ON TOMBS AND TIRADES

Pilgrim Church, Duluth EASTER 4-6-80 Royal F. Shepard, Jr.

Mark 16:3 "And they were saying to one another. 'Who will roll away the stone for us from the door of the tomb?"

Matthew 23:13-36

"But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! because you shut the kingdom of heaven against men; for you neither enter yourselves, nor allow those who would enter to go in. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for you traverse sea and land to make a single proselyte, and when he becomes a proselyte, you make him twice as much a child of hell as yourselves.

"Woe to you, blind guides, who say, 'If any one swears by the temple, it is nothing; but if any one swears by the gold of the temple, he is bound by his oath.' You blind fools! For which is greater, the gold or the temple that has made the gold sacred? And you say, 'If any one swears by the altar, it is nothing; but if any one swears by the gift that is on the altar, he is bound by his oath.' You blind men! For which is greater, the gift or the altar that makes the gift sacred? So he who swears by the altar, swears by it and and by everything on it; and he who swears by the temple, swears by it and by him who dwells in it; and he who swears by heaven, swears by the throne of God and by him who sits upon it.

"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for you tithe mint and dill and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law, justice and mercy and faith; these you ought to have done, without neglecting the others. You blind guides, straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel!

"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for you cleanse the outside of the cup and of the plate, but inside they are full of extortion and rapacity. You blind Pharisee! first cleanse the inside of the cup and of the plate, that the outside also may be clean.

"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within they are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness. So you also outwardly appear righteous to men, but within you are full of hypocrisy and iniquity.

"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for you build the tombs of the prophets and adorn the monuments of the righteous, saying, 'If we had lived in the days of our fathers, we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.' Thus you witness against yourselves that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets. Fill up, then, the measure of your fathers. You serpents, you brood of vipers, how are you to escape being sentenced to hell? Therefore I send you prophets and wise men and scribes, some of whom you will kill and crucify, and some you will scourge in your synagogues and persecute from town to town, that upon you may come all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of innocent Abel to the blood of Zechariah the son of Barachiah, whom you murdered between the sanctuary and the altar. Truly, I say to you, all this will come upon this generation."

WOW! That certainly was a tirade! People must have thought that Jesus popped a valve that day. Here were those who called their people back to order and decency here were the men of the true Bible-believing faith; here were the charismatic leaders who would save their people from perdition. And Jesus calls them showmen, hypocrites, self-righteous prigs, blind men stumbling around amid the dead bones of ancient regulations, men of narrow-conscience, who cannot grasp the weightier issues of the law. They will traverse land and sea, says Jesus, in their evangelistic zeal to save a soul, and only succeed in producing another religious zombie like themselves. They are like whitewashed tombs, says Jesus. And the dread irony of their lives is that they shut the doors of the kingdom against themselves and others

It was a tirade, indeed. We can only give thanks that Jesus has shown us a better way, that the centuries have ground this religion of dead men's bones into dust and that we need not listen any more to tirades such as that.

We still have them though. Tirades, I mean. We can hear them most any time of day, even at six in the morning we may hear them, tirades against the devil and various evil conspiracies punctuated every few minutes by the sale of gold medallions and masterworks of religious art.

The tirade I remember best, however, took place near the crest of what was sometimes called in the enthusiasm of local pride, "America's Acropolis." As was true of the Athenian Acropolis there were long views from Manhatten's Morningside Heights One way you could see past the Bronx County Court House. Another way you could overlook the Sunshine Biscuit factory. I recall no statue to Pallas Athena, Goddess of Wisdom. But looking just as cerebral was a copy of Rodin's "Thinker" sitting naked in all weather with his chin in his hand. Only a few yards away sat Daniel French's "Alma Mater", looking as if she knew everything that ever might be known on the campus of Columbia University and all her satellite offspring: Barnard College Teachers College, Union Theological Seminary, Jewish Theological Seminary and the Julliard School of Music.

Nor did this Acropolis lack for temples. There was the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, big enough to make the Parthenon look like a ranch house. There was Riverside Church soaring four hundred feet in sacred memory to the Rockefellers. And amid all this learning and beauty and high piety there stood smack on Broadway a run-of-the-mill Presbyterian church. It was there that out of convenience one Easter Sunday I wandered in. (Let me say, that it is always a foolish thing to go to a church out of convenience. The providence of God rarely smiles on that sort of thing.)

To my credit I may have gone to that church partly out of curiosity. The preacher was known as a fulminating fundamentalist. But I was not prepared for such a tirade as he delivered on Easter Day. He took off, I think, from the bodily resurrection. But that was a brief consideration. From that launching pad he rocketed after the Presbyterian Sunday School curriculum and then on from planet to planet blasting all things and persons Presbyterian that were clearly of the devil.

Since it was Easter, the church was full. But I had the feeling that many people came not for the holy day, but for the sport. Up in the balcony were a hoard of young men whom I guessed were students from Columbia College. Every time that soaring prophet dropped another warhead against the Presbyterian liberals the balcony exploded with hoots and guffaws.

As for myself, I was not amused. I was disgusted. I thought to myself, "What a tragedy it is that this should be the image of the Protestant church held up at this great center of learning. It is no wonder that the artists, scientists and social scientists of our day look with contempt upon the church, or at best, are indifferent to it. It is no wonder that students like this should look on Christianity as a laughing matter. This church fits perfectly the caricature of Protestantism commonly held in the academic world."

But I consoled myself with my own Easter meditation. "After all," I thought, "this is only the death throes of a sick and dying faith. A generation ago men like this were pushed into the shadows in many of our major denominations. They still protest, but come another generation and they will be gone. The future has no place for religion such as this."

Well, I was not ordained to forecast the future. The fact is that today, nearly a generation later, the kind of religion represented by that preacher, polished up, jazzed up,--or perhaps, we should say, rocked up--now provides the dominant, and indeed, the truest image of American Protestantism. Fundamentalism did not need to recapture the old denominations. It simply went around them.

The rest of us now are but a small band of wornout guerillas surrounded by the vast army of these gospel witnesses. Every week I spend much of my time on the telephone retrieving invitations to some new victory over the devil. Usually, I try to put off these overtures politely and vaguely. Sometimes I even say, "Send me the literature." I don't want to deprive anyone in our church of hearing about a great opportunity.

But two weeks ago I received three such calls within a morning and that prompted me to think that it might be time for a tirade of my own. The first call invited us to go, no doubt with our wallets, to hear a man who was smuggling Bibles into Communist countries. In some situations that idea may have some merit. But I have doubts about the religious and social context out of which such enterprises come. So I told the caller that I had just come back from a Communist country where I saw a good many Bibles floating around.

The second caller was promoting a "Mission to the Hebrews." You see, if you really want to make it with the God of Abraham the thing to do is to traverse land and sea until you get a Jewish scalp to hang around your neck along with your gold medallion.

The third caller told me that a lot of people were going to Washington to pray for Congress. This idea seemed to have possibilities, but I was suspicious.

"What are they going to pray about?" I asked.

"All this abortion and homosexuality," I was told.

Well, these are not my favorite issues. Sometimes I am uneasy about where our United Church of Christ resolutions come out on them. But these particular red flags often signal a lot of other things. And in any case I felt I should tell the caller that I suspected the approach of our church was a little different from that of those people who were going to pray in Washington.

"What church is yours, anyway?" she wanted to know.

"The United Church of Christ," I told her.

"Never heard of it," she said.

"What about the Congregational churches?" I asked,

"Did you ever hear of them?"

"No. Never heard of them either."

"Really!" I said, growing desperate now. "Did you ever hear of the Pilgrim Fathers?" I committed this sexist sin deliberately because I felt that it was the only way I could communicate with this woman.

It did not seem that she had heard of them either.

I said, "You know, Thanksgiving and all that."

"O yes," she answered doubtfully. "The Pilgrims."

"That's us," I told her, stretching history just a little.

The woman was not impressed. "I called eighty other churches," she told me, "and they're all going to pray for Congressman Oberstar."

Since I never mix religion and politics, I refrained from comment on that.

But I got the message. One church out of eighty that nobody never heard of doesn't count.

So that's where we are.

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Sometimes I think the time has come for another tirade. Sometimes I think that on the Day of Resurrection someone should shout "Woe" to all that which walls up the Lord of Life amid all this death and corruption. I should like to hear someone stand up with the sunrise and say:

"Woe to you showmen, you electronic hucksters who play on peoples fears and prejudices in search of funds for building towers of Babel.

"Woe to you blind guides, cowards of the mind, who set books to the torch and drive the teaching of science from the schools.

"Woe to you billionaires whose speculation in metals imperils the financial stability of the nation, who employ wealth and power in the service of the most oppressive attitudes, and yet boast of your not smoking and your not drinking and your efforts to save the country for Christian morality."

"Woe to you whose Christian schools are but a screen for racism, whose churches are but a front for fascism, who oppose the rights of the poor, who oppose the rights of minorities, who oppose the rights of women, whose gospel is pride, prejudice, privilege and violence and who indeed have killed more than one prophet sent to you in our time.

"Woe to you who pervert the message of the Bible into a purely individualistic, narcissistic flight from reality, and so close the door of the commonwealth of God to those in need of a truer vision."

"Woe to you who tithe mint, dill and cummin to put up your monuments to faith," but overlook the weightier matters of the law, justice and mercy in the social order.

"Woe to you who claim to preach Christ and the resurrection, but in reality wall Christ up into the tomb of your ancient fears and superstitutions, who make of Christ not only a laughingstock to the learned, but an enemy to the illiterate.

Oh, I think the time has come for a tirade today. Don't think I would direct it equally against all self-styled Evangelicals. There are some among them whose dedication to a liberated world puts us all to shame. Don't think I would exempt the so-called liberals. I have a set of woes for them too. Another sermon.

But once and for all the time has come to declare publically our independence of that image of death and corruption which so much of the church turns to the world. Some time ago a visiting preacher was advertised in the local newspaper as having been "clinically dead for thirty minutes." I did not have the privilege of hearing that man, but I have a suspicion that the advertisement failed to do him justice.

Let others proclaim the gospel of dead men's bones, let us look to that new order of justice and respect for all peoples that is the hope of the kingdom. Let others lay proud claim to the title "Christian," let us be those worldly folk who only stumble after Jesus. Let others be the Bible-believers; let us just stand for the truth as we see it. Let others convert the Hebrews: Let us draw humble inspiration from that Hebrew whose memory is so profaned by those who abuse Hebrews in His name.

Let others be the eighty. Let us be the one. The Pharisees were the eighty. Christ was the one. And let us not fall prey to the fallacy that where the notoriety and the numbers are, there is the way, the truth, and the life. It was the Pharisees who survived. It was Christ who died.

* * *

AND LIVES.

So much for tirades. The question for us on Easter Day is the question that faced Mary Magdalene.

"Who will roll away the stone for us from the door of the tomb?"

Who will roll away the stone that imprisons Christ in the religion of dead bones? Who will let out the Christ who came to set people free, the Christ whose message looked not to the past, but to the future, who spoke of good news for the poor, of freedom for the slave, of rehabilitation for the outcaste and of forgiveness for us all? Who will roll back the stone so that Christ can lead us into that divine commonwealth where we are all set free from those age-old habits in which some are put first and others last, where some fill up barns while others starve, where the quest for possessions blots out the glory of the wild lilies, where prophets are stoned and Samaritans snubbed and good men jailed and crucified?

Who has the courage to roll back that stone in order to find out where the living Christ might lead us now--not in the age of the Romans, not in the time of the Crusades, not among the campfires of the frontier, but NOW?

Well, we are heretics here. We don't put much stock in angels. We think that if we waited for an angel to shove that stone out of the way, we might wait till the Day of Doom.

All right, then let's not leave it to the angels. Let's put our shoulders to the thing and roll it back ourselves.