Ash Wednesday
Rolling Meadows, Illinois 1971

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IN NOMINE JESU

26: 41

St. Matthew: WATCH AND PRAY THAT YOU MAY NOT ENTER INTO TEMPTATION: THE SPIRIT INDEED IS WILLING, BUT THE FLESH IS WEAK."

The story of the suffering and death of our Lord Jesus Christ in intensely dramatic. You get the feeling of this dramatic intensity in the Garden of Geth semane, when the collosal, terrible burden of the sin of mankind was laid upon His LOVING HEART until the fierce ~~AGNOY~~ agony of that CRUSHING LOAD made His SWEAT like BLOOD. He WRESTLES in PRAYER for the POWER to remain LOYAL to His HEAVENLY FATHER ~~adn~~ and TRUE to His TASK - but His FOLLOWERS FALL ASLEEP! They had SWUNG full circuit, from BRAGGADOCIO into FLIGHT - and COLLAPSE with FEAR - and ONE even SELLS HIM to His CAPTORS for something like TWENTY DOLLARS. Too much of this DRAMA we are only SPECTATORS. We have NOT had the OPPORTUNITY to TEST whether we would SELL Jesus for SILVER or RUN AWAY under the THREAT of PERSECUTION But one TEST we have FACED again and again - and we FIND a bit of SYMPATHY with the DISCIPLES. WE HAVE NOT ALWAYS SUCCEEDED IN STAYING AWAKE WHEN WE OUGHT TO BE PRAYING.

The COMPLAINT of CHRIST strikes at US: "COULD YOU NOT STAY AWAKE WITH ME EVEN FOR ONE HOUR?" His ADMONITION is DIRECTED squarely at US: "WATCH AND PRAY THAT YOU MAY NOT ENTER INTO TEMPTATION: THE SPIRIT INDEED IS WILLING, BUT THE FLESH IS WEAK."

"FLESH" is not a BAD WORD. It means our HUMAN CONSTITUTION. But that is the POINT - it means ONLY our HUMAN CONSTITUTION. It is SIMPLY what we are BORN with, Jesus told NICODEMUS. It's a PACKAGE of GREAT POTENTIAL. LOVE ~~nda~~ and HATE, GROWTH and MATURITY, NERVE and MUSCLE, ART and SCIENCE, JOY and SORROW - these are ALL JUMBLED together in the FLESH of MAN. Everything that is GOOD or BAD about HIM comes together HERE.

But when JESUS SAYS, "WATCH AND PRAY.....FOR THE FLESH IS WEAK," He pulls back the CURTAIN on a most IMPORTANT FACT about the FLESH. IT GETS TIRED! It wants to RUN AWAY - RETREAT - AND ESCAPE! The FATIGUE of the FLESH turns in upon itself! The DISCIPLES were SORROWFUL over the impending DEATH of their LORD. They were also AFRAID of what might HAPPEN to THEM! ..... The ESCAPE of SLEEP and FORGETFULNESS becomes the SIMPLEST way to ESCAPE from the REALITY of LIFE - it's CHALLENGES - its RESPONSIBILITY - and its PAIN.

"WATCH AND PRAY," said our LORD. FACE-UP to what is GOING ON. FACE-UP to GOD and YOURSELF. FACE-up - WIDE AWAKE - to your TENDENCY to SLEEP.

It has become very COMMON to hear someone say, "I'VE HAD IT," or , in more OLD=FASHIONED LANGUAGE, "I'M READY TO THROW IN THE TOWEL." We ALL feel SOMETIMES that we are NO LONGER able to "TAKE IT" - that we have to get "AWAY FROM IT ALL" -- the "IT" being the IRRTATIONS, FRUSTRATIONS, and DEFEATS of LIFE as we have been LIVING IT. Suddenly a CRISIS comes at our HOME or at our JOB - suddenly the MYSTERY of SUFFERING ceases to be an ABSTRACT, PHILOSOPHICAL PROBLEM, but rather it STRIKES US - suddenly we have FALLEN into the FEARFUL PIT of DEPRESSION and MIRY CLAY of DEFEAT - suddenly the ROAD of LIFE becomes STEEPER, ROUGHER, LONELIER than we EVER imagined it could be - - - - and our HEART and our FLESH CRY OUT: "I CAN'T GO ON! I'M BEATEN I WILL NEVER BE ABLE TO MANAGE THIS!"..... And we say to ourselves: "NO ONE CARES! LIFE IS NOT WORTH LIVING - I WISH I WERE DEAD!" And we go to SLEEP.

A PHYSICIAN, for example, who has spent A YEAR and a HALF in a MENTAL HOSPITAL told a friend: "You can never REMOTELY IMAGINE what a battle it has been for me to keep on with my DAILY TASK of seeing PATIENTS and HELPING THEM. Whenever a REAL DIFFICULTY intervenes, I LOOK BACK LONGINGLY to my WEEKS and MONTHS in the MENTAL HOSPITA

and recall how PLACID and SERENE LIFE was there. Believe me, the PULL BACK to that HOSPITAL WARD is MIGHTY STRONG. The TEMPTATION to RUN AWAY from LIFE AGAIN is almost IRRESISTIBLE."

The DISCIPLES in GETHSEMANE FELL ASLEEP. When they were AWAKENED - at the FIRST SIGN of VIOLENCE - they RAN AWAY. They were AFRAID they would be ARRESTED TOO. This kind of RUNNING AWAY, however, does not bring PEACE of MIND - for though it is POSSIBLE to DIVORCE one's SELF from a certain DIFFICULT SITUATION, it is NOT POSSIBLE to GET AWAY from ONE'S-SELF - and STILL LESS FROM GOD.

There is a STIRRING PASSAGE in Helen Waddell's novel about Peter Abelard, when Heloise REALIZES that she is in LOVE with PETER and he with HER, and that NO GOOD could COME of it. She is THINKING of LEAVING PARIS and so putting some DISTANCE between HER and her LOVER when her CONFESSOR Giles, one of the canons of Notre Dame, says to her, "Have you READ your PSALMS for today?" - - - - and Heloise REMEMBERS that one of them is the 139th, with its verse "WHITHER SHALL I FLEE FROM THY PRESENCE?" She realizes then that, as she cannot GET AWAY from GOD, she will CARRY herself WITH HER wherever she GOES.

This is something that ALL OF US have to FACE UP to. You CANNOT GET AWAY FROM GOD - or FROM YOURSELF! When things go WRONG at WORK or at HOME - you may GO TO BED and try to FORGET it! You may do what you WILL - get DRUNK, use DRUGS, engage in DAY-DREAMING, become MENTALLY ILL - sooner or later you WILL have to DEAL with the REALITY of GOD, and if you are to have any HEALING or WHOLENESS - you will HAVE to FACE UP to YOURSELF. There is NO ESCAPE from GOD, and the ONLY ESCAPE from YOURSELF is DAMNATION! And NOBODY WANTS THAT.

Jesus is VERY MUCH AWARE of our SLEEPINESS - our DESIRE to ESCAPE. That is why He says:

"WATCH AND PRAY THAT YOU MAY NOT ENTER INTO TEMPTATION; THE SPIRIT IS INDEED WILLING, BUT THE FLESH IS WEAK."

The FLESH is WEAK even when the SPIRIT is WILLING. The SPIRIT is the NAME JESUS GAVE for the INNER ACTIVITY of OURSELVES - our THINKING and DESIRES, our IMPULSES and our DEMANDS. The FLESH is WEAK - it becomes a VICTIM for the CRAVING of COMFORT, the INSTINCT for SURVIVAL, the DESIRE for REST. The SPIRIT is WILLING - for when JESUS is SPEAKING to a DISCIPLE, He is TALKING about an INNER SELF in which the SPIRIT of GOD is at WORK. Here we SIT TONIGHT - MEN and WOMEN and CHILDREN - to WHOM the SPIRIT of GOD CAME through THAT MOMENT when in our BAPTISM we were made SHARERS in the DEATH of JESUS CHRIST for OUR SINS and were LIFTED UP AGAIN into His RISING from the DEAD to be ALIVE WITH HIM!

Always there is the possibility of our RUNNING AWAY from HIM or GOING to SLEEP ON HIM. That is why we come to HIM - to HIS WORD and SACRAMENT - CONFIDENTLY SEEKING what WE LACK. He SUFFERS ALONE - but He does NOT LET US DOWN. He says, "MY GRACE IS SUFFICIENT FOR YOU," - and then we may say - "I CAN DO ALL THINGS THROUGH CHRIST, WHO STRENGTHENS ME." For the SICKNESS of ESCAPISM of the Flesh, there is the HEALING of CHRIST. Amen.

and the power of His Spirit!