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Lenten Meditation: The Head of the Church: Matthew 17:8

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Matth. 17,8

THE HEAD OF THE CHURCH

"And when they had lifted up their eyes, they saw no man save Jesus only."

It is entirely possible that in the long wisdom of God and the patient light of eternity no subject for our noonday meditations could have been chosen which would strike more directly and deeply into our own brief interlude between the eternities than the topics selected for this week. Here we are coming down to rock-bottom. If you will go out into Nature at twilight you will find that trees, stones and hills cast shadows which are out of all proportion to the realities of the world -- shadows which will give you, if you attend only to them, a grotesque and utterly unreal picture of the purposes and accomplishments of the Creator of the Universe. Something like that happens in the world and in the Church with the same regularity with which twilight comes. Under the long accumulated burden of sin upon sin and shame upon shame the eyes of men turn down and down and deeper down until they see only the shadows of the realities of God -- the shadows of a world in which men and women prefer to live and die like beasts of the field and not sons of God -- the shadows of a Church in which the Apostolic fires have died and the flames of devotion are burning low -- the shadows of men and women whose cold hearts and God-abandoned lives have become the eternal sorrow of heaven. Do you remember Edwin Markham's burning description of "The Man with the Hoe"? All but a few lines might just as well have been a picture of "The Man without God" -- man created in the image of God -- man after weary centuries of sin -- man looking down because he can turn nowhere else:

Bowed by the weight of centuries he leans
Upon his pride and gauges on the ground
The emptiness of ages in his face,
And on his back the burden of the world.

Is this the thing the Lord God made and gave
To have dominion over sea and land
To trace the stars and search the heavens for power;
To feel the passion of Eternity?
What gulfs between him and the seraphim!
Through this dread shape the suffering ages look.
Time's tragedy is in that aching stoop
Through this dread shape humanity betrayed
Plundered, profaned, and disinherited
Gries protest to the Judges of the World
A protest that is also prophecy.

No, not prophecy! The only hope for that figure is memory - the memory of a golden afternoon two thousand years when three lowly men in whose eyes there were also the shadows of sin and doubt and despair saw the face and figure of a man radiant as the sun and more glorious than an army with banners. In that moment life was suddenly moved for them, body and soul, from the dark ways of time to the radiant roads of eternity. All their lives they had looked down. Now they could look up - and they saw the man who six days earlier had placed the imperial hand of God upon the destinies of men by responding to Peter's confession: "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the Living God" with the words: "Upon this rock I will build my church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." Here is the last reality of God behind the illusions of men, and there is the subject which under the mercy of God we purpose to consider this week.

When you leave this theatre in a few moments to return to your home or your place of business, you will see a number of men and women walking the streets of Saint Louis -- all busily engaged in the momentary, pitiful business of making a living. Outwardly they will look much alike -- young and old, rich and poor,

wise and foolish -- the same endless procession which walked the streets of Rome two thousand years ago. And yet -- if for a brief revealing moment God would give you eyes to see -- eyes to cut through the ghostly sameness of men and women into the inner citadels of the heart -- you would suddenly find a vast difference among them. Some of them -- not many perhaps -- do not really belong here. They are foreigners, strangers, and pilgrims -- citizens of a far and better country, men and women whose feet may strike the pavements of Saint Louis but whose hands touch the pinions of the seraphim. No outward sign may reveal their inner glory -- numberless and nameless they may be on earth -- but their names are engraven certain and sure on the heart of God. They are the members of the Church of Christ, the living stones of the temples of God, the men and women whose quiet feet have shaken the world. Down through the centuries they came, a blessed and mighty army bound together by a common faith, a common hope, and a common love, moving like a Gulf Stream in the history of the race, a part of the sea of humanity and yet set aside forever and ever from the ways of men. They are the Church of Jesus Christ.

Here is something for the world to remember. In our own day we are again busy about the damnable work of dividing men and drawing lines between them. We build walls between nation and nation, between rich and poor, between German and Jew. Wilfully and consciously we break the oneness of humanity into a thousand broken and helpless pieces. Is it not time for us to tell men, in the name of the truth of heaven, that God knows only one line of demarcation between man and man, only one difference, only one distinction which can stand up in the pitiless light of eternity? There is a very old legend that at twilight on our first day of judgment when Paradise had become Paradise Lost, Adam, turning back once more to see the things he had left, saw the angel of the flaming sword barring the gate of Paradise and asked him: "What shall I bring back to God

when I return?" And the angel answered: "Bring back the fact God gave you in the garden." Adam turned away -- and with him you and I, and every man and woman in Saint Louis, and every man and woman on the face of the earth -- down and down and deeper down -- over all the strange pathways that the hearts of men go crying on -- until in another twilight a Roman captain and a few women saw in the face of a man crucified and covered with dirt and sweat and blood, the hope of heaven and the sunlight of Paradise Regained. And from that very moment the great host of humanity has been divided into two parts -- those who have looked upon that face in Godgiven faith and those who have not. Here is the only line that God knows -- the only line that reaches across the grave and over the valley of the final shadow -- the only line that reaches also into this auditorium today and silently, but with fearful certainty, divides the men and women who have come here to hear what these Lutherans might have to say. Let the world see this line again, sharp and clear and deep, and we shall stop playing soldiers with our childish distinctions between men.

And all this is expressed so simply and clearly in the words I read to you a few moments ago: "And when they had lifted up their eyes, they saw no man save Jesus only." These words are an end and a beginning. They are the closing scene in the great transfiguration of our Lord Christ. For a few heavenly moments Peter and James and John had seen the surpassing glory of the eternal Head of the Church. But it was soon over. The darkness of everyday life surrounded them once more. A few months later they saw this same transfigured Jesus dragged, whipped and wounded and bleeding through the streets of Jerusalem -- they saw Him nailed to a cross -- they saw His torn and broken body lowered into a grave. Was this the end? Now comes the beginning. Forty days later He is standing with them on a hillside in Galilee and His voice comes to them like the sound of many trumpets, like the rush of mighty waters which would tear them from their moorings and hurl them broadcast over the Roman Empire: "Go ye, and teach all nations."

And because He saw the momentary doubt and confusion on their faces over the magnitude of the task He had imposed on them He added the words on which you and I can live and die today: "Lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world." Even though now a cloud shall take me away from your sight, no cloud and no shadow shall come between me and the eyes of your faith. From now on you will see no one but me only. If happiness is to come to you, it must be the happiness reflected from the light of my countenance; if honor, it must be the honor of Calvary; if glory, it must be the glory of the Cross. Lo, I am with you alway even unto the end of the world.

On this countless men and women have lived and died for almost two thousand years -- and I still think it is a good way to live and to die. See no man save Jesus only! How easy it is to cross the line of God! A lifting of the eyes -- the sorrow over sin -- the murmur of the heart "Come Lord Jesus," -- His answering voice -- old and lovely, healing and tender -- "Yea I come quickly." -- and He crosses the threshold of your heart -- and life can never be the same again. My dear friends, if He were here today, speaking to your heart and mine, what would He say? Would not His voice come to us like the tone of the Compline bell, bearing the sorrow of God which we can never put into words? You, friend of mine, bearing your huge invisible load of regret and care and sin -- is it not time for you to come home? You who are breaking down under the intolerable burden of the remembered years, is it not time to reach for my hand? You who are looking down to your sputtering lusts, your little hates and your crawling sins, is it not time to look up and to see me in Whom the ends of the earth are saved? This is what He would say -- and in heaven the angel of the Book of God would write your name, indelibly and forever, among those whom He had brought home again.

And so He builds His Church here on earth. One by one the living stones are fitted into the temple of God, slowly and patiently, until the day when the scaffolding can be turn away and the praying and militant Church stands praising and triumphant

in the glory which never was on land or sea. Men may turn away from her today. They may see only her visible manifestations, her faults and vanities, the awful gap between the faith she professes and the faith she lives. And yet her glory is everlasting and eternal. Invisible today perhaps, but visible tomorrow to all men -- and visible today to those who see beyond her cold ways and barren heart. The shining figure of her great Head Whose cross is even today her only glory and her surpassing hope. It can be also yours. In one of his fantasies Robert Dickens seems to sum it up. Two men are driving late on a wet winter evening through the vice and noise of London. Suddenly a huge red cross on a black background starts out of the gloom above a theatre. One of the men shudders. "I can see things tonight much more clearly than usual. I know London -- but tonight it seems as though my eyes are open for the first time. How ironical that cross looks up there, as if it were silently laughing at all the noise and tumult in the rain!" No, not ironical -- but tragic! It is the forgetfulness of men over against the uplifted cross that makes the tragedy and pain of the world. And only when this forgetfulness is transformed into memory -- the Godgiven memory of the transfigured Christ -- warm and wistful over all the wandering souls of men -- then and then only will men come again to pour out their heart's blood before Him forever:

I take, O Cross, thy shadow

For my abiding place -

O Christ, I know no sunshine

But the sunshine of Thy face.

Content to let the world go by

To know no shame or loss

My sinful self my only shame

My glory all the Cross.