

# SERMONS

FROM RIVERSIDE

**"FOR THOSE WHO THINK THE GRASS  
IS GREENER ELSEWHERE"**

"Will you also go away?"  
"Lord, to whom shall we go?"

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**THE RIVERSIDE  
CHURCH IN THE  
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"Will you also go away?"  
"Lord, to whom shall we go?"  
(John 6:67, 68)

In the central hallway of the main building of Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore stands a larger-than-life marble statue of Jesus Christ with hands outstretched. At the base of this imposing sculpture is the text: "Come unto me all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." (Mat. 11:28)

Will you come? This is the basic invitation of the Christian faith. To extend this invitation in the Master's name is the mission of the church. Today before the sun goes down this invitation will have been extended in towering cathedrals, quonset hut chapels, mission outposts, prisons, hospitals and Skid Row meeting halls. In more languages and ways than we can name, men and women, boys and girls will be asked to come.

But there is a second question too. A question that is asked of those who have already been there, those who have already come. It's the question: "Will you also go away?"

Jesus had had a busy and productive day. He had performed a miracle with a few loaves and fishes. The crowd, still breathless with excitement, had trailed him to the little village of Capernaum in quest of more. Now, however, he was preaching, not performing wonders. This time he was pressing a claim, not rendering a service. Strange words fell from his lips. "He that eateth my flesh and drinketh my blood dwelleth in me, and I in him." (John 6:56) Many of those who heard it said, "This is a hard saying, who can hear it?" (John 6:60)

The record goes on to say, "From that time many of his disciples went back and walked no more with him." (John

6:66) Jesus, the mists of disappointment welling in his eyes, turned to the twelve and said, "Will you also go away?" (John 6:67b) Simon Peter was never stronger, not even at Caesarea Philippi where he gave us his great confession. He stood, as it were, shoulder to shoulder with Christ and said, "Lord, to whom shall we go? Thou hast the words of eternal life." (John 6:68b)

However hard it may be to follow Christ it is always harder not to. The alternatives to faith are ever more difficult than faith itself. For those early followers the chafing point was the death that He would die and their participation in it. I should like to inquire as to what your chafing point might be. What is it about the Christian life that would lead Jesus to turn to you and say, "Will you also go away?"

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For some of us the problem is that of maintaining a central belief in God. It is maddening, in a way, that Jesus always assumed the existence and care of God. It is not all that easy for us, at least not all the time. There are seasons when God affirms Himself to us in accents loud and clear; when our health is good, when our income is adequate and rising, when our fortune is on the upswing, when society is stable, when life seems secure, when a sense of purpose appears to hold all things together.

But let personal or public foundations quake and the doubts come flooding in. When life appears to lack a center that can hold; when events seem more rampant than ordered; when values that we were taught to cherish are awash; when the forces of the night seem stronger than the forces of the day. It is precisely at such points that we wonder whether we can continue on. It has been well said that men are not argued out of faith in God, they are shaken out of faith in God.

"Will you also go away?" Does the option of unbelief seem like a more manageable option to you? Surely at the outset here we must bear in mind that it is not likely that our poor minds can ever grasp the infinite without struggle. Robert Browning did not often defend himself as a poet. But

on one occasion he did in this way:

"I can have little doubt that my writing has been, in the main, too hard for many. I should have been pleased to communicate with; but I never designedly tried to puzzle people, as some of my critics have supposed.

On the other hand, I never pretended to offer such literature as should be a substitute for a cigar or a game of dominoes to an idle man." 1

When we flirt with the alternatives to faith, either atheism or agnosticism, we owe it to ourselves to at least pre-imagine the other side. Do you think, for example, if you arose in the morning totally void of a sense of God, that you could stand the sheer loneliness of life? An agnostic once confessed, "I have seen the spring sun shine out of an empty heaven upon a soulless earth and I have felt with utter loneliness that the great companion was dead."

Think you that you could live with the absence of purpose implicit in such a view. How bleak our days were we to believe that all our doings are destined for a massive cosmic barbecue in which everything that we have loved and cherished will be burned to a crispy nothingness.

Somerset Maugham in his book, The Summing Up, was honest enough to acknowledge a sense of futility here. He said, "In psychological laboratories rats are trained to find their way through a maze and presently by trial and error they learn the path that leads to the food they seek. In the matters with which I now occupy myself I am like one of these rats scurrying along the pathways of the complicated maze, but I do not know that it has a centre where I shall find what I seek. For all I know all the alleys are blind." 2

How, if you did not believe in God, would you account, even in part, for the nobility of life that you stumble on now and then? The gentleness? The goodness? The sacrifice? The love? Pity the poor atheist on Thanksgiving Day. All

those blessings and no one to thank! "To whom shall we go?" It's hard to believe. It's harder not to.

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For others the problem is not so much theological as ethical. They find it hard to obey. Christ is a disturbing presence as well as a loving saviour. He is the light of the world, and one can never live casually or comfortably with light. I may come to Jesus, in the words of the old hymn, "Just As I Am," but He will not let me stay just as I am. He keeps trying to enlarge and develop us and bring us to maturity as the sons of God. A Christian is destined to live on the stretch. He can never be content with where or what he is.

Come now, has it never rankled you that the Christian is frequently more distressed by the absence of some minor virtue than the outright worldling is at the presence of some flagrant sin? Years ago I worked with a young man here in this city who seemed to pile up about fifty lost weekends out of fifty-two a year. I had no reason to doubt his stories of success with women, drink and cards. I heard him out as he told me on Mondays about his achievements. Never did I detect a trace of remorse of any kind. Yet as he spoke to me about his exploits I frequently struggled with a conscience that was disturbed from a rift with a friend.

Has it never rankled you that we are drawn to such sensitivity because we follow Christ? Don't you ever get tired caring about the race problem and feeling that you have to care? Does it ever bother you that we have to consistently regard marriage in a sacramental light, that we can never simply look upon it as a form of friendship recognized by the police? Does it ever get to you that we cannot ever enjoy our money in total freedom, that we always have a sense that we are holding what we have as a trust for God? Does it ever bother you that you cannot look upon your colleagues at work as so many competitors and see your job as something that can get you to the top? That you are always hobbled by a sense of vocation, a belief that what you are must somehow be related to what you do and all of it related to

Almighty God? There are very few Christians that I have ever known who have not felt at one time or another that Jesus Christ had been a handicap to them.

The Russians in one of their recent attempts to stamp out religion issued a tract in which was found this statement: "Without God the road is wider." We've all felt drawn to that at some point along the way.

But to whom will you go? What is the preferable alternative? Do you think it would be easier to live in a state of ethical neutrality, following the lead of a man in a recent novel who said, "There is no right and wrong any more, there's only what's best for the moment?"

Do you really think it would be preferable to sink to the level of instinct and become more identifiable in conduct with the animals of the field. Do you think you could possibly live in an ethical world in which everything was relative to something else without anyone knowing what the ultimate point of reference was?

I think often of the man who used to stop in front of the jeweler's store early in the morning, make an adjustment on his watch and go on. One day the jeweler's curiosity got the better of him. He hailed the man and said, "How come you always stop here?" The man said, "One of my jobs is to blow the whistle at the factory, and I always set my watch by your clock." The jeweler replied, "Isn't that interesting, I always set my clock by your whistle!" Translate that over into the field of ethics and ask yourself where either the factory man or the jeweler would be in due time. "To whom will you go?"

Of course it's hard to live with light. But it is a "kindly light" as John Newman described it in his magnificent hymn. The end is good. Christ yearns to make us over after His likeness. The writer to the Hebrews had it right: "For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant; later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it." (Heb. 12:11)

Of course He is the constant disturber. Of course He is always presenting new options and opening closed doors, pulling us into a future that pulsates with challenge and adventure. How much better to live with that than in some dull content.

"He wakes desire you never may forget.  
He shows you stars you never saw before.  
He makes you share with him forevermore  
The burden of the world's divine regret.

How wise you were to open not! and yet,  
How poor if you should turn him from the door."

3

It's hard to obey - it's harder not to.

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For others the problem is the church. They find it hard to belong. Faith in God, yes. Obedience to Christ, yes. But the church -that's something else again. If only Christ had not said, "I will build my church." If only God had provided in His wisdom that we could free-lance our experience of Him.

I can understand this irritation, can't you? The church has so many liabilities. It has an uncanny way of coming down on the wrong side of major questions. Or worse, of not coming down at all. A church can be petty and short-sighted. The pulpit and the pew alike fall short of their professed ideals. And when it comes to a fight, there is no fight like a church fight! The saints are alright in the abstract. But when they are localized in concrete situations they are often hard to take.

"To live in love  
With the saints above:  
Oh! that will be glory.  
But to live below  
With the saints you know:  
That's another story."



So is this the sticking point with you, the church? It is at this point that the Lord says to you: "And will you also go away?"

My question is: "Where will you go if you leave the church?" There is nothing quite like it, for all of its weaknesses. Consider the opposites that it envelopes: Labor and management, Republicans and Democrats, blacks and whites, rich and poor, lettered and ignorant, veterans and beginners. And mark you, it holds them together in a voluntary association. No one has to stay!

My experience has been that the much maligned congregations of the Christian world are capable of a caring love and a solicitation for each other that is absolutely unmatched to that degree anywhere else in our society. There is a Russian saying about a husband and wife who have grown old together, that they are so close that when one cries the other tastes salt. I have seen in every church I've ever been a part of, the caring love of God so manifested that when some member cried other members tasted salt.

Many of you have seen the play "Member of the Wedding" by Carson McCullers. If you have you will recall that the story turns on the trauma that Frankie, a young girl in her teens, experiences as her brother who has been her lone support finally decides to marry. For Frankie this is the end of the world. She is jealous of her brother's wife-to-be and goes through great tribulation trying to sort out her feelings. At one point in this touching drama Frankie sits down and says. "Sush, just now I realized something. The trouble with me is that for a long time I have been just an "I" person. All other people can say "we." When Bernice says "we" she means her lodge and church and colored people. Soldiers can say "we" and mean the Army. All people belong to a "we" concept except me."

She continues, "I know that the bride and my brother are the "we" of me. So I'm going with the two of them to Winter Hill. And after that to whatever place that they will ever go. I love the two of them so much and we belong together. I love the two of them so much because they are

the we of me." 4

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"Will you also go away?" "Lord to whom shall we go? Thou hast the words of eternal life. And we believe," as Peter went on to say, "and continue to believe that thou art the Christ the son of the living God."

It's hard to believe. It's harder not to. It's hard to obey. It's harder not to. It's hard to belong. It's harder not to belong.

### CLOSING PRAYER

Lord, in an age that prefers short-term commitments to long-range loyalties  
Help us to hold fast to thee.  
When the pieces do not seem to fit;  
When the doing of thy will seems more than we can manage;  
When our brethren get us down;  
Give us the stamina to persevere and the good sense to know that troubled faith is easier to bear than troubled unbelief.  
Through the same Jesus Christ our Lord,  
who loved us and gave himself for us.

Amen.

### FOOTNOTES:

1. Browning, Robert, in Robert Browning: Chief Poet of the Age, by W. G. Kingsland, London, 1890
2. Maugham, Somerset, The Summing Up, p. 147  
Mentor Book, 1938
3. Lysaght, Sidney Royse, "The Penalty of Love"
4. McCullers, Carson, "The Member of the Wedding,"  
end of Act I



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