

A S E R M O N

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Preached in All-Saints-by-the-Sea, Santa Barbara - November 24, 1963

by

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Two days ago, this nation was stunned into silence by the death of the President by an assassin's bullet. Our first reaction was one of disbelief -- it just couldn't have happened; then as we were forced to acknowledge its reality -- of sheer speechlessness, we didn't know what to say; and then of grief and bewilderment and despair. That man, in the prime of life, whose responsibility it was, more than anyone else's, to guide the destiny of our country and of the world, was dead.

Some of us felt like weeping; most of us ~~experienced the emotional strain that comes with poignant loss;~~ and all of us felt a profound sympathy for Mrs. Kennedy and the two children.

Because we are here face to face with one of life's inexplicable tragedies, I thought it might not be amiss if, instead of preaching the sermon I had prepared, I should speak with you for a few minutes about how Christians face things like this.

Certainly, we all know now, if we didn't know before last Friday, that sometimes life goes terribly wrong for people. Right living, prayer, Church membership are no guarantee that we will not run into difficulties. (As Jesus said, "In the world you shall have tribulation".) Everyone, at some time or another, in one degree or another, has a date with adversity. It is the common lot. (Students fail in examinations; the prize we had coveted for ourselves goes to someone else; another marries the person of our choice; we find that we have not the talent we thought we had; circumstances beyond our control block our path to the work or profession we wanted most to follow; an illness or accident lays us low; the death of some loved one knocks the breath out of us and compels drastic readjustment of

our way of life).

This morning then, I would speak to the disappointed, the bewildered, the discouraged, the hurt, the frustrated, the embittered people who at some time or other have run into trouble or adversity or misfortune or stark tragedy, and I would guess that that includes about all of us.

The way of life we shall go after such experiences depends in large measure in what we do when they are upon us. You will perhaps remember the little jingle, "Oh a trouble's a ton, or a trouble's an ounce, or a trouble is what you make it. It isn't the fact that you're hurt that counts, but only, how did you take it?". There are many different ways of taking it.

Some people grow resentful and bitter, and rail against the fate that brought them into this situation. Often, the bitterness becomes chronic, until it sours the disposition and degenerates into a cynicism that looks out on the world with jaundiced eye, suspicious of everyone, always finding fault, getting angry over trifles and turning one into an unlovely person who makes life difficult for all with whom he comes into contact.

Some people blame God for their troubles, accusing Him of letting them down, as if religion gave one a kind of lien on God's care and protection, and guaranteed immunity from trouble. Even Luther once gave way to this petulant complaint when things went against him, "My God," he cried, "art Thou dead?". There are people to whom religion has meant little for years, who, when they fall on evil days, use God for a convenient scape-goat. "It's not fair!" they say, as if the God they utterly forgot should somehow have kept them in mind.

Sometimes people are just overwhelmed and bewildered and stunned, "What can a man do when there is nothing to do?". A helpless feeling of resignation settles upon them. Perhaps in this mood they just give up and sink into a slough of self-pity, with inner resources exhausted, incapable of going on. Perhaps they assume a stoical attitude of indifference -- what cannot be cured must be endured -- and so they trudge along in a cheerless sort of way neither better or worse for their

experience. Or perhaps they flit around sampling different religions or psychology or new thought, or what have you; seeking a kind of spiritual paregoric to dull the pain in their souls. Or perhaps they crawl into a shell of pretense, repeating some magical incantation, "It doesn't hurt, it doesn't hurt, it isn't true" with a sweet and pious smile on their lips as they assure themselves and their friends that, "Things are going to come out all right in the end".

A Christian behaves quite differently, realizing that circumstances are too much for him to handle by himself, he turns to God, not in complaint or rebellion, but to learn what he is to do. He turns to God, not as an emergency measure, seeking some quick and painless way out of his trouble, but he turns to God as one long known and trusted, Who has ever been a source of spiritual strength and renewal.

In this referral to God, the Christian makes three discoveries.

(1) He learns he is not alone in the universe. There is a Spirit here from Whom our spirit springs; a Spirit Who is waiting to back us up and hold us true and give us power if we will but let Him into our lives. The life of Jesus, and the experience of countless numbers of his followers down through the centuries, verifies that fact. They have found, as the Psalmist did long ago, "Though I walk through the Valley of the Shadow of Death, I will fear no evil, for Thou are with me". Like the gyro-compass on an airplane or a ship which maintains a fixed reference point, undisturbed by the raging storm, religious faith points to an unfailing guide even when all is confusion around us. We do not have to walk alone and unguided over life's difficult and treacherous terrain.

(2) In turning to God the Christian wins a courage and strength to persevere beyond that which he himself possesses; "Courage is fear that has said its prayers". If you want to see lives illustrative of that aphorism, open the New Testament and turn to almost any page of the Book of the Acts of the Apostles. Look at Peter and John, for example, released from prison with a warning that they were not to preach Christ any more, immediately going forth and preaching the Word with boldness.

People do not find in religious faith the explanation of the hateful things that befall them, but God does turn helplessness into courage and dejection into a song.

(3) In turning to God, Christians discover that there is still something for them to do, that their usefulness is not ended by a handicap or a defeat. One of the baleful consequences of misfortune and frustration, is the feeling that one's career is ruined and life is no longer worthwhile. Our plans have blown up in our face and our hopes are shattered -- what's the use? If our religion is real, God will convince us that there is still something important for us to do. There is always some compensating spiritual gift for what we have lost or for what has been denied us, and often out of the deep waters of frustration and defeat come a finer person and a better work for the world.

Even out of that terrible thing that happened in Dallas last Friday, and the stunned shock which it engendered in all the people of this land, there could come a new sense of unity; a new determination to master our difficulties together, and to find a just and peaceful solution of the tremendous problems confronting this nation.

Two consequences flow from this Christian procedure of turning to God in adversity and frustration.

(1) For one thing, a Christian does not quit. He may be breathless and worn and beaten, but he does not quit. He knows that God is counting on him to carry through. He recalls that because Jesus did not quit in Gethsemane, Easter was possible; so he hangs on a little longer, and out of that little longer come blessing and victory.

It was so that Handel composed the Messiah. His health and fortune were at lowest ebb, with his right side paralyzed and his money gone. His creditors were threatening to imprison him, and he was tempted to give up; but he went on a little longer and out of his little longer came his greatest oratorio, which has immeasurably blessed the world. So, out of blindness and suffering and illness have come some of the world's finest music and poetry and inspired utterance, scientific

discovery and missionary endeavour and social improvement, because men and women would not give up. I salute the world's benefactors, known and unknown, who would not quit.

(2) Christians who turn to God in disappointment and defeat are moved to make what they can out of the leftovers. In spite of broken bodies and blighted hopes, they know that there is some contribution God means their lives to make. Something speaks authoritatively within them and calls them to do the best they can. The raw materials may not be of the best (maybe ill health, physical handicap, little education), but they are resolved, under God's inspiration and guidance, to make the very best of what is left to them.

In a shabby tenement, three flights up, on New York's East Side, a young woman lay for years on a bed of pain with an incurable disease of her hip. But when the curates at St. George's Church got discouraged and their faith a bit wobbly, we went up to sit for a while at Margaret Barry's bedside. Her radiant and cheerful spirit, her certainty of God, her trust in His love and goodness transformed that drab, bare little room into a kind of sanctuary in which faith and hope and courage were restored to all who tarried there. How gloriously God uses the leftovers of shattered lives if we will but let Him!

How do Christians face things: These dreadful, horrid, frustrating, bitter, bewildering things that happen to us? By turning to God, not in complaint or rebellion, but to learn what He would have us do. There we find companionship and understanding and courage and the assurance that our lives are still important. So the Christian does not quit, but proceeds to make the most of what is left to him. He has a God to trust and a song to sing.

We do need God, all of us, for in simple, spiritual arithmetic -- man minus God commonly means talents half used, means bitterness, means defeat, means desperation; but man plus God, means victory. A rainbow is made by the sun shining through the rain, so the light of God shines through tragedy and bitter experience and becomes the hope of mankind. May God so bless this land and its people today.

Closing Prayer

We thank Thee, O God our Father, for the life of Thy servant, John Fitzgerald Kennedy, and all he has meant to this nation and people; for life's task faithfully and honourably discharged; for the courage and good humour with which he bore the heavy burdens of his office; for sadness met without surrender and weakness endured without defeat.

Comfort, we beseech Thee, the members of his family, stunned by the greatness and suddenness of their sorrow. Give them faith and courage that they may have strength to meet the days ahead with steadfastness and patience; and grant that even in the desolation of their loss, they may feel the calm assurance of Thy mercy and know the blessing of Thy peace which passes understanding.

And grant to the people of our land, so suddenly bereft of our leader, that we may work more earnestly and more closely together for the good of all. Give us wisdom to learn the way Thou wouldst have us to go; the courage to walk in it no matter what the cost may be, and the endurance to continue our pursuit of freedom and justice and truth in spite of frustration and defeat, that so, we may be truly, a nation under God and a dedicated people.

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