

## CONSIDER THE DAYS OF OLD

Psalms 77:11-15, I Peter 2:9-10

The Church of Jesus Christ is rooted in history. The history of the past and the history making now. It began with an historical event, the first Christmas, the coming of Christ into the world. But this event is not completely included in what is passed and gone. The coming of Christ is always powerfully contemporary, the Advent of the Lord is always vitally present. We treasure the past of the church, but we do not get lost in it. By means of what the past has been for us, we serve the present moment, and we look to the future, to the Coming of Christ in his Kingdom. We serve the present moment, the Thanksgiving season, and have remembered again the Puritan Pilgrims who came to these American shores long ago. And we have recalled the word with which their pastor, John Robinson sent them forth from Holland, he said, "There is more light yet to break forth upon the Word." He referred to the Bible, an ancient book come to us out of a long history; but he referred also to the fact that the Word of God is always speaking to us, and that its full meanings will not have appeared until the end of the world.

This, which is ever true of the church of Jesus Christ, is true of our particular church. We are celebrating an anniversary today, an anniversary year. And because we have received a tradition in this particular church, we may be justly proud of what happened here 100 years ago. There was a building on this corner. And on May 19, 1956, it burned down. A rather impressive thing is that there is no great record of that event in the records of the church. The session minutes make no mention of that fact at all. In the minutes of the Board of Trustees there is a record of a meeting on May 20th, the day following the fire. There is no record of anxiety, no account of a group of people feeling sorry for themselves. The meager record of that trustees meeting says that they accepted the resignation of two of their number, and they elected some successors and arranged to have them notified of their election. And then they appointed a committee of three to get plans and specifications for a new building. That is all. There is no weeping in these minutes, no feeling sorry for themselves. Just the quiet, determined, Christian conviction that they were in a situation in history, and they must face it with Christian fortitude constructively. A week later, on the 26th, another committee was appointed to preserve all the brick that was useable from the ruins of the old building.

These records are opened for your reading in the exhibit downstairs today, and I wonder if they will not thrill and inspire you as they have me. Here were people who faced disaster, but faced it quietly with a sense of duty and a serene trust that the church is never destroyed, only delayed, and they set about at once to build this building that the church might remain rooted to this place, to do its work day after day, week after week, as the needs of the times should demand. They would serve an historical event of long ago, the gift of God of his Beloved Son; but they would serve it in the place where they were, as history unfolded in the very lives they lived.

This historical character of the church is not always understood. Some years ago I was invited to give a series of lectures to a student conference on the West Coast. I was to talk about theology, and in the series inevitably I must talk about the church. There was less mind among students to be interested in the church a dozen years ago than there is now; and I knew I did not have an easy assignment. I wanted to find some way to say to them that the church has a present power, and that it also has a long history. So harking back to my own youth, I began by talking about a team of fine draft horses. Heavy, powerful and to me beautiful horses that could pull tremendously, because for generations there had been a process of selective breeding to bring about that weight and that power. Well, it was not a happy illustration; not only was it an anachronism to

talk to young people of a gasoline age about draft horses; but it was almost equally as much a mistake to try to talk to that generation of students about the value of history. They were very much concerned with the social demands of the immediate present, and the past seemed to them irrelevant. Let the church get on with its job in race relations and slum clearance, world peace; and not take time nor energy to fool with this old stuff of a long past.

Those students in their youthful impatience were characteristic then of much of the mind of college and university campuses; and it is still too greatly true. Not infrequently one comes upon the question, why not scrap all that old stuff, the mistakes and the foolishness of the past, and get on to do the intelligent and useful thing now. The answer is that life always springs from life. The live child must have a live mother, and the live plant must generate in a live seed. So the life of our time is not some new thing, just now appeared from some sort of spontaneous generation. It has its long, deep roots in the past, and if this be the source of its mistakes and any misguiding there may be; it is also the source of our strength and our knowledge and our assurance.

The Bible knows that this is true. Here is this passage from the 77th Psalm. "I will call to mind the deeds of the Lord; yea, I will remember Thy wonders of Old." This psalm is one of those which spoke out of a deeply anxious heart. The poet's life has been beaten down. It is his day of great trouble. But as in many of such psalms, the poet finds his way out of his trouble by an historical route. He remembers the days of old, he recalls the days of the right hand of the Lord, he calls to mind the wonderful way in which God has saved his people.

A little book which has had a continuing influence upon the life of our time is Paul Elmer More's book, "A Skeptical Approach to Religion" published almost 25 years ago. In it examining the Old Testament from a thoroughly objective point of view, he points out the importance of the experience of the nation of Israel, slaves escaping from Egypt, when they are saved from their pursurers by the waters of the Red Sea. Religion previous to this had known the sense of the wonder and character of God, the awe, the tremendousness of the Divine. And religion before this had known the demand of morality, that man must behave in some certain fashion because God is God. But here is opened for all the world to see, the power of God to redeem his people, to care for them and to establish them. Wrought into the very mind of the Old Testament is this understanding, that God saves his people.

Notice the present tense. The event at the Red Sea is far behind them. God did save the people by his command of the waters, so that they went back to let the people of Israel cross over, but returned to their place to destroy by drowning the Egyptian power that would recapture them and return them to slavery. "The horse and his rider he has cast into the sea." This was their song that day. But that power, made manifest in that moment at the Red Sea, moves on and on and on in the life of this people. God saves his people. "I will call to mind etc."

And when Peter was writing to churches he established when they stood on the threshold of a period of dire persecution, he carried this assurance over from a Chosen People who were a nation, to a people chosen from every kindred and tribe and people and nation. And the very names and experiences of that ancient Chosen People, he ascribes to this new company. For God has saved them, and God saves them. "You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light."

It is the message of the Bible that God has done great things for his people, and he does them now for us. He saved men long ago, and he saves them now. The vehicle



of his message then was a company of people whom he chooses, and this is still the way in which he brings his Word into the life of humanity. So the church is rooted in history. Its roots go far back to wonderful events and marvelous things. The saving at the Red Sea has been entirely eclipsed by the power of the saving life and cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ, his Son. There is this tremendous historical event. But we do not meet to celebrate this only, maybe not to celebrate this primarily. We meet to consider and show forth the wonderful deeds of God, done in our time, in our lives, for he has called us out of darkness into His marvelous light. And as a living tree stands, breathing by its green leaves and bearing its fruit, though it has stood there for years and years; so does the living church of the people of God, live and breathe and bear fruit. Rooted in history, the history of the past, the present history in the making. Rooted in the very life of men by the planting of God. This is the church. "You are a chosen race--"Israel is still in the world. We are Israel."

It seems to me that the records which tell how Dr. Cochran and Dr. Murray and Mr. Hughes and the others of that Board of Trustees 100 years ago took that disastrous fire, speak to us to say just exactly this thing. There had been a fire, yes; they must conserve all they could from the old building, for money was hard to come by, yes; it was not an easy task to plan and build another building; but they did not falter. It took them six years, it was 1862 before this Sanctuary was finished for use. During that time they met for worship on the floor below. But they had the sense and conviction which is characteristic of the church in every generation. They were inheritors of a long tradition, and they were the agents and instruments of God in a present situation. So the building must be built, and it must stand to speak for the God of the Red Sea, the God who is Christ Jesus our Lord, the Holy Spirit, who moves to comfort and to guide, to strengthen and to teach in the every day life of every day. This church building stands rooted in a history long before there was a settlement of people in this place. This church building stands rooted in the history of those hard days of the rebuilding, 100 years ago. This church building stands rooted in the very time in which we are living, in this very day, December 2, 1956. For the church is rooted in the actuality of the life of man, to bring the saving of God to his people.

"Consider the days of old." Remember what God did for his own long ago. But consider it not as something foreign to ourselves. For God still lives and moves in his church. 25 years ago, I studied in the University in the Old Swiss city of Basel; and I used to go to church in the old Munster. One tower of that church was built in the year 920, and so it has stood for more than 1000 years, an old, old thing. But frequently there I heard Pastor Thurneysen as the preacher, a friend and colleague of Karl Barth, who was then moving in what was a new direction for the church. This is the church, old, very old; rooted deep in a long past, as the century old building of ours tells us. But ever new, ever contemporary, the movement of the Spirit of God in this immediate present. And we remember the days of old, in order that we may know God in our own time. We bear the ancient names of a people God chose long ago, but we are called by those names because we speak and live for that same God in this very day. "You are a chosen race. . ." The church is rooted in history, the long, long past; and also the making in history now.

"God of our Life. . ."