

CHRIST IN THE MIDST

"Then the same day at evening, being the first day of the week, when the doors were shut where the disciples were assembled for fear of the Jews, came Jesus and stood in the midst, and saith unto them, Peace be unto you." John 20:19.

For the Christian, Jesus Christ is central. His earthly life was set in the midst of human history and divides the drama of our race into two great sections, the B. C. and the A. D. periods. He, who is from everlasting to everlasting, took upon Himself our human nature and on the stage of this world lived the one perfect life. His brief career was confined to the narrow limits of Palestine, but it was right in the midst of a vast area over which Greco-Roman civilization held sway. More important, His life was lived, not like that of an ascetic, far from the haunts of men, nor in a royal palace among a select class, but in the midst of ordinary everyday folk much like ourselves.

There are a number of instances in the New Testament where we read of the Lord Jesus being "in the midst," occupying the central place, the place of authority and of preeminence. When He was twelve years old, Joseph and Mary took Him to Jerusalem. After they had left the city and traveled a day's journey they discovered that He was missing, so they went back to Jerusalem, and, after searching for Him, they found Him "sitting in the midst of the doctors, hearing them and asking them questions."

One of the greatest promises that our Saviour made was this, "Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them." That is literally true at this moment. The best thing about this gathering is that He is "in the midst," no nearer to you than He is to me, but equally near to each of us. Though we cannot see Him with these natural eyes and though we cannot reach out and touch Him, yet, right here in the midst of this gathering is our Lord Jesus in all of the glory, majesty and grace of His risen power. Christ is "in the midst" of every assembly of His people.

We cannot read the New Testament where it describes the days which followed immediately upon the crucifixion of our Lord without feeling that this event had plunged the disciples into amazement and despair for the time being. It was not what they expected. Although Christ had been careful to warn them against all worldly anticipation, the disciples had never quite let go the hope that one day their Master would summon some supernatural power and mount an earthly throne. Instead, He was crucified and buried.

It will discipline our hearts to faith and patience if we observe the fears and fluctuations of mind through which the disciples passed on the first day and evening after the resurrection. One of the most dramatic scenes in the gospel story took place in an upper room in Jerusalem. That room was a place of sad and solemn memory, the scene of the Last Supper with their Master. The disciples went to the upper room, locked themselves in for fear of what the Jews might do, and in order to think things through, and to decide upon their immediate action.

There they were full of disappointment concerning Christ. Believing Christ to be the Messiah, they had forsaken all and followed Him. Only a week earlier they had been in a state of great excitement as their Master rode into the city with the Hosannas of the thronging multitude in their ears. They had witnessed the subtle attempts of His enemies to entrap Him in His answers to their questions. They had shared in the celebration of the Passover and the mysterious hours spent in the Garden. Then had followed the arrest, facilitated by the traitor Judas. Resistance was hopeless, in fact, forbidden by their Master Who had submitted meekly. "They all forsook Him and fled."

It is not difficult for us to understand their dilemma. The very bottom had been knocked out of their lives. Christ had been discredited and crucified, so it was no wonder that their dreams were at an end. They were filled with uncertainty and bewilderment, and felt themselves to be a laughing-stock and objects of ridicule. Their world had come to an end with the death of their Master. One can hardly imagine a more dejected company. They

were down and out. They had gathered in that upper room, where they had so often met with Christ, and locked the doors. There they sat shivering with fear, listening for sounds that might be the tramp of armed men or the footsteps of the raging mob, which had caused Christ to be put to death, coming to destroy them.

While sharing their discouragement and sense of frustration behind the closed doors, a very wonderful thing took place. The Lord Jesus, Whom they loved and Who had died for them upon the cross of Calvary and had arisen again from the dead, came into the room. The same Lord at whose feet they had sat, and to whose words they had listened, came and stood "in the midst" of them. What a wonderful experience it must have been for them when He came into their midst! It was when they were in such an unhappy condition, with their minds confused and in darkness because of troubles from the outside, and because of their own miserable thoughts about themselves, that He came into their midst. His presence was surprising to them because there had not been any knocking from without. The door had not been unbarred. No sound of entering footsteps had been heard. And yet He stood there in their presence. In the hush of silence which pervaded the group they heard a voice speaking as only their Lord could speak, and saying, "Peace be unto thee." We can imagine how startled they were. Were they dreaming? Could they be seeing and hearing things? What right had He to speak to them of peace and tell them that all was well? Did He know the sort of world in which they were living?

Seeing their questioning faces, the Lord Jesus showed them His hands and His feet. They leaned forward with wonder to look upon the print of the nails, the signs of sacrificial suffering. He also laid bare His wounded side, and they shuddered when they saw the dreadful scar where the soldier thrust his spear. He bade them draw near and touch Him, in order that they might be sure that it was His real body which they saw. Then He called for food and ate in their presence. They knew that He was real, and not just a fantasy. He was the same Jesus Whom they had known. The grave had not destroyed Him; his was a life over which death had no power. They realized that He had the right to speak. He knew all of the things that were threatening them, for He had been through all of them. He had won the right to speak. His hands and His side were the proof of it.

Convinced that He was the Lord, they were glad that they had seen Him. They realized that there was still something which they could do--they could live in the world as those who had seen the unhealed wounds of the Saviour of men.

Christ allayed the fright and calmed the troubled minds of the disciples. He came to give them peace, to restore the broken relationships, to commission them to carry on the work that He had started, and to fortify them with divine power that should suffice for all their needs. They did not fully grasp the significance of it all, but He was in their midst, the radiant and triumphant conqueror of death. Their whole outlook was changed, the clouds were rolled away, and the earth was once more steady beneath their feet.

It is noteworthy that the first word which our Lord brought to His disciples in their assembly on the first night after His resurrection was "Peace." He stood in the midst of that startled company with that great blessing upon His lips. When they had recovered from their fear and excitement sufficiently to heed His words, He said again, "Peace be unto you." His first appearance on earth was announced by angel voices with the same blessed word--peace. Then, after He had completed His work and passed away from the world, He came back from the grasp of death and from the grave to bring the sorrowing the wonderful blessing of peace. This blessed word of the risen Christ is for us as well as for the first disciples. He comes to give us a peace which shall abide in our hearts amid all the agitations and changes of this present life.

Christ still comes through barred doors. This scriptural incident is a significant illustration of a constantly reappearing experience of life. As the disciples unwittingly shut out the risen Lord, so in many a life the doors are shut against the Saviour. It is the tragedy of many a life that its doors are shut to Him. Sometimes it is due to engrossment in pleasure, in business or in friendship. These things, which are lawful in themselves,

having a necessary place in any life, may gain such an ascendancy as to become our master, demanding all our thought, energy, strength and life, until the one over whom they have gained control is behind closed doors. However, it is chiefly sin that excludes the Son of God from a life in which He seeks to be known and served.

Under whatever circumstances may be His appearance, Christ comes with the same object as He entered that upper room. His first word is one of benediction: "Peace be unto you." He does not come to increase the storm, but to quell it. He does not come to complicate the problem of life, but to solve it. He does not come to alarm us, but to allay our fears. As Christ did with His disciples, so He does with us. He comes unexpectedly. He comes in a crisis. He always comes to us in our darkest hours, just when we need Him most. Oh, these beneficent intrusions! What would we do without them? When we have lost hope and despair tries to seize us, the Lord Jesus comes through the barred doors offering us peace.

The message our world needs today is that the One Who was crucified and rose again is in the midst of human life here and now. His big heart of loving-kindness suffers with those who suffer. All the evil that has afflicted the world in our time has imposed fresh suffering on Him.

Have we given Christ the foremost place in our hearts and lives, in our homes, offices and businesses, and in all of our service? The secret of effective, victorious Christian living is to invite the Lord Jesus gladly, unconditionally and unreservedly to occupy the foremost place in the heart and life. Suppose you do give Him that place of pre-eminence, what will be the result?

If the Lord Jesus Christ is "in the midst" of your life:

1. Your life will be peaceful.

The very first thing that Christ did when He came into that upper room and stood "in the midst" was to stretch out His hand and say, "Peace be unto you." The very first thing that happens when you ask the Lord Jesus to become central in your heart and life is that you know as you have never known before, and as you can never know otherwise, His wonderful peace pervading your whole personality. I cannot think of any blessing more to be desired than that of His peace. Do you have that peace? If you have not yet learned the secret of experiencing the peace of God in your heart, Christ is here now, waiting and wanting to give you His peace.

These are days in which the lives of many people are constantly filled with frustration. A large percentage of people are suffering from an anxiety neurosis. They go to bed fearful, they wake up fearful, and all day long they are carrying burdens which make them fearful. Because so many are gripped by fear, anxiety and worry, their lives are filled with frustration and discord. If you will only yield your life completely to Christ, He will banish that fear, that sense of insecurity, and He will give to you His own wonderful peace.

2. Your life will be grateful.

If Christ is "in the midst" of your heart and life, your life will not only be filled with peace, but also with gratitude. If Christ should come and stand here in visible form and hold up His wounded hands and show the marks of His Passion upon His brow and His side, you would be overwhelmed with a deep sense of gratitude. You would fall at His feet and say, "Lord Jesus, those marks speak of Thy bloodshedding for me upon the cross of Calvary." Here is what is wrong with some of us--our lives are not filled with gratitude to the Lord for His dying love. When we are really filled with gratitude to Him for His dying love, we find that we are being weaned from our worldliness and self-will and from everything that is contrary to His will for us.

3. Your life will be joyful.

When Christ came and "stood in the midst....Then were the disciples glad, when they saw the Lord." Thus, when He is "in the midst" our lives become peaceful, grateful and joyful. Here is the Christian's secret of a happy life in four words--"Jesus in the midst." When He really comes into the central position in your life, then you will know the joy of the Lord which is unspeakable and full of glory; joy such as you never knew before. That does not necessarily mean that your external conditions will change. It does not mean that you will never have any troubles or trials, or that you will not be tempted, that you will not suffer loss or experience sickness. It does mean that if Christ is in the central place, you will have His joy deep down in your heart and soul in spite of whatever circumstances may surround you.

4. Your life will be useful.

When Christ stood "in the midst," He said, "As My Father hath sent Me, even so send I you." Think of it! As the Father sent the Lord Jesus from the highest heights of glory down into this world to be the Saviour of people, so now the Lord Jesus has sent us into the world to seek the lost, witness to them for Him and try to introduce them to Him. Even though many Christians are not living useful lives, because Christ is not preeminent in their lives, your life can and will be useful if Christ is upon the throne of your life.

5. Your life will be powerful.

In verse twenty-two we read that when Christ was in their midst "He breathed on them, and saith unto them, Receive ye the Holy Ghost," whereupon their lives were filled with power, and they came to have great influence. Oh, we are so weak!--weak in our daily living, weak when it comes to facing the temptations that come to us, and weak in our witnessing. But Christ's word is, "Ye shall receive power after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you, and ye shall be witnesses unto me." When Christ is "in the midst," that power is released in our lives and then the miracles begin to happen. It is not our working, but it is Him working through us. It is only when Christ has been enthroned in our hearts that the power of the Holy Spirit is released through our lives. Won't you ask Christ to be "in the midst" in your heart, and life, and home, and job, and everything else that has to do with you? If you will do that, your life will be peaceful, grateful, joyful, useful and powerful.