

GREAT EXPECTATIONS

EASTER

Pilgrim Church, Duluth March 30, 1975 Dr. Royal F. Shepard, Jr.

"And when they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, 'Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?' He said to him, 'Yes, Lord you know that I love you.' He said to him, 'Feed my lambs.'" John 21:15

Do you recall that last reported conversation that Peter held with Jesus? It was in the upper room. Jesus announced that at the critical moment all the disciples would disappear into the woodwork. But Peter, the designated leader, vehemently denied this prediction. "Though all the rest let you down," he said, "I'll stick by you."

But a lot of water has passed under the bridge since that conversation and the one before us today. There was Peter's strange drowsiness when he was supposed to be standing watch in the garden. There was his brief moment of ill-advised violence when he struck out with his sword. There was that other dawn when he warmed his hands over the fire and denied to the serving girl that he knew anything about that Galilean who was being interrogated by the priests. There was his conspicuous absence - or if he were present, his notable silence - during the whole series of events leading through the crucifixion. All this and much more has taken place between these two conversations. Peter does not play much of a role in that between. He is hardly center stage, and when he does appear he is no hero.

So the way this next conversation opens is a surprise. We need to bear in mind, of course, that this passage in John is not objective reporting. It is John's interpretation of what happened to the inner man in Peter, an interpretation set down a long time after the first Easter, when the tradition of Peter's own crucifixion was already known. But this interpretive account is no less true because it lacks the character of an Associated Press bulletin. It is a profoundly insightful account of what the resurrection meant to Peter, how it changed his life.

You see, here is Peter alternately foolhardy and a coward, Peter who so often says and does the wrong thing, Peter whom Jesus nicknamed, no doubt with a touch of irony, the rock. He is like one of those rocks you step onto hopefully while crossing a stream only to have it give way under your feet. This is Peter on whom the church of Jesus Christ is founded. Jesus comes to him despite all that has happened and without any post mortems, without any introduction except the question of whether Peter still loves him. And Jesus says, "Feed my lambs."

I say this is a surprise because what this statement means is that Peter is still expected to be the rock. Or to adopt Jesus' other figure of speech, he's still the shepherd. He is expected to hold the flock together and to get it moving. In Peter's remorse, his sense of defeat, Jesus confronts him with this great expectation.

I think that is what made the difference in Peter. I think that is why in fact Peter did become the first and foremost leader of this shaky old enterprise we call the Church. Suppose Jesus had come to him and said: "Well, don't take it too hard, Simon. We're not all made to be bishops." I don't think we would have heard much more about Peter. Or suppose Jesus

had said, "Well, life being what it is, what you need is a little religious consolation. Just think a few positive thoughts and remember that I'm Okay and you're Okay and everything will turn out fine." Well, I rather doubt that the blood of the martyrs was nourished on such a diet.

But here comes Jesus to this man whom he once considered so far from being O.K. that he called Peter "Satan." And Jesus gives to this man this tremendous commission. It is as if he went up to one of those football players who every so often gets confused and carries the ball the wrong way for ninety-eight yards. While the player is banging his helmet on the ground for the benefit of the TV audience, Jesus, the coach, comes up to him and without any other comment says, "Okay, captain, the score's 21 to 0 in their favor. Let's get on with the game."

That's the way it was with Peter. That was his resurrection experience.

It is only when something is expected of us that life has any meaning. Oh, it is true that we delight in that feeling of freedom that comes when we can throw off the expectations. We have all known that delicious sensation that comes over one on the last day of school. We know the old jingle, "No more pencils, no more books, no more teachers' dirty looks." Tomorrow is a bright day then. For our presence will not be expected in the classroom, nor our homework, nor our knowledge, nor our good behavior. That's a great feeling. And don't think that the teachers don't experience the same feeling on that last day of school.

But there comes a time in the course of the summer when the scholar grows tired of this freedom. He is tired of lying on the livingroom floor watching "As the World Turns." He is tired of following mother around the supermarket. He is tired of dropping rotten apples on the roofs of passing automobiles. He wants something to do, but not just something to do. He wants somebody's confidence, somebody's reliance, somebody's demands. He wants something expected of him. He wants to go to school.

That's the way it is with us. We need those free times, those vacations, those retirements. We need to lay our burdens down. But unless something is expected of us, the meaning drops out of life.

It is true, of course, that misguided expectations make a great deal of trouble for us. All of us suffer from the expectations of our parents. In many ways these expectations are good. They prompt us to live up to sound values. They goad us into higher achievements than we would otherwise attain. But frequently the values connected with parental expectations are distorted values. They put too much stress on material success, perhaps, and not enough on character. Sometimes too the parental expectations do not fit us. They are appropriate to someone else, to our father, perhaps, who wants to realize his own unfulfilled dreams through us. But studying metallurgical engineering at Michigan Tech is not what we were cut out for. Finally, these parental expectations may be unrealistically high. Even if we got Walter Cronkite's job our mother wouldn't be satisfied. She'd want us to be president of CBS.

Expectations can be a real blight on a person's life, both his own expectations and those of other people. That fact needs to be recognized.

But that fact doesn't alter the fact that without expectations life isn't worth living.

So many of the tragedies of our day center about people feeling that nothing more is expected - the mother whose family is grown, the businessman who retired, the athlete who graduates. These are stock characters. But they are also real life characters. And so much of their misery centers about the disappearance, or seeming disappearance, of great expectations from their lives.

And there is a larger tragedy too, the tragedy of a whole society that lives without the sense that there are transcendent expectations. In such a society people feel they are free. They have thrown off the burdens of the past. The expectations of morality, of religion, of the marriage covenant, of parenthood, of being a son or daughter, of country, of work, of neighborhood, even of friendship - all these are thrown off like so much dead weight. Were they not all corrupt anyway, all hypocritical, all shot through with sin if you want to get moralistic about it? It is better to live without expectations. School's out! Let each one do his own thing, and the whole society likewise.

But it doesn't work. Not for individuals or for whole peoples. It doesn't work, living without knowing that something is expected of one from beyond oneself. That is not freedom. That is not living at all. That is death.

Well, let's go back to Peter. "I say you are Peter, and on this rock I found my church." You don't have to be a Catholic to believe that. It's in the Bible, so Protestants can't escape it. Peter is the church-man, the fellow who comes first in the long chain. What happens to him is what happens to the church. If great expectations is what resurrection means to him, that's what resurrection means to the church as a whole.

A lot of us have been wondering what the church is all about these days. Why do we still keep it around? I have been wondering. Some of you have been wondering. Some perhaps have not been wondering. Let's not kid ourselves, some of us haven't been much interested. How many of you were here last Sunday?

But some of us have been wondering. What's the nitty gritty thing about the church when we get rid of all the trivia, like preachers, choirs, stained glass windows, offering envelopes, Easter bonnets and koolaid? I have been wondering about that.

I think it has something to do with this business of living by great expectations. This always was the distinctive thing about the people in the Bible. The thing that set the ancient Hebrews off from other people was that they alone understood how much God was expecting of them. That's the only thing they had, really: not military might, not good farm land, not artistic geniuses, not skilled politicians, not techniques of meditation. Egypt, Babylonia, Assyria, Greece, Rome - those are the places where you had to go to find all those other things. What the Hebrews had was simply a question:

"What does the Lord expect of us?"

That's the way it was with the Christians too. The question deepened and so did the answers. But the answers came always in the form of expectations. "Feed my sheep." "Go into all the world." "Teach, preach, heal, pray, prepare, love, lay down your life." It was the expectations beginning with Peter that set off the chain reaction. It was the expectations that would not die, but which came back from the grave with renewed power, that set off that tremendous surge of confidence that was the faith of the church.

And that's the way it is with the church today. Maybe that is all the church has left, just that. Just the conviction that somewhere in the world there has to be a place where people are reminded that they are subject to great expectations.

Our own expectations, and those of the society around us, are, indeed, shot through with confusion. We cannot trust them wholeheartedly. Even what the church has to say about expectations we must take with a grain of salt.

But this we can expect the church to do - (and woe to the church if it does not do this! It would be better had that church never been born!) - we can expect the church to remind us that beyond all the other expectations, whether from parents, or friends, society as a whole, or from within our own uniqueness, there is still a higher source of expectation that holds all of us to account. No matter who we are or what we do there is one who asks something of us.

This is a sober thought, for we can never escape these expectations from above. Not if like the psalmist we try to make our bed in hell. Not if like Jonah we set sail for some foreign port. Not if like Simon Peter we tell the serving girl, "I never met the fellow." Not if we say we are tired, or old, or sick, or defeated, or disillusioned. We can't get away.

But that's good to know too. Because when the word comes "Feed my sheep," that's the beginning of our confidence. That's the future opening. That's the resurrection and the life.