18th Sunday after Trinity
Bessemer - 1958

Rev. Carl F. Thrun

IN NOMINE JESU

Psalm 119: 151 Thou art near, O Lord.

GENUINE CHRISTIANITY

One of the great difficulities would-be Christians have in putting the Almighty first in their lives, in loving Him with all their heart and with all their soul and with all their mind, is that God seems to be so entirely unreal to them. Instead of being a Living Reality within their hearts, a loyal Companion with Whom they walk hand in hand through all the up's and down's of earthly life, God appears to be so far removed from them - so abstract. Thus failing to experience God's nearness, Christianity becomes for them nothing more than a series of outward restrictions and regulations - tiresome and tedious - and it is not long before some other idol moves in to take pre-eminence over the Living Lord of heaven and earth. I believe, writes Leslie Weatherhead in his book THIS IS THE VICTORY, that the greatest trouble in the churches today is that a high percentage of our people - numbers are dangerous and inaccurate, but perhaps ninety per cent are spiritually without the vital experience of Christ which is gloriously offered in the New Testament. They are familiar with what Christ says - in some cases they are attracted, hungry, and wistful, but not surrendered, no committed, not won. Therefore in their lives the promises are not fulfilled and the fruits are not obvious. Their Christianity, in fact, is not the real thing, but a spurious substitute. It is not alive. Based not on surrender, but on compromise, it is a ... poor copy of the real thing. In their hearts they know it is a sham, for there is no power in it. In their hearts they know it is a lie - such a poor lie that it has not even convinced them. In their hearts they know it is a fake, and the pathetic illusion of reality is kept up by attendance at services, a dangerous anesthetic; or by hectic service on this committee and that, a dangerous drug; or by passionate discussion of this problem or that, so aften a deep dugout.

I hope Weatherhead is wrong as far as the high percentage of such people is concerned. As for the rest of his observation, who will deny that it is painfully correct? Not all who name the holy name of Christ are Christ's - far from it. Christ is not a Catechism to be memorized. Christ is not a creed to be confessed.

Christ is not a list of pious customs to be practiced - going to church, attendi Communion, goving one's share for the Kjngdom, teaching Sunday school, singing i the choir, holding a church office,. As necessary as some of these things are, a laudable as the others may be, Christ is none of them.

Failing to sense God's presence

Thus it was that Ahaz, king of Judah, turned his back on God. Not that became altogether irrelgious, mind you! After all, a man has to worship somethi he must believe in something. But God seemed so far remote that Ahaz turned to idols. The sacred record reports that he shut the doors of the house of the Lor and that he made high places to burn incense unto other gods. Then comes the we aimed sentence: They (the idols) were the ruin of him and of all Israel. When men turn their back on God and begin to love and trust something else more than they love and trust God - the result is always ruinious. When men ignore God and His Will, they become like devils! The less a world is ready to listen to God, the more it will begin to resemble hell!

Let's take a look at some of our modern idols which have shoved God out o His Primary position. Look at the idol that was made out of science. No one wil deny that science has added much to our modern mode of life. Who would want to g back to the days when there were no cars or trains, no refrigeration or modern mea of sanitation, no furnaces or electric lights, no telephones or radios, no surger or miracle drugs? Yet, science has also produced weapons of war that kill at staggering rates. What a destructive god science can thus become! Today that fa has many of the greatest scientists deeply concerned. When men forget about God i their interest for material advancement through science, they are worshiping an idol that is ruinous.

Look at the idol that is made out of education. Again, no one will questi the worth and need of a good education, but it can never take the place of charact that is based on love and respect for God. Some of the greatest minds in the wor have used their brilliance in the interest of evil and destruction. When men forget about God in their interest in education as a cure-all, they are worshiping an idol that is ruinous.

Look at the idol that has been made out of material possessions. The creed of the average man is that life does consist in the abundance of the things he possesses. The love of maney and what it can buy is at the root of most of ou modern evils. Like a contagious disease, it has spread until it has tainted the life of practically every one of us. If you had all the gold in the world, you would have a piece about the size of an eight-room house. With it you could not but a single ture friend, a moment of real peace, or a second of eternal happines Not the mere possession of material goods, but loving them more than God is makin an idol out of them, and that is always ruinous.

Look at the idol that has been made out of pleasure. There is overwhelmi evidence that God wanted man to be happy and to enjoy himself on earth, but He do not want him to make a god out of fun. Man was placed on earth by God for more noble purposes than just to have a good time. Those who forget God and play thei lives out by making an idol out of pleasure, soon discover that the final outcome is ruinous.

Look at the idol that has been made out of popularity. Its creed is that one must conform to the pattern cut by the crowd. God's voice is ignored, and the fact that everybody's doing it seems to be reason enough for any style of thought, attitude, or behavior, no matter how contrary it may be to the expressed will of God. When pleasure comes first, ahead of God, the result is inevitably ruinous.

In the face of all these idols which would push the Lord out of His distinctive place in our hearts and lives, the Psalmist declares: Thou are near, O Lord. Try as we will to crowd God out, He is still near. But our trouble, as stated before, is that God (don't realize it) seems so far away, so unreal. Our worship so easily becomes something formal and meaningless. We get all dressed up to go to church, but we don't always meet God there. He's there all right, and He wants to meet with us, but we take our idols along, our concern about material things.

God can be as real to us as He was to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. God can be as true to us as He was to Abraham during his pilgrimage from Ur of the

Chaldees to Palestine. God can be as evident to us as He was to Moses by the burning bush. God can be as close to us as He was to David when he wrote: God is our Refuge and Strength, a very present Help in trouble. The Psalmist expressed God's inescapable nearness when he said: Whither shall I go from Thy Spirit, or whither shall I flee from Thy presence? If I ascend up into heaven, Thou art there; if I make my bed in hell, behold, Thou art there.

My greatest trouble - and yours - in drawing near to God and knowing His unfailing presence is an awareness of our unworthiness. God is so great and holy and we are so small and sinful. Often when individuals come with personal problems, they begin by saying, I can't pray any more.... My faith seems to be gone. God seems so far away.... Sooner or later they come to the real source of their trouble: I have sinned.... I'm struggling with a sinful habit.... I can't shake the memory of a wrong I did.... It's mostly our sin that keeps us from appreciating God's nearness. Christ says, Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if any man hear My voice and open the door, I will come in to him and will sup with him, and he with Me. That's the only way to get near to God. If you'll recognize the sin in your life, and in faith open the door of your heart to Christ the Savior, you'll be able to live through these fearsome days of earthly life with this song in your heart: Thou, art near, O Lord!

The early Christians experienced and knew this reality of God's presence in their lives. Kneeling at the foot of Calvary, they understood the wonder of God's love and concern for them as in Christ He hung on the cross to redeem them. About the middle of the second century, a certain Diognetus received the following letter: The Christians are distinguished from other men neither by country, nor language, nor the customs which they observe.... They dwell in their own countries but simply as sojourners. As citizens, they share in all things with others, and yet endure all things as if foreigners. Every foreign country is to them as their native land, and every land of their birth as a land of strangers. They marry as do all; they beget children; but they do not commit abortion. They have a

common table, but not a common bed. They are in the flesh, but they do not live after the flesh. They pass their days on earth, but they are the citizens of heaven. They obey the prescribed laws, and at the same time surpass the laws by their lives.... They are poor, yet they make many rich; they are in lack of all things, and yet abound in all. They are dishonored, and yet in their very dishon are glorified.... They are reviled and bless; they are insulted and repay insult with honor; they do good, yet are punished as evildoers.... What the soul is to t body, that the Christians are in the world.

At Calvary, you too can find the amazing love of God for you; you can kno the joy of having Him at your side as you live through a life a suffering, pain, and hardship. And knowing His love and His unfailing presence, you will respond- at least in part - by permitting Him to have first place in your life, by loving Him with your whole heart and mind and soul, and by loving your neighbor as your- self. We love Him, because He first loved us. Therefore, sing out with the Psalmist in firm confidence - even in the midst of weal and woe - Thou art near, O Lord!