

SERMONS

FROM RIVERSIDE



"THIS SIDE OF EASTER—
A GOOD PLACE TO LIVE"

Dr. Ernest T. Campbell



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Next to "What's your name?" the question most frequently asked us over a lifetime is, "Where do you live?" The expected reply usually includes a house number, a street, a city, a state and five zip code digits. The same question might be asked in a philosophical sense. Where do you live? I don't live anywhere, I merely exist. Where do I live? Why, I live wherever I am. Robert Southwell said "Not where I breathe, but where I love, I live." 1

We all have more than one address. We have a literal address that marks out our home, our place, our residence. But we also have an address that indicates where we live philosophically, religiously, spiritually. That is, we are at home with a certain outlook on life, a "blick" as Van Buren puts it. It is here that our motivation for life is generated and our value judgments formed.

Using the life of Jesus as a model, I should like to suggest three places that cover pretty well where most men live. To live in one is to reject the other two.

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Some live between Bethlehem and Palm Sunday. That is, they live on the conviction that life is basically inconclusive. This is the view that sees life as a puzzling mix of good and evil. Love is capable of significant achievement, but hate also has its victories. There are good Samaritans on the Jericho Road, but there are also belligerent bandits and indifferent churchmen.

This is the way it was during most of Jesus' life. At his birth there was tenderness, loyalty and faith. But there was also an irate Herod, the death of many children, and a flight into Egypt.

Over the years of his public ministry things happened that both cheered and chilled the heart. A tax collector went

straight. A prostitute was forgiven. Hungry crowds were fed. Many sick were healed. The love of God was winsomely expounded and faith was engendered in many hearts. So strong in fact was Jesus' appeal, and so wide his following at one point, that his enemies were heard to exclaim "Behold, the world is gone after him." (John 12:19b)

But while this was going on Rome's military presence controlled the world. John the Baptist was beheaded. Judas purposed in his heart to betray his master. Angry farmers ran Jesus out of Gadara. And religious leaders put their heads together to plot his death.

For those who live between Bethlehem and Palm Sunday, history is at best a toss-up—or worse. John Steinbeck said, "Everything in life is seven to five against." 2 Is the board white with black squares, or black with white squares? Who knows? For every Schweitzer in Lambarene there is a Hitler in Berlin. Eventually those who live here succumb to disinterest and cynicism. The world is filled not with angels but angles.

I've always felt sympathy for the telephone operator in James Gould Cozzens' The Last Adam. "For herself, May never expected things to be very good. As long as she lived, she more or less expected to realize that whatever was, was a pity; and how much better it would have been if —" 3

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But worse, there are some who live between Palm Sunday and Good Friday. They live with the conviction that evil has the upper hand. That first Palm Sunday was deceptive. For a few hours it appeared that the future was with the Galilean. Soon that hope was crushed as it became increasingly apparent in the days that followed that Jesus was on a collision course with death. Long standing enemies bury their differences to destroy him. The power of church and state conspire to do him in. He is betrayed and denied by his friends. Barabbas is released and Jesus condemned!

The ranks of the faithful are scattered. Shouts of "Hosanna," on Sunday curdle into cries of "Crucify him," five days later. Eventually a cross is raised. And we may be sure that no one was calling the day Christ died Good Friday when it happened!

Nothing ultimately matters. If the brightest light that man has ever known can be snuffed out by the culture of Greece, the law of Rome and the pressures of a noble monotheistic tradition, what hope is there? All is vanity. Presently we fall into what Paul Goodman describes as the "Nothing can be done disease." 4 Despair is the only response. So dark is such despair in our time that a distinguished professor in this city recently suggested that we need a new science in this mad world, the science of "Victimology." Such a discipline would study why certain people become victims, and why society responds to crime the way it does.

If we believe that Good Friday summarizes history, then there is nothing left for us except short reign hedonistic goals and total immersion in matters that concern immediate livelihood. Hence Peter, "I am going fishing."
(John 21:3)

"Truth forever on the scaffold,
Wrong forever on the throne."

* * * * *

But, thank God, there is yet another place to live. We can live this side of Easter. The Apostles' Creed declares that "on the third day he arose again from the dead." St. Paul in his classic brief on the subject said: "For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scripture, that He was buried, that He was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scripture." (II Cor. 15:3-4)

The resurrection of Jesus Christ is more than a doctrine to be affirmed by the orthodox. It is more than an

isolated event to be recalled each year in spring. Think of the resurrection as a place to live, as a source of perspective and power.

It is not only the case that Christ died for us. He rose for us too. We are related to that event. He represented us in His dying and in His rising again. As the olympic athlete carries the fortunes and colors of his native land, so Jesus, the son of man, acted for us all.

Moreover, he personifies for us the trustworthiness of the promises of God. I like the way the New English Bible gives us II Cor. 1:20 and speaks of Christ as "the Yes pronounced upon God's promises, every one of them. That is why when we give glory to God, it is through Jesus Christ that we say Amen."

The Easter event has meaning for the world. The resurrection of Jesus Christ was not simply a triumph for the church. It was a triumph for man. How unfortunate that we are prone to think of Easter and the event behind it, as a peculiar possession of the faithful. We are coming to see that there are cosmic implications in the fact that death could not hold Christ. Too often we have assumed that the church was an end in itself, forgetting that at best the church is a means to a larger end, the Kingdom of God, which in turn embraces all of human story.

This is what the Lutheran theologian Karl Braaten describes so clearly when he writes: "The first generation of Christians were fired by hopes for the kingdom. The second wave of Christianity built the church as an interim device while waiting for the kingdom. Later generations identified the two. Today the task is to reactivate the Christian hope by pointing to the Kingdom of God whose Biblical images have been blurred in the history of Christianity." 5

By rising from the dead Jesus pried the future open for man and opened man to and for that future. "Behold he goeth before you into Galilee." (Mat. 28:7) This is not a static doctrine. Here is a living presence, like a moving

point before us, pulling us into the future. The light that comes to us from that empty tomb suffuses all of history. Good and evil are not at a stand-still. It is not the case that good has been defeated and that wrong has triumphed.

God is in control. Your efforts and mine, however ambiguous in a given situation, add up to something durable. This is the nourishment I gain from that bit of dialogue in George Eliot's Middlemarch, where Dorothea says:

"....But I have a belief of my own, and it comforts me."

"What is that?" said Will, rather jealous of the belief.

"That by desiring what is perfectly good even when we don't quite know what it is and cannot do what we would, we are part of the divine power against evil--widening the skirts of light and making the struggle with darkness narrower." 6

But we ought to bear in mind that Easter holds meaning for us as individuals too. Frankly, I am rather dismayed that much of the literature coming out these days seems to be inattentive to man's need to know that there is "more to come," that his personal identity will be sustained beyond death. One is grateful for books that tell of a dynamic process going on in the world. One is glad to have his feeling confirmed that history is moving somewhere. Even the physical sciences bear testimony to a cosmic purpose gradually unfolding.

But many who write in this vein seem almost totally indifferent to the place of the individual in this grand design. I speak as one concerned about this slight. Pascal speaks for me when he observes that "We spend all our lives trying to take our minds off death." I am in pain to know whether there is more to come not only for the race but for me. This concern is heightened when I consider that I belong to a species in which the mortality rate is one hundred percent! I

confess that I am not especially uplifted at the citing of the proverb "When the righteous die they live, for their example lives." Should one feel elation at the prospect of becoming compost for the flowering of civilizations yet unborn.

St. Paul, who understood the cosmic dimensions implied in the resurrection of Jesus, never forgot the personal. "To me to live is Christ," he said. "And to die is gain." (Phil. 1:21) "To be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord." (II Cor. 5:6) "I know whom I have believed, and I am sure that he is able to guard until that Day what has been entrusted to me." (II Tim. 1:12b)

Lord Tennyson believed that a funeral should reflect the happy wonder of a door flung wide open, not the melancholy of a door slammed sullenly shut. Indeed, when Tennyson was buried in Westminster Abbey the organ pealed, the candles blazed, and the coffin was covered with a pall, not of black, but of white! And true to the Faith that he had inherited from the centuries, there was embroidered across the pall those words which he at age eighty had written one October day three years before he died:

"For tho' from out our bourne of Time and Place
The flood may bear me far,
I hope to see my Pilot face to face
When I have crost the bar."

* * * * *

Where do you live? This is my Easter question to you. Do you live in cynicism between Bethlehem and Palm Sunday? Do you live in despair between Palm Sunday and Good Friday? Or do you live in hope this side of Easter. Easter is more than a nice place to visit: It's a good place to live. It is possible today by an act of faith to change your address and come to know the joy of living not simply in 1970, but in Anno Domini 1970. "Hallelujah, for the Lord God Omnipotent Reigneth!"

FOOTNOTES:

1. Pittenger, Norman, Alfred North Whitehead, p. 32
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2. Steinbeck, John, The Short Reign of Pippin IV, p. 130
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3. Cozzens, James Gould, The Last Adam, p. 111,
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4. Roszak, Theodore, The Making of a Counter Culture,
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5. Braaten, Carl, "Toward a Theology of Hope,"
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6. Eliot, George, The Works of George Eliot, Middle-
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