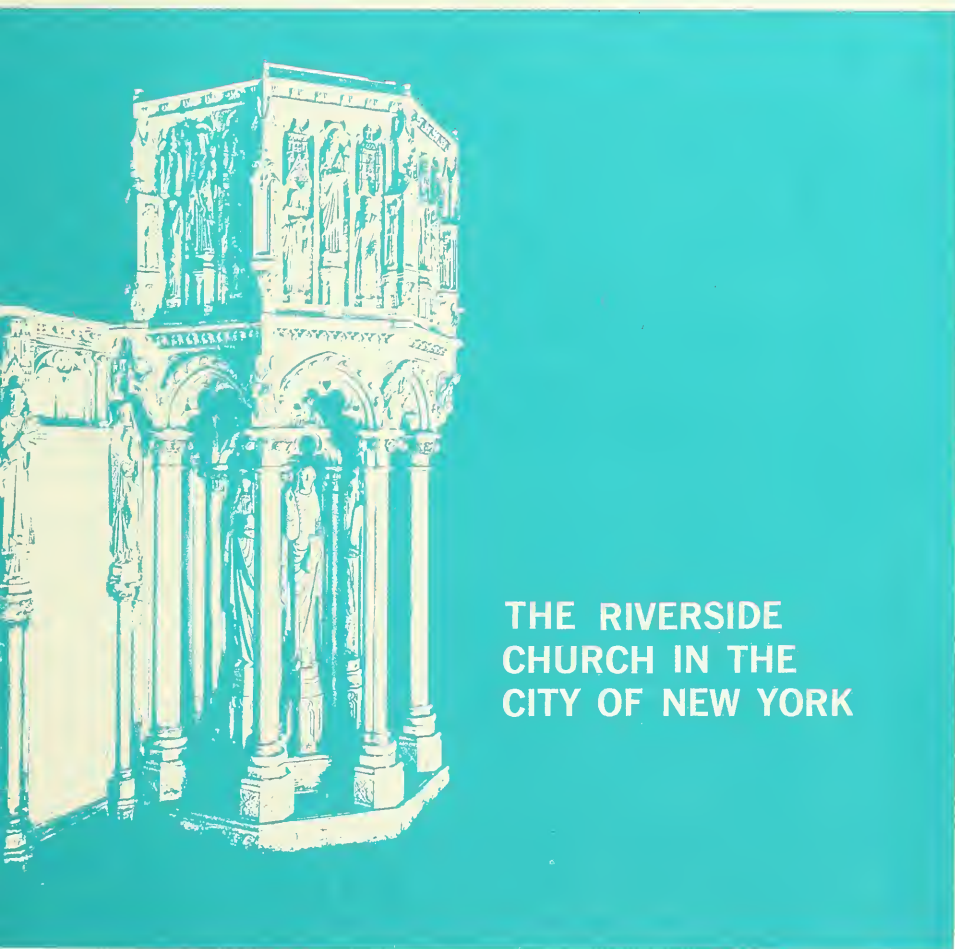


SERMONS

FROM RIVERSIDE


YOU SHOULD HAVE BEEN HERE YESTERDAY!

Dr. Ernest T. Campbell



THE RIVERSIDE
CHURCH IN THE
CITY OF NEW YORK

APRIL 6, 1975



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YOU SHOULD HAVE BEEN HERE YESTERDAY!

All told, I suppose I have gone out fishing no more than three times in my life. In no instance did I pose a threat to anything that lives in water! To be truthful about it, my heart was never in it -- I hate to see anything die.

But there are people for whom fishing is a lively interest if not a livelihood. Ardent fishermen regularly charter boats and venture out into the ocean for a catch. Their hopes rest on the man who serves as guide and captain. He takes them to the right spot! At least that's the idea. Occasionally, however, the captain cannot deliver. Try as he may he cannot discover where the fish are running.

In such a circumstance his defense is both ancient and predictable: "You should have been here yesterday." You should have been here yesterday. That's when the blues were running! Never saw so many! One school after another! You should have been here yesterday!

* * *

If I grasp their conversation correctly that's what Cleopas and his friend were saying that day as they journeyed on the Emmaus Road. Travelling on foot from Jerusalem, they were overtaken by a stranger. It was late afternoon on the world's first Easter. "What is this conversation that you are holding with each other as you walk?" the stranger asked. (Lk. 24:17) Irritated by what they took to be an unpardonably stupid question, they replied, "Are you the only visitor to Jerusalem who does not know the things that have happened there these days?" (Lk. 24:18) But the stranger would not be deterred. "What things?" he asked. (Lk. 24:19)

Then, for themselves as well as for their new companion, they reviewed their disappointment: Concerning Jesus of Nazareth who was a prophet mighty in deed and word..but our chief priests and rulers condemned him to death and crucified him...We had hoped that he was the one...It is now three days since it happened.

They were putting Jesus away into the past tense. The let-down and sadness that they felt comes through with arresting force. "Those were the days, friend! You should have been here yesterday!"

* * *

Some feel this way about their country. These are bitter days for most Americans. The myth of national innocence has been rudely shattered and, one suspects, irreparably so. Many of our countrymen live with a sense of vanishing glory. I felt sorry for the President of these United States at his Press Conference on Thursday last when a reporter asked him whether the 50,000 Americans who died in Vietnam had died in vain. This is the first time that we have ever been involved in a war that we did not win, and it is a thankless job, for the President or anyone, to waken people from a dream.

We wince at fresh disclosures of the antics of the CIA. Our cities are in a fight for their very lives. People are hungry and without work.

Then we recall the America of the Currier and Ives prints wherein everything seemed to hang together and serenity clothed the land. We recall the America that was given us in school, the America of song and ballad. We can only say in our discomfort, You should have been here yesterday.

* * *

Some feel this way about the church. The Old

Testament gives us a highly dramatic rendering of an event that deserves to be better known among Christian people. It has to do with the return of the Israelites to their land following a period of captivity in Babylon. The Book of Ezra tells us how the regathered exiles were intent on rebuilding the temple. This was a theocracy! The first thing that needed to be restored was not a fortress but the place of divine worship.

So, the Elders and the people gathered for the laying of a foundation for the new temple. Listen to how Ezra describes it: "And when the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the Lord, the priests in their vestments came forward with trumpets, and the Levites...with cymbals, to praise the Lord according to the directions of David, King of Israel.... And all the people shouted with a great shout...because the foundation of the house of the Lord was laid. But many of the priests and Levites and heads of fathers' houses, old men who had seen the first house, wept with a loud voice when they saw the foundation of this house being laid... (Ezra 4:10-12)

Some of the oldsters there remembered Solomon's temple in all its splendor. Even though the trumpets blared and the cymbals clanged, their hearts were heavy. They recalled a yesterday that made the present seem like a distant second. This is a fine temple that you folks are building, but it is not as good as the one we used to have.

As for us, we recall an era when the church, we think, was more obviously endowed with the glory of God. We keep torturing ourselves over some imagined yesterday -- the early church, the beginnings of Christendom under Constantine, the middle ages with its untroubled certainties, the Reformation era, the revivalist years under the irresistible John Wesley, the beginnings of the modern missionary movement in the 19th Century (In those days there were giants in the earth.), or even the religious boom in America of our own century in the late 50's and early 60's. You

should have been here yesterday!

* * *

Some feel this way about themselves -- especially about their experience of God. Any of us who are even half-way long in the tooth have vivid memories of solid religious experiences. If asked to discuss what God means to us we are likely to say, "I remember when..." That "when" can be the day you joined the church as a youngster. That morning when people surrounded you with welcoming love; when Jesus was real and uncomplicated; when prayer was simple trust; when duty was clear.

Or that "when" could be for you an evening in your youth when you sat around a campfire at a summer conference sponsored by the church and God seemed nearer than your very breath. That "when" might be for you your first hearing ever of a sermon by Paul Tillich. That "when" could be for you the whole community at Chautauqua singing, "Day Is Dying In The West" under the rafters of that mighty amphitheatre. That "when" might have been the occasion when you listened to the "Hallelujah Chorus" on an Easter Sunday for the first time after your mother's death. That "when" could be the ecstasy and challenge that you felt when you watched a film on the life of Albert Schweitzer. "I remember when..." Those were the days. You should have been here yesterday.

* * *

And the whole thing is rubbish, you know! To idealize the past and denigrate the present is a common and expensive human frailty. Yes, frailty, because the past was never that good and the present is never that bad. The America of our school days was a noble republic alright, but it had its faults. There was corruption then in high places. There were unjustified wars - the Civil War, and the

Spanish-American War - to name but two, not to mention endless indefensible skirmishes with the American Indians. There were repeated depressions. This is why economics is such a boring subject in most American schools. It is the study of one depression after another! Minority rights in that good old past were flagrantly and consistently repressed. Why, one half of the length of this nation's life has been quagmired in slavery!

The church even in its earliest years was riddled with problems, most of them people problems. It would be interesting sometime to read Paul's letters and ask what the questions were that he was trying to answer. Most of them were pretty simple. I think there were times when Paul must have thought that he was running a Spiritual Infant Day-Care Center.

And what shall we say of the Christianity of the Eisenhower years? The Christianity of those years in this country so identified faith with material well-being that people did not know whether they were happy because they were "in Christ" or because they were "in the chips!!"

And your own past, the one you clutch to yourself, was really not all that good. You had your doubts once the emotions finally simmered down. You knew that there were still vast areas to bring beneath the rule of Christ - corporate ethics, for example, science, your arts and pleasures, yes, and your body. The past was never that good -- not the Nation's past, not the church's past, not even your own past.

The corollary, of course, is that the present is never that bad. However unnerving it may be to belong to this Republic now, the nation is not without its merits. It is clearly wrong to say that the United States could not win in Vietnam. It is truer to say that we chose not to win in Vietnam. Moral forces were generated in this country that were given suf-

ficient receptivity to keep this nation from using all the hardware that it might have used to win.

There is a concern building in this country to do something about the enormous disparities of wealth and power that engender so much strife at home and abroad. And I doubt that there is a State anywhere in the world in which the concerns of the migrated stranger are taken to heart with greater seriousness than here.

And the church? I thank God that I am part of the church now. I don't spend too much time reading about the history of the church. I'd rather make some history so that future generations can read about us. The church is far less Gnostic today than it used to be. Far less given over to idly focusing on the life to come. At high levels and low in the church's life we are coming to see that we are responsible for this thing called history. Slowly but surely the cross is reappearing in the church. And perhaps as never before in its life the Christian church is now uneasy over its alliances with power.

When it comes to personal religion, it's a hard thing to keep one's experience of God untrammelled, to feel always at peace with the situation. But are we not more honest with regard to our doubts today? Are we not better able than our fathers and mothers to handle controversy? It used to be in churches that I know anything about that everything controversial was kept outside. We had the peace of the cemetery within and we didn't wish it broken. But now we've learned to fight and love at the same time, to wrestle and pray together. Most Christians with whom I am acquainted are working hard to understand what it means to be a responsible human being in a highly complex world. The present is not all that bad.

* * *

That gets me back to the Road to Emmaus. The incognito stranger re-interpreted for them their history. Showed them, as it were, the news behind the news. He stayed for supper, and as he broke the bread we read that "their eyes were opened and they knew him." He had not come to pass, he had come to stay. Jesus who died is now alive: This is the grand theme that runs through the New Testament. "Lo, I am with you always."

No past that the world has known has been worthy of being eternalized. That's why history rolls on. The eras are not in competition with each other, for Christ is equally present in each. You should have been here yesterday! Nonsense!

Michel Quoist is right: "God is waiting for you here at this very moment, at this very place, and nowhere else." *

CLOSING PRAYER

Help us, God, with wide and
welcoming arms to embrace
the present; and to know
it as Thy habitation.

Grant that no worship of the
past may work to hide Thee
from our sight -- here and now.

Through Jesus Christ our Lord
Amen

FOOTNOTE:

- * Gibbard, Mark, Twentieth Century Men of Prayer,
p. 86, SCM Book Club, Naperville, Illinois, 1974

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