

BRINGING OUT THE BEST THAT IS IN US

"One of the two which heard John speak, and followed him, was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother. He first findeth his own brother Simon, and saith unto him, We have found the Messias, which is, being interpreted, the Christ. And he brought him to Jesus, And when Jesus beheld him, he said, Thou art Simon the son of Jona: thou shalt be called Cephas, which is by interpretation, A stone." John 1:40-42.

This message is meant for you. That should make it interesting and important. It is quite possible that others may not think you are so interesting and so worthy of consideration, but you are definitely an object of great interest to yourself. This is as it should be, for you are the only human being who has any idea as to what is locked up in that personality of yours. You are the only human being who can determine how much of what is inside of you will be brought out, and what shall ultimately be made out of the raw material of your life. That is why I want to speak to you not only about what you are now, but especially about what you can become.

It was said of Michelangelo, who was possibly the greatest sculptor who has yet lived, that he could see within a rough block of marble the finished monument before he touched it with chisel and hammer, and that he just went to work upon the stone to bring the character out of hiding. Christ's vision of Simon Peter was much like that.

When Andrew brought his brother to Christ, our Lord observed a rough and tough-looking fisherman. Christ looked at Simon discerningly, and saw what he could and would become. God always sees the end from the beginning. That is a rather disturbing thought. He knows what you are now, and He knows what you will be at the end of your life here on earth. God has a plan for your life, and He knows whether or not it is going to be fulfilled.

When our Lord looked at Simon, He saw that he was a difficult character, as difficult as some of us. He was rough and crude. He was boastful and proud. He was fickle and unreliable. Christ saw that his impulse was strong, his energy was immense and his determination was selfish. He knew that his main trait was impulsiveness; that he acted according to his feelings rather than on the basis of reason; that he acted first and then thought it over later. Simon was very unstable; in fact, more like shifting sand than stone, and yet Christ saw in this selfish, weak, cowardly and impetuous man the possibilities of a transformed personality. Seeing all this, Christ spoke, as no mere man could have spoken, with unerring accuracy and authoritative prophecy: "Thou art Simon the son of Jona: thou shalt be called Cephas, which is by interpretation, A stone." Christ was telling him that his sand-like nature could be solidified. He was emphasizing the fact that, if he would yield himself to Him, the Lord would make him into what he ought to be.

"Thou art! Thou shalt be!" The actual and the possible! Realism and idealism! What is and what ought to be! Between the two is the Christ, the effect of Whose presence is like that of a mighty bridge flung across a vast and forbidding chasm.

There is no more beautiful illustration of the charity and hopefulness of our blessed Lord than is to be found in these His first words to Simon Peter. When Simon came to Him that day he was a man of sand, and for many a day after that. It took months and years to turn the man of sand into the man of rock. In the two names, Simon and Peter, we have the man as he was before Christ began His work on him, and the man he became after the friendship, love and teachings of Christ and the discipline of life had wrought their transformations in him.

"Thou art." It is important that you accept the verdict of what you are. It is a good thing to take inventory at regular intervals. This is recognized as one of the fundamentals of good business. From the knowledge a businessman thus gains he determines

what his next move shall be. How often do you take an inventory of your life and discover in which direction you are traveling, and whether or not you are really making progress? Some make the sad mistake of thinking that they are all right and that there is no need for improvement. They become thoroughly self-satisfied. The fact that self is satisfied does not mean that God is pleased. The sorriest person is the one who has caught up with his ideals. It is a tragedy if he thinks that he has arrived.

To each of you Christ says, "Thou art," just as He did to Simon, and sometimes He says it with a sob in His voice. Christ sees you exactly as you are in the light of the unchanging purpose of God.

Many people have as their sole purpose to get by, to obtain a few creature comforts, to extract what they can without putting much, if anything, back into the world. Actually, this is the nature and method of a parasite. Having no roots of its own, a parasitic plant must draw from another plant, tree or organism, its life's sustenance. Into this family fit leeches, mistletoe and people who intentionally sponge off of others. Life has to follow God's design for investment if it is to pay off compound interest.

I should like to remind you that in a sense there were at least three Simons -- Simon as he saw himself, Simon as his friends saw him, and Simon as Christ saw him.

I imagine that Simon's picture of himself was a flattering one. He probably judged himself to be a decent fellow, loyal to his friends, good at his work, and ready to do a good turn to everyone. But, we do not see ourselves as others see us.

What was Simon like as his friends saw him? He was impulsive both in anger and generosity, a blusterer at times, and at times loud-mouthed and dirty-mouthed -- he could curse and swear with the worst of them. Yet he had a way of being the outstanding person in the company, and what he did others so often did also. He was impulsive and unstable, but he was born to lead and could never be overlooked.

Our Lord saw Simon as he was (which was neither the Simon that Simon saw nor the one his friends saw) -- the real man then existing; and, what was more important, the Simon Christ could make of him. The two were so different that they required a different name. Looking at Simon as he was, Christ said, "Thou art Simon, the son of John." And then looking at the Simon He could make, Christ said, "Thou shalt be called 'Rock.'" That is the man I'll make you." What a change! The unstable can become solid.

"Thou shalt be." Whereas truth says, "Thou art," grace says, "Thou shalt be." To shun the truth is to miss the grace. Christ's statement, "Thou shalt be," summarizes the possibility and promise of power. His promise should stimulate hope. The reason hope is such a great thing is because it has in it the elements of desire, expectation and patience.

John Newton, author of "Amazing Grace" and "How Sweet the Name of Jesus Sounds," dictated his own epitaph. It is a striking summary of his life, and reads: "John Newton, Clerk, once an infidel and libertine, a servant of slaves in Africa, was by the mercy of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, Preserved, Restored, Pardoned, and appointed to Preach the Faith he had so long laboured to destroy."

The story of his conversion is one of the great epics of grace. At the age of twenty-three, having drunk the dregs of the vilest sins, young Newton took ship from Africa for his native England. Plunged into a terrific storm, the battered vessel began to take water into its hold. The pumps had to be manned. Hurrying to take his turn, Newton said to the captain, "If this will not do, the Lord have mercy upon us." His own words startled him. For the first time in years his thoughts turned to God in a serious way and he considered the interests of his soul. That evening he began to seek the face of

God. At first he seemed not to get anywhere. He said, "I could not utter the prayer of faith. I could not draw near to a reconciled God and call Him Father." On he struggled. Then came the light. These are his own words: "In the gospel I saw at least a peradventure of hope; but on every side I was surrounded with black, unfathomable despair." In following the gleam of that peradventure of hope, saving faith was born in him and on that tenth day of March in 1748 John Newton became a new creature in Christ Jesus. Though he sleeps in death, the grace of which he wrote and sang lives on deathlessly and works on transformingly:

"Amazing grace, how sweet the sound --
That saved a wretch like me;
I once was lost, but now am found,
Was blind, but now I see.

'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear,
And grace my fears relieved;
How precious did that grace appear
The hour I first believed!

Thro' many dangers, toils and snares,
I have already come;
'Tis grace hath bro't me safe thus far,
And grace will lead me home.

When we've been there ten thousand years,
Bright shining as the sun,
We've no less days to sing God's praise
Than when we first begun."

Ellen Terry knew Henry Irving as well as anybody ever did, and she wrote of him, "Henry Irving at first had everything against him as an actor. He could not speak, he could not walk, he could not look. He wanted to do things in a part, and he could not do them. His amazing power was imprisoned, and only after long and weary years did he succeed in setting it free." That is life in a nutshell. Powers and possibilities in us -- somehow to set them free, somehow to get out of us the best that is in us!

Let us note briefly one or two implications of this way of looking at our situation. For one thing, there is encouragement in it. It is a great day in a man's life when he stops trying to be someone else or to import into himself virtues from without, and makes up his mind to be himself: not himself as he is -- doubtless he ought to be dissatisfied with that -- but still to be himself at his best, and not somebody else. The world is littered with the human wreckage of people who have tried desperately to be somebody else.

Be yourself. Never mind if somebody else is wiser, greater, more useful. That is not your affair. Be yourself -- at your best. Especially if you are a one-talented person, dare to get out of yourself the best that is there.

The sight of eagles in cages hurts me. As I look at the great wing-spread of the king of birds, I feel sick at heart because they are caged. If only it were possible to make friends with the birds and the beasts, and not rob them of their liberty. Made for the skies, and yet the eagles are crammed in cages! So many people are like that; made for the skies and imprisoned in sin.

Charles Brookfield, an actor, was once mistakenly reported to be dead and so had the unusual opportunity of reading his own obituary notices. He always remembered one of

them. One could not blame him. It ran like this: "Never a great actor, he was invaluable in small parts." While he may not have taken this as a compliment, nothing much more worthwhile could be said of any one. He got out of himself the best that was there -- not a great actor, invaluable in small parts.

In this way of looking at our problem there is not only encouragement but challenge. If our business in life is to get out of us virtues and qualities already there, that can be done. Get out of yourself the best that is there.

A strong ambition always tends to bring out what is in a man. Listen to these frank words which Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, as a young man, wrote about himself: "The fact is, I most eagerly aspire after future eminence in literature; my whole soul burns most ardently for it, and every earthly thought centers in it." Suppose that you saw your child laid hold on by a fine ambition. Would you worry much about his or her character? All other things being equal, you would not. A youngster who is ambitious to do excellent work in a good field will get something out of himself before he is through.

Heavy-hearted over the knowledge of what we have been and are, but quickened with the hope of a new and better life, it becomes imperative that we place ourselves in the hands of Christ. Would you like to taste the joys of a life in vital fellowship with Christ, then yield your will to Him. If you have a desire for the life of purity, praise and power, dedicate yourself unreservedly unto the Lord. Offer praise and obedience to the Christ Who can take your possibilities and convert them into actualities. By His grace you can be what you ought to be, and bring out the best that is in you.