

What follows is a condensed version of the preliminary and introductory remarks given to the organizational meeting of the 1974-75 adult instruction classes. They are important. Read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest.

In these classes we are not going to teach about the Episcopal Church (except incidentally.) We are not even concerned to explain the Christian religion. This is to go at it backwards. There may be somewhere in the Metroplex somebody who is batting his brains out wondering, "What is the Episcopal Church all about?" But I doubt it. There may even be some people who are really churned up wondering what Christianity is all about. But not many. You see, this is not the problem that vexes people.

Our instructions are not about the Episcopal Church. They're about the human predicament. The Christian religion is the answer, not the problem. The problem? What is life all about? Why do things so seldom go right? Why do the good die young? Why is it that it's always the best puppy in the litter that gets run over? Why when I love my wife -- I really do -- do we quarrel so much? Why, when I set out to do good do I so often do harm? Why can't I communicate with my kids, or my neighbors, or my boss? I love my job, I really do. Then why am I bored with it? Why do the best laid plans of mice and men gang aft a-gley? Why should a man's reach exceed his grasp? Why must we grow old and die? Why is there so much pain and sorrow and grief in the world? And crime? And war? And injustice and cruelty? If life makes sense, why is it so obscure? Why aren't the directions more simple? If there is a God, why does he hide himself? What should a man do with his allotted three score and ten? Why do we have so few real friends we can count on? How is it that we can be lonely at a party? How is it that we can sit on our own front porch and be homesick? What are we looking for when we keep scanning the faces of those who pass by? Why is sex such a problem to everybody? How does one learn to live on a fixed income in the face of inflation? Why do those we trust sometimes betray us? How does one face the death of loved ones? Why should there be death? Or for that matter, why should there be life? Why don't I like myself?

This is the problem. The anguish of the world is enough to make the angels weep. It was enough to make God die of heartbreak on the cross. The business of the church is not -- repeat not -- to gather together a group of nice middle class Americans to perform a dignified liturgy on Sunday. In case you hadn't noticed, the world is dying, suffocating, of dry-rot. People all around are scared stiff, despairing, and putting on a brave front. It was this that prompted Jesus to say, "Ah, Jerusalem, Jerusalem, how oft would I have gathered thy children about me as a hen gathereth her chicks under her wings, and ye would not."

These classes are about the human problem. The Christian religion is the answer. But you do not explain the explanation. You first understand the problem, and then the explanation either explains to your satisfaction, or it does not. But if one cannot accept the Christian explanation he leaves the problem unsolved, for there has never been another solution offered. The world and the human predicament either makes Christian sense or it makes nonsense. Christ is the answer or there is no answer. Remember the old gag: "If you can remain calm in the midst of all this confusion you just don't understand the situation."

We shall be concerned to analyze the human problem and see how the Christian answer answers, how the Christian solution really solves. Christian theology is not something a bunch of bearded hermits thought up as a kind of intellectual parlor game. It was wrought out of the blood and tears of real people, facing real problems, born out of anguish and terror and despair. And it does answer the human predicament. That's why they called it Good News. It is still good news. To anyone who does not receive it as good news -- well, he just doesn't understand the situation.

Further notes on the introductory lecture Sunday 9-15-74

It should be noted that there are two kinds or levels of belief. They are not generally recognized because the language does not have the words to distinguish them. The English philosopher-theologian V. A. Demant suggests that we use "doctrine" and "dogma" to mark the difference.

One kind of belief, which Demant calls "doctrine", you hold as the result of reason and evidence. If someone disagrees with you about your doctrines, you say he is mistaken, and will try to convince him.

The other kind of belief is "not so much an aspect of the landscape of reality as a window through which you view the landscape of reality." They are your unconscious assumptions, your dogmas. Everyone has them, even if we do not often consciously advert to them. If someone disagrees with your dogmas you do not say he is mistaken, you say he is crazy.

An example is the way most Americans reduce all human problems to psychological terms. People are not wicked; they are sick in the head. If your crime is bloodthirsty enough you are almost sure to get off with a judgment of insanity.

Child: Mother, why does water run down hill?

Mother: Why, honey, it obeys the law of gravity.

Child: Mother, what's the law of gravity?

Mother: Well, ah, uh, it's the fact that water runs down hill.

Child: Yes, I know, mother, that's what I asked in the first place. Why does water run down hill?

Mother: Well, honey it just does.

Whenever you come to the "well, honey, it just does" stopping place, you have run into a dogma. Prior to Newton, any mother would have answered that question by saying, "Well, honey, God tells it to." And why does God tell water to run down hill? Well, honey, he just does. Different dogmas. Both acts of faith — that is, naked assumptions about the nature of reality. Beliefs that explain other beliefs and which themselves seem to need no explanation because we are content that they should be.

Our dogmas our are "springs of action." They are the categories to which we reduce all other problems. No society will tolerate the challenge to its dogmas, because they are the necessary precondition to any peaceful resolution of other differences. This is why the Middle Ages burned heretics. That we do not do so today is no compliment to our tolerance; it just means that we have decided that religious dogmas are not ultimate. We today do not persecute religious heretics; we persecute political heretics. We do not fight over religion; we fight over politics. Our dogmas are different.

Most Christians today find their religion is not fundamental in their lives precisely because their dogmas are not religious. We do not solve problems by reducing them to religious ultimates.

What we are going to be concerned with in these classes is Christian dogmas — those deep, basic, assumed attitudes toward reality which form the almost unconscious "springs of action," which give shape and definition to our self concept and our notion of the world and our place in it, our destiny, the meaning and purpose of life. The alternative dogmas proposed in the 18th and 19th century have brought the world to the mess reflected in this morning's paper. The human problem is at bottom a problem of dogmatics.

St. Francisfolk:

A quotation from St. John of the Cross: The Ascent of Mt. Carmel.

"Some souls obtain sensible or spiritual sweetness from God because they are incapable of eating the stronger and more solid food of the trials of the cross of His Son. He would desire them to take the cross more than any other things."

"Any person questioning God or desiring some vision or revelation would not only be guilty of foolish behavior but also of offending Him, by not fixing his eyes entirely upon Christ and by living with the desire for some other novelty."

"God could respond as follows: If I have already told you all things in My Son, and if I have no other word, what answer or revelation can I now make that would surpass this? Fasten your eyes on Him alone, because in Him I have spoken and revealed all, and in Him you shall discover even more than you ask for and desire. You are making an appeal for revelations that are incomplete, but if you turn your eyes to Him you will find them complete. For He is my entire locution and response, vision and revelation, which I have already spoken and revealed to you, by giving Him to you as a brother, companion, master, ransom, and reward. Since that day when I said, "This is my Beloved Son in Whom I am well pleased, hear him", I have relinquished these methods of answering and teaching; hear Him because I have no more faith to reveal nor truths to manifest. . . . You shall not find anything to ask or desire through revelations and visions; behold Him well, for in Him you will uncover all these revelations already made, and many more."

We want God to lift the burden from our shoulders. He wants us to grow strong to carry yet more.

The devil is far more likely to tempt us with good than with evil. He wants us to settle for the \$1.98 instead of the \$2.00 we could have by waiting 'til tomorrow. Tomorrow his offering is \$1.95, and the next day \$1.90. We are delighted with the cash in hand, never realizing that our "take" is shrinking. One day we are clutching our pennies and calling them riches. The next day we're broke.

God on the other hand asks us to forego the \$1.98 today for the sake of the \$2.00 tomorrow. Tomorrow he says if we'll wait another day he'll give us \$2.50, and then if we'll wait still more he'll make it \$3.00.

The devil pays off promptly. God's payment is deferred. But in the end Satan takes away our goodies and gives us nothing in return. In the end God gives us eternal glory and riches beyond our imagining. There is great merit (and reward) in believing God's promises. The devil is tricky; we never realize until the last minute that we've been had.

When the devil shows his hand -- as today, with the increase of witchcraft and evil doings, Black Masses and such -- it means that he has blown his cool and is hysterical. His normal way is to disguise himself as an angel of light and offer us good things -- even spiritual rewards -- bedazzling us so we do not realize we are accepting less than we might have from God. If he can get us to attribute his works to God Himself, he is supremely delighted. Hence all the persecution and prejudice in God's name. Watch him; he's sharp.

Padre