

IDEAS THAT HAVE GRIPPED ME

Each of us makes his own spiritual pilgrimage. This is always an intensely personal journey in which we walk through many unexpected experiences. God waits for us at every turn of the road to make His presence known. He is always trying to speak to us. The remarkable fact is that we have learned any lessons whatsoever when we consider how dull and hard of heart we are most of the time.

Certainly there are those deep, basic convictions that lay hold on us and become a part of the warp and woof of our lives. Many of us are profoundly grateful for Christian parents with simple faith, for godly Sunday School teachers and for churches and pastors that shared with us in their best moments the compassion and truth of Christ. Through the gift of such influences we were given our most durable and fundamental ideas and convictions - we learned of the incredible grace of God and came to walk with Christ in life's deepest companionship.

But beyond these foundations there have come other certainties that have guided and formed our lives. In the hidden tug and pull of gnawing doubts, searching questions and baffling experiences there has come the profound sense of God's abiding presence and the answers to life's dilemmas.

I recall the time of my deepest questioning in seminary days. Who has not gone through the dark night of doubt? There came the awful wonder if this gospel we share was after all really true. Among the many questions asked in seminary was the one concerning the reliability of the witnesses. How can one trust those who claim to be eye witnesses of the events recorded in the Scriptures? Did anything happen "back there" that really matters for our salvation? Could one know that Jesus had ever lived and died in the

way the New Testament spoke of him? But most of all how could one be certain that Jesus had really overcome death? This is like coming to the end of the road of skepticism and agnosticism about history itself.

Then, providentially, riding home on the bus one evening, I began reading History and the Gospel by C. H. Dodd. I could not lay the book down until it was devoured. I shall always be grateful for that work by a devoted scholar. Professor Dodd faces the issues of criticism including skepticism about the events of the Gospel, but he affirms that the good news of salvation has its roots in history. The evidence is overwhelmingly in favor of trusting the New Testament and the witness of the early writers. Jesus was born under Caesar Augustus and he was crucified and raised from the dead under Pontius Pilate. These are facts that have eternal significance for the human race.

This may seem prosaic to some, but I hurried back to look at the New Testament with a new understanding. God has done something in our world in a certain time and place. He has acted to save us through Jesus of Nazareth within human events. The Gospel has saving relevance. Later I read T. R. Glover's simple classic The Jesus of History, which underscored in a different way the same great theme - these things have happened - "of that we are witnesses".

It seems to me in a day of extreme demythologizing and of agnosticism about about history, when we are saying it makes no difference what happened back there, simply believe, or let us not trouble with the "Jesus of history" but only cast ourselves on the Christ of faith, we need to affirm the integrity of the first witnesses. We can trust their word. There is a reliable core of events which is the heart of the gospel we proclaim.

Later another insight came to me which was a turning point in my life and thought. Beyond all our attempts to define and formulate our faith

is the reality of a living encounter with the Living God. This has been stated with power in such books as Emil Brunner's Divine - Human Encounter, Martin Buber's "I - Thou" and H. H. Farmer's Servants of the Word. This is not to deny that we must operate within a framework or structure of reason or that we cannot define in language or symbol our meeting with God.

But for many of us our faith is like a lifeless corpse. We analyze it and dissect it, but still it does not live! The Bible is shot full of the experiences of people who have met God at a burning bush, or at a potter's wheel or in the long wrestling of the night. Men had their faith kindled into a living flame when they encountered the resurrected Christ behind closed doors, on a dusty road or at the seashore. It is still the same today. As Samael Rutherford cried out in prison, "This morning Jesus Christ came into my cell and every stone glistened like a ruby".

There is a depth experience of faith which grows out of a personal meeting with Jesus Christ and results in our obedient surrender to his presence. The Church needs to recover this experience once again if it is to make any decisive impact on modern culture and the needs of mankind.

Then there has come in the day to day work of pastoral shepherding the conviction that we must recover the meaning of the person in Church life. We have been so concerned with programs and our own schemes that often we have manipulated people. I have seen more real concern for persons in some mental hospitals or in Alcoholics Anonymous meetings than is found in many churches.

The costly center of real congregational life, which is the work of the Holy Spirit, is that particular persons are loved not for what we can get out of them, but because they are persons. In a Christian Church the lovely, the guilty, the troubled and the broken-hearted are seen with the eyes of

Christ knowing what they can become. This kind of concern will take us to the frontiers of society as it took Christ to the great frontier of the cross. We will have to reevaluate our strategy and love the dispossessed, the aged, the delinquent and the alcoholic and help them carry their burden. They must be accepted for what they are. Where else in our modern world can the personal be recovered if not in the household of God? This has laid hold on me with increasing conviction.

Finally, I have been gripped by the power of the Christian community. I have caught occasional glimpses of the glory of this reality in small Bible study and prayer groups, in evangelistic houseparties, participating in men's breakfasts, in the witnessing of eager lay people and in the congregational acts of corporate worship, particularly in the services of communion and baptism. Men and women are truly members of one another where the congregation is formed by response to the call of God. They share each other's joys and sorrows, have all things in common and Christ lives in their midst. Wherever our fragmented, broken world struggling to find some semblance of community sees this reality it cries out once again, "Behold, how they love one another."

I have been profoundly moved by the witness of men who have known this reality such as in Tom Allen's "The Face of My Parish" or William Gowland's "The Church Militant and Triumphant". This fellowship is never a sham or humanly contrived. It is a gift of God's grace to obedient believers. As pastors we have the high opportunity of serving all kinds of people in the prayer, hope and agony that Christ's fellowship might become a reality. This is our incredible calling. As Christ was the suffering servant who lay down his life for the sake of the sheep, so we must learn once again to be servants of his body.