

WHAT CHRIST EXPECTS OF OUR CHURCH

"And they come to Jerusalem: and Jesus went into the temple, and began to cast out them that sold and bought in the temple, and overthrew the tables of the moneychangers, and the seats of them that sold doves; and would not suffer that any man should carry any vessel through the temple. And he taught, saying unto them, Is it not written, My house shall be called of all nations the house of prayer? but ye have made it a den of thieves. Mark 11:15-17.

Jesus Christ referred to the temple as "my Father's house," and "my house." The word "house" used to describe the church is beautifully appropriate. It suggests home, a place where the Father, the Elder Brother and all God's children are living together. The family conception of the church is full of beauty and significance.

Sunday was anything but a triumphant day for Jesus. Rather, it was a day of humiliation. Sunday night was spent, very likely, somewhere in the region of Bethany, only about two miles east of Jerusalem. The first thing that Jesus did on Monday morning was to visit his Father's house, his own house.

That visit was weighted heavily with disappointment and pain. Instead of a Passover scene of fine spiritual quality and inspiration, he met the scene of a busy, thriving market-place. From far and near there gathered at Jerusalem for the Passover the members of a race which the hard fortune of defeat, or the bold enterprise of commerce, had carried into all civilized lands. To these dispersed believers the temple was the symbol of all they cherished most -- their long and famous national history, their religion and their sacred expectation. Sacrifices must be provided for the people, so the servants of Annas and his son-in-law Caiphas had herds of oxen and sheep and quantities of doves for sale. These were not in the temple proper, but in the great open space called the outer court. Imagine the temple area crowded with pens for cattle and sheep and crates for doves -- that was the scene that met the eyes of Jesus. Under the guise of accommodating the people the vicious and degenerate priesthood conducted a thriving business. It was immensely profitable, because the animal or bird purchased was paid for at once and then surrendered to the possession of the priests at the altar. Thus the priests possessed both the purchase money and the animal. One cannot but wonder how often a particular ox or sheep made the trip between a pen and the altar. No Wonder that Jesus said, "Ye have made my house a den of robbers," not merely a market-place, but a den of robbers.

After looking around on all this sacrificial system, so elaborate, so punctilious, so formal and so far from the holy intimacies between the soul and God, Jesus came back the next day with a deliberate purpose in his heart. It is a very remarkable episode, to say the least of it. What startles us is that Jesus should be so dramatic, so self-asserting, so spectacular, so sensational and so masterful. The way of pageantry and popular demonstration was not his usual way. He cast out them that bought and sold in the temple. He overthrew the tables of the money-changers, and overturned the seats of them who sold doves. Out they went, bag and baggage. He cleared the whole place. However interesting the subsidiary things, we can afford to forget all of these if we can get the real point in the address of Jesus. This central point is in the words, "my house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations, but ye have made it a den of robbers." Temple religion had ceased to exercise its true function. Indeed, in the eyes of Jesus it was abusing its function, and the abuse of function means corruption and death. The person who cannot feel indignation at heartless violation of that which is sacred is himself in danger of a spiritual collapse. The pure and sensitive soul of Jesus was deeply offended.

Conscience can make men courageous as well as cowardly. Let a man know that he is utterly clean in his loyalty to a noble cause and that man has both power and courage. Let a man know that he is corrupt in an ignoble project and that man is weak and cowardly in open conflict. Conscience makes either heroes or cowards of men. Thus the cattle-selling, tax-collecting servants of the corrupt priesthood went helter-skelter before the wrath of the Son of God.

What interests us most is not what Jesus drove out of his house, but rather what he expects to find there -- the qualities and characteristics which constitute the redeeming ministry of the church. What does Christ expect of our church?

1. Reverence in Worship.

That was precisely what was missing at the temple. Everywhere it was trade and gain. The scene was one of irreverent behaviour of marketers and shoppers. The Psalmist expressed the meaning of reverence by saying, "Enter into His gates with Thanksgiving and into His courts with praise." A person of such reverent attitude is prepared to meet with God and receive His ministry of grace. Reverence is an attitude of appreciation of that which is good and beautiful and true, and the accompanying aspiration of the person to become like that which he appreciates. Worship is an expression of our feelings and ought to include homage, deference, respect and ardent admiration. It should express gratitude, joy, wonder and praise and go even farther to include a sense of fellowship with the object of our devotion. Effective worship calls for an intelligent comprehension of the value and desirability of the One we worship and a contemplation of His love and character. This will include an adoration of His goodness and loving-kindness.

One of the great sins of the present age is the lack of reverence. There is a lack of reverence for the House of God and for His worship. Unless sacred things are kept sacred they will soon lose their attractiveness and influence. American Christians certainly do not excel in reverence. The American Indian is the outstanding example of the spirit of reverence and worship which is indigenous in America. Even before he comes to know Christ the Red Man worships the Great Spirit in the attitude of awe and a humility and receptivity which inspire respect. After he has come to know Christ, he exhibits a simple earnestness and wholehearted confidence in his worship which are beautiful. Frequently in our churches before the minister stands in his pulpit, a hum of conversation fills the building. It is far more becoming for a waiting congregation to sit in silent Meditation or prayer than is alertness to use every moment possible to keep up the fences of human friendship and fellowship.

Why do people go to the house of the Lord anyway? Some go to be conventional -- it is good form. Some go for a mild sort of entertainment -- the sermon subject is attractive and the singing may be good. Some go to accumulate merit before God -- they have been told that God will reward them for their devotions. Some go to discharge a religious duty -- they feel under obligations to help maintain the services of the house of God. Some go to worship God -- they earnestly desire to unite with others in praising God in His house.

God's house is dear to the Christian whether it be one of elegant appointment in the city or "the little church in the wildwood." Multitudes are going up to God's house every Lord's Day, but many of them to little profit because they are actuated by wrong motives. Our purpose should be: --

(1) To see Jesus.

David said, "One thing have I desired of the Lord, that will I seek after, that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to behold the BEAUTY of the Lord and to inquire in his temple." The desire uppermost in his case was to contemplate the beauty of the Lord — the excellencies of His character, His goodness, His grace, His tender compassion and His measureless love.

(2) To worship Jesus.

To see Him is essential to worshipping Him. Unless we see His excellencies we cannot ascribe praises to Him.

(3) To share the blessings Jesus provides.

The sincere worshipper may confidently expect suitable blessings. The leper came and worshipped Him, expecting a blessing. He was not disappointed for His leprosy was cleansed. Every devout soul who sees his Lord and sincerely adores Him may confidently expect suitable blessings at his hands.

2. Loyalty in Support.

Our church is a necessary institution. It is the best teacher of righteousness we have. It is the friend of childhood, the inspirer of youth, the strengthener of middle life and the comforter of old age. Few of us realize how much we owe the church. We are likely to think of how much we have done for the church rather than how much it has done for us. Take the mere matter of mental culture. Most of us have had the privilege of listening to many good sermons. Men who are keen thinkers and eloquent speakers have given us the results of their reading, their study, their observation and their experience. It is safe to say that most of us have underestimated the intellectual values of the church. It is through the influence of the church that we have been saved. It is so much easier for us to live under our burdens when we have the support, the comfort and the inspiration which our church provides.

Christ's people should salute the church by attending its services. To neglect the services of God's house is to give comfort to the devil, satisfaction to Christ's enemies and sorrow to Christ's heart. It should be the solemn resolution of every Christian that no enemy of Christ and His church shall ever be able to prove his point about its failure by pointing to him as one who rarely, if ever, attends the services of God's house. God's people should salute the church by supporting it with their tithes and offerings. We can prove our love for Christ and our church by being faithful in attending its services, by supporting it with our means, by giving our time and talents in its work, and by praying for God's blessing upon the things that the church is trying to do.

My church claims first place in my heart, highest place in my activities, and its unity, peace and progress concern my life in this world and that which is to come. Since Christ loved the church and gave himself for it, so must we.

3. Concern for others.

The glory of the church is that people turn to her for help. When Peter and John made their way to the temple, they found a lame man asking for help. He received it. In the hearts of men like them, concern for people will never be lacking. The church is not a building. The building is simply the place where the church meets for worship, inspiration, vision and renewed energy for assigned responsibilities. The church, militant and aggressive, goes out into the highways and byways and into homes and industries translating into action God's concern for people.

Christ expects our church to have a deep concern for the redemption and welfare of people. It is good to give help to those who come within the doors of the church. It is better when the church extends itself in deliberate action to reach the people wherever they might be. Christ expects His church to be concerned very deeply for people.