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Lenten Meditation: The Majesty of the Cross

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I want to devote the few minutes I have at my disposal this noon to saying a few words about the Cross to my own generation - the generation which was born in the twentieth century and came to maturity since the World War and which a number of modern writers have called the lost generation. A few years ago John Randa Kennedy wrote a play entitled "The Terrible Meek." One of its scenes takes us into the last few moments on Calvary. The sun has gone down, the crowds have gone home, the Savior is dead. Only two human beings are still standing in the gathering darkness - Mary, the Mother of Jesus, and the Roman Captain who has just made his great confession: "Verily, this was a just Man and the Son of God." Mary speaks: "What did you say? I don't understand you. Only a little while ago I heard His blood dripping down here in the darkness. The stones are wet with it. He's dead." The Captain answers: "He's alive." Mary: "Why do you mock me? Are you God that you can kill and make alive, all in one breath?" The Captain: "Listen. He's alive. I can't kill Him. All the empires can't kill Him. How shall hate destroy the power that rules the earth? Listen. I am a soldier. I have been helping to build kingdoms for over twenty years. I have never known any other trade. Soldiery, bloodshed, murder: that's my business. My hands are crimson with it. That's what empire means... We stretch out our hands, greedy, grasping, tyrannical, to possess the earth. It can't last: it never has lasted - this building in blood and fear. Already our kingdoms begin to totter. Possess the earth! We have lost it. We never did possess it. I tell you woman, this dead son of yours, disfigured and shamed and spit upon, has built a kingdom this day that can never die. The living glory of Him rules it. The earth is His and He made it. He and His own have been moulding and making it through the long ages; they are the only ones who ever really did possess it; not the proud, not the wise, not the wealthy, not the vaunting empires of the world. Something has happened up here on this hill today which will shake all our kingdoms of blood and fear into dust and ashes. The earth is His, the earth is theirs, and no longer ours. The meek, the terrible meek, the fierce, agonizing meek are about to enter into their inheritance. Theirs is the power and the glory - forever and ever."

Why am I telling you all this? Perhaps because I feel too that we are a generation that has lost much. This strange and terrible world which man has built during your and my lifetime has taken something away from us. The sinblasted mind of man has been at work and has succeeded in robbing us of the one thing we need most bitterly today - a deep and abiding sense of the continuing majesty and power of the Cross. And if you want to see the thirty pieces of silver we have gotten in return, I ask you to do what I did last summer - go out and see the Century of Progress exhibition at Chicago. There you will see
The machines which man has made standing row on row, cold, efficient, and clean, contributing to the material comforts of humanity. But if you will leave the fair grounds, cross Michigan Boulevard, and go three blocks inland, you will see just how much progress we have made with the fundamental problems of humanity. You will see the faces of men and women pinched and torn by poverty, twisted and distorted by sin, faces of men and women beaten down and crushed by a civilization whose god is the machine and whose profit is gold. Progress - the progress of a world that must dump the gifts of the Creator into rivers while men and women starve - the progress of a world that is again rushing headlong into brutal and senseless war - the progress of a world that stands today helpless and confused in the fearful results of its long forgetfulness of Christ and the Cross.

A great number of tragedies have come over the church during the past two thousand years, but none more terrible than the fact that our own generation has come to consider the religion of Jesus something soft. It has no place in the modern world. It can offer nothing to the most ruthless civilization of money and power which the world has ever known. The reason for this is undoubtedly the caricature of the person of Christ to which so many Protestant pulpits have devoted their energies during the last thirty years. Instead of the world-conquering, world-dominating Christ who walked from the Cross to the throne, they have given us a sentimental, dream-haunted wanderer far from the ways of men who walked about Judea two thousand years ago, pathetically trying to do good to a number of people, and then finally died on the Cross, a failure - beaten by His enemies, beaten by life, beaten and crushed by a Cross.

This picture of the conquering Christ is a lie. It ignores the majesty of the Cross. Look at Him for a few moments on the last night before His death. He has spent hours in a garden of agony and betrayal. The hands of the living God have poured all the desperate tides of the world's great anguish through the channels of one weary heart. It is midnight: through the shadows of the olive trees he sees the gleam of many torches and hears the tramp of many feet; a detachment of Roman soldiers, the hardest representatives of the proudest government the world has ever known, and a few equally hard servants of the high priest, are coming to take Him prisoner. He steps before them. "Whom seek ye?" "Jesus of Nazareth." And then swift and sure, like lightening in its terrible intensity, comes the answer: "I am He." Then the Sacred Record tells us "They went backward and fell to the ground." What happened there? A miracle? No. No miracle, but the miracle of a face and figure of such God-illumined and God-inspired power that it beat to the ground these hard representatives of a proud civilization. Is this the sentimental dream-haunted Christ of the twentieth century? This is the world-conquering, dominating Christ who even today carries within Himself a heart-demanding and heart-searching power to which only the best and noblest in young manhood and womanhood can respond.
I tell you, sometimes I am afraid of Him. He has a strange and terrible way of coming back - coming into a cold and indifferent church and throwing down the candlesticks as He did two thousand years ago. On the evening of that first Good Friday thousands went down the hill and promptly forgot all about Him. It was so easy to forget. And thirty-four years later, almost to the day, My Lord Christ came back again in the noise and confusion of war, and before His crowned head and uplifted arm Jerusalem crumbled into dust and ashes. Where one cross had stood there now were thousands. They had shouted, "We have no king but Caesar," and they had no king but Caesar. The King of heaven and earth had become their Judge and Avenger. He'll do that again. Men and women cannot play forever with the majesty of the Cross.

One more word and I have done. Sixty years after Calvary and the Cross, an old man sat on a little island in the Aegian Sea, with a bit of parchment in his hand. As he gazed out over the waves which were beating against the shore with monotonous thundering, a troubled, infinitely weary look came into his old eyes. He was the last of that first great generation that had nailed the screaming eagles of Rome to the cross of Jesus Christ. He was alone -- all the rest had gone home. He was undoubtedly wondering what would now become of the infant church. As he raised his eyes the last rays of the dying sun were bathing the waves of the Aegian Sea in glory, and in that glory he saw the Eternal City of God standing in the everlasting sunshine of the pity of the Most High. In the four walls of the City he saw twelve gates: three on the north, three on the south, three on the west, and three on the east. He turned and wrote the vision on the parchment - his inspired commentary on the immortal words of the Master: "Come unto Me all ye that are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest." Suddenly St. John the Beloved knew that those twelve gates would always be necessary, that until the end of time men and women, hurt and sick with sin, would come from the four ends of the earth to find rest for their souls. Suddenly he knew that until the end of time there would always be men and women in the world who would work and labor and toil and sacrifice that these twelve gates might be filled with the songs of those who had washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. That was enough for Him. It is enough for you and for me. Once more today you are permitted to choose. You can come along or you can get out of God's way. The Kingdom must go on.

Baltimore, Maryland.
Wednesday, March 28, 1934.