Quinquagesima Sunday
Rolling Meadows - 1968

Rev. Carl F. Thrun

IN NOMINE JESU

St. Luke 18: 35-37 As He approached Jericho a blind man sat at the roadside begging. Hearing a crowd going past, he asked what was happening. They told him, "Jesus of Nazareth is passing by."

JESUS OF NAZARETH IS PASSING BY!

As Lent begins you will frequently hear preachers like myself calling Lent a time for self-examination and repentance - a time for deepening our spiritual lives - a time for self-denial and for making sacrifices. I guess Lent includes all of these things all right - I certainly would not want to become guilty of talking against such great Christian virtues as self-examination, repentance, deepened spirituality, self-denial and sacrifice. But I do dare to suggest that often the net result of all this is apt to be complete confusion and a feeling of frustration. Those of us who respond to the call of Lent and take it seriously immediately start rooting around inside ourselves to find out what is wrong - as if we already didn't know only too well! We throw ourselves into longer, more frequent, and more self-conscious prayers and devotions (and God knows we can never get too much of that in our feverish and over-worked world!) We give up things like candy and dessert and movies and dinner out (and God knows we can spare it!) We deny ourselves a few unnecessary luxuries to make what is called a self-denial offering (and God knows we can afford it!) But in the midst of it all we get all confused with mixed-up feelings of guilt and self-congratulation struggling for control inside of us. We actually feel proud of the things we have done without for the good, ole Lententide - proud of the extra hours spent in church or at our devotions and prayers. At the same time we seek an honest sense of humility as we GO UP TO JERUSALEM and follow the steps of the MAN OF SORROWS as He walks the WAY OF SORROWS - but the humility only too often turns out to be phony - and we are confused and confounded about the whole thing. No wonder we breathe a sigh of relief when Easter finally rolls around, and things get back to normal again, and we can stop pretending ~~with~~ about what only too often proves to be superficial and shallow ~~antics that do~~ and does not deepen our spiritual life at all!

May I suggest an entirely different approach to Lent? My suggestion is that

we do not look at ourselves at all - at least nor primarily - and certainly not first of all - but that first of all we look away from ourselves. This approach to Lent is suggested by our text - the story of the Healing of the Blind Man.

It begins with Jesus' announcement to His disciples of His coming passion and death, and their bewilderment as a result: THEY UNDERSTOOD NOTHING OF ALL THIS; THEY DID NOT GRASP WHAT HE WAS TALKING ABOUT. Then follows immediately the story of the BLIND MAN sitting BY THE ROADSIDE BEGGING and HEARING A CROWD GOING PAST, HE ASKED WHAT WAS HAPPENING. Lent begins with that question: WHAT'S HAPPENING? What's going on in the world around us? You don't have to root around inside yourself to ask that question. All you have to do is take a look around you to see and hear a profusion of sights and sounds in the world - most of which make very little sense. Watch the struggle that goes on to make a living, or to make a bit more than a living, yet without finding satisfaction in the bit more - watch the children growing up and moving out only to have their children grow up and move out with few of them really sure why or for what - watch as friends and loved ones face death and move into the unknown darkness - watch the children playing with balls and dolls one minute only to exchange them before you know it with zip guns and contraceptives - watch successful and unsuccessful men and women divorcing each other and then giving it another try - watch the lines forming at the offices of psychiatrists or social workers - watch young people crowding into coffee houses to sing their melancholy folk songs or trying to find some sort of escape in sex, or dope, or alchohol, while Negroes line the streets of our nation singing their melancholy ballad, WE SHALL OVERCOME SOME DAY - watch the puzzlement of the richest nation on earth wondering what to do with 5 million unemployed and embarrassed by its overflowing wheat bins while children in the slums are put to bed hungry.... All I am saying is that you don't have to pull yourself into all sorts of queer spiritual shapes to look around and ask the question, WHAT'S HAPPENING? What is going on here? What on earth is God doing in all of this?

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The blind man sitting by the roadside of life heard a confusion of noises

too, and got his answer: JESUS OF NAZARETH IS PASSING BY. No sooner had he heard that than he knew exactly what he wanted — HIS SIGHT! He wanted new eyes. And he received what he wanted at the hands of Jesus of Nazareth: HE RECOVERED HIS SIGHT INSTANTLY; AND HE FOLLOWED JESUS, PRAISING GOD.

This is obviously more than a story of a blind man suddenly able to see faces and trees and colors again. Set against the background of the announcement of the Passion and the disciples' lack of understanding, it is a dramatic exposure of the blindness of the disciples and of the sight that can come to those who would understand WHAT'S HAPPENING in the light of an understanding of the life and death of JESUS OF NAZARETH PASSING BY. If Lent begins with the question, WHAT'S HAPPENING? - then the next question is what on earth is the significance for all of this of JESUS OF NAZARETH PASSING BY?

May I suggest that you might very profitably spend some time this Lent by picking up the Gospel according to St. Luke from which this text is taken and reading the whole story of JESUS OF NAZARETH PASSING BY in one sitting? Use a new and fresh translation like Phillips, or the NEB, or Good New for Modern Man, so that the old story may seem fresh again. Then reflect upon it for a day or two

There are two things you should notice. First of all note the fact that in sharp contrast to the strange noise and confusion in the world around us in which life seems constantly to be hemmed in, restricted, confined by death and perplexit and tragedy and emptiness and lack of purpose and meaning - here was a Man who ENLARGED the lives of those He touched. New and wonderful things happened. Life began again. Horizons were broadened. The ceiling on life was lifted. From the opening story of the promise of a child to an old and barren woman, Elizabeth, and the child leaping in her womb in the presence of another Child in the womb of Mary - on to the closing story of two men walking the dusty road to Emmaus, their hearts on fire as a Stranger talked to them along the way — from beginning to end it is the story of life being enlarged, broadened, deepened, and heightened! A woman gives her last pittance, all she had in the world, into the temple treasury - a street walking prostitute breaks a box of alabaster ointment, very

precious, over the feet of Jesus - Zacchaeus comes down from a tree to give half his fortune away - a withered hand is restored - demons are expelled from a man crippled and diseased - a woman presses close in the crowd around Jesus and draws health from the hem of His garment. In scene after scene, the dominant impressio is that of life enlarged, released, freed from all that hems it in. Even death and darkness cannot write "FINISHED" to the story of JESUS OF NAZARETH PASSING BY.

But there is something else you should see - and that is that there is a life and death conflict here. There is an attack going on - and the attack, strangely enough, is carried out by this same Jesus of Nazareth. I suppose we are apt to think of the story of Jesus as the story of a man under constant attack and harassment by His enemies and even by His friends who finally caused His suffering and death. It almost makes you feel sorry for Him and for God. POOR OLD GOD, you know, always on the defensive against the forces of evil, trying so desperately to fight His way out of a jam - like a fullback caught behind the line of scrimmage. Actually the opposite is true. To be sure, He encounters resistanc - but the initiative in the drama is always with JESUS OF NAZARETH. His life and death have been called the "ATTACK OF GRACE." And His weapon is precisely THE ENLARGEMENT OF LIFE. The conflict develops as men resist the enlargement in their lives. They'll see Him dead first!

They complain when they cannot manage and manipulate His ministry to suit themselves. The grumble when He eats with publicans and sinners and the riffraff of society. They rise up in revolt when He attacks the hypocrisy of their well-cultivated moralities, niceties, pieties, and prejudices - and all the things that hem life in. At the end He is left hanging there, alone. Yet, as you read, you are never left with the feeling that the initiative has been taken out of His hands. Even helpless as He is there at the end - nailed fast to the cross beams - His lips can still move: FATHER FORGIVE THEM, FOR THEY KNOW NOT WHAT THEY DO. And you know the initiative, the power, is still in His Hands.

And now the meaning of Lent begins to clear up. God's attack upon the

principalities and powers of evil in the world and in ourselves takes the shape of a Cross - the shape of suffering love. This is not submission to the evil in the world or the evil in us - this is an offensive weapon - the very power of God at work to bring enlargement, freedom, release, healing to our lives. Here is GOD'S ATTACK OF GRACE, the all-out invasion of life with His unconquerable love - even the gates of hell - of death and darkness and fear and loneliness - shall not prevail against it. For Lent without Easter is morbid and pointless. Even death and the gates of hell give in at the last to the relentless attack of grace in JESUS OF NAZARETH PASSING BY.

SIGHT FOR THE BLIND - that's what Lent has to offer to you and to me - eyes to see a new world around us - eyes to see that the victory and the power and the glory are already in the hands of JESUS OF NAZARETH PASSING BY. Amen.

& we can be a part of it