still being responsive to their needs? There is a hunger that bread cannot feed, a thirst that neither milk nor beer can slake, a nakedness that clothing cannot hide, a poverty that money cannot reach. Man does not live by bread alone. Have we the courage to say it?

Finally, in our desire to appear humane we have come dangerously close to abandoning our belief in personal accountability. There is no questioning the fact that the dominant sentiment in our time sees man as a hapless victim of overwhelming circumstances. Immature parents make a lasting mark upon us. As do bad housing, poor schools, racial prejudice, an atrocious war and the threat of atomic annihilation. Whatever our failures, the cause, we insist, is always to be found outside ourselves.

Hence, the question that comes to me again and again: Have we the courage to work for the humanization of our common life without forfeiting the belief that man has some responsibility for his actions? There are limits to excusability. Character can triumph over circumstance. It isn't what reaches us from the outside, but what we have on the inside that ultimately counts!

Robert E. Lee wrote to this point in a letter to his daughter Agnes when she was sixteen: "We make a great deal of our own happiness and misery in this world, and we can do more for ourselves than others can do for us. You must expect discomforts and annoyances all through life. No place or position is secure from them, and you must make up your mind to meet with them and bear them."4

Something there is that is stronger than heredity and more formative than environment. St. Paul called it - "the power of God unto salvation." To this power, I take it, we are witnesses.

* * * *


"You have heard that it has been said....but I say unto you." We are called as Christians to live out of phase at many points with the world around us. Our effectiveness for Christ will be determined in large measure by the fads we have resisted, and the trends that we have followed.

CLOSING PRAYER

Grant O God, that neither the longing to be liked,
nor the need to be accepted
may divert us from our calling.
Give us a sense of what is vital and the courage
to hold to it at whatever cost,
through Him who for our sakes lived
and died and rose again -
even Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

FOOTNOTES:

1. Rees, Wilbur, "Monday Morning", May 17, 1971, Vol. 36, No. 10, General Council of The United Presbyterian Church, Indianapolis, Indiana.
2. Lewis, C.S., God in The Dock, p. 94, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1970.
3. Alinsky, Saul D., Reveille For Radicals, p. 229, Vintage Books, Random House, New York, 1946.
4. Freeman, Douglas, Robert E. Lee, Vol. I pps. 361-2, Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1935.



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