

NOT WITHOUT HONOR

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on March 9, 1969 at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee, and heard over radio station WLAC at 8:05 P.M.

On one occasion Jesus asked the Pharisees this penetrating question, "What think ye of Christ?" (Matt. 22:42). This text goes on to indicate the answer which the people gave, but for my purpose on this occasion I would like for the question "What think ye of Christ?" to stand out in bold relief by itself. This is the most important question that anyone can face. It is the imperative question of all time for all men. I would like for it to serve as a backdrop for the message of this hour.

The thirteenth chapter of Matthew is an important chapter for a number of reasons. It is primarily remembered because it is the location of the numerous parables which Jesus used to explain the nature of his kingdom. Seven times Jesus says, "The kingdom of heaven is like ..." However, it is for none of these stories, important as they are, that I call your attention to the thirteenth chapter of Matthew. Rather, it is because of the final paragraph in which we read of the disturbing reaction of the people of Nazareth to the presence of Christ.

The text reads, "And coming into his own country he taught them in their synagogue, insomuch that they were astonished, and said, Whence hath this man this wisdom, and these mighty works?" His own country is Nazareth where he was reared from childhood. It was his custom to go to the synagogue on sabbath day, and, according to Luke 4:16-30, Jesus was given the scroll of Isaiah on this occasion. He read from what we have designated as the 61st chapter prophecies concerning the coming and the work of the Messiah. When finished he indicated to the audience that these prophecies were being fulfilled in him. While Matthew's account does not include these details, it does indicate that the people's reaction was quite negative.

Our text continues, "Is not this the carpenter's son? is not his mother called Mary? and his brethren James, and Joseph, and Simon, and Judas? And his sisters, are they not with us? Whence then hath this man all these things? And they were offended in him. But Jesus said unto them, A prophet is not without honor, save in his own country, and in his own house. And he did not many mighty works there because of their unbelief." (Matt. 13:54-58).

A Window Into Christ's Life

Even though this passage is a disturbing one, we are grateful for its inclusion in the scriptures for a number of reasons. First of all, it gives us some insight into the pattern of Christ's home life. He grew up in a typical Jewish fashion, learning the trade of his foster-father Joseph. He was surrounded in the family by four younger half-brothers and by at least two sisters, whose names are not known. Because of the fact that he is called both a carpenter and the son of a carpenter we can be reasonably sure that he was quite familiar with honest toil. He shared the common experiences of labor. It might also be indicated that his honest weekday work led quite consistently to worship on the sabbath. This has always been true throughout the world. Wherever men have worked at some honest, constructive, helpful work during the week they have been more likely to worship God on his day. On the other hand, slipshod weekday work alienates a man from God and often finds such a man not at worship on the Lord's day. Jesus knew a home very much like our homes and evidently engaged in work very much like our work.

The real crisis reflected in this passage is in the dilemma which the people of Nazareth faced. Either they could cut Jesus down to ordinary size and reject his claims, or they could acknowledge his claims and accept him as Lord. They did the former, rather than the latter. It appears likely that their own pride was the basic factor in causing them to reject Jesus as the Son of God. What a tragedy this was! Think of what it meant for those who had played with him as a child, or had observed his growing from infancy into manhood, to know him so very well, yet in the deepest sense not know him at all. What a tragedy that those who had seen him day-in and day-out through the years and who had been so close to this unique event in history, the incarnation of God in human flesh, should be blinded to its significance. We can feel something of the tragedy in the words, "They were offended in him." What a world of meaning there is in Christ's sentence, "A prophet is not without honor, save in his own country, and in his own house."

The Near Is Commonplace

Considering what is near as commonplace is a very widespread phenomenon. Thomas Heywood, the poet, once wrote,

Seven cities warr'd for Homer being dead,
Who living, had no rooffe to shroud his head.

Henry Robinson while visiting William Wordsworth in 1816 strolled one day into the nearby village. Then one of Wordsworth's neighbors asked him, "It is true--as I have heard reported--that Mr. Wordsworth ever wrote verses?" How strange that one of his fellow townspeople could have been unaware of his greatness as a Poet.

Perhaps you also remember the newspaper cartoon which appeared on Lincoln's birthday some years ago which showed a hunter talking to a local farmer. The hunter asked, "Any news down t' th' village, Ezra?" And the reply, "Nuthin' a' tall, nuthin' a' tall, 'cept fer a new baby down t' Tom Lincoln's. Nuthin' ever happens out here." Looking back from the vantage point of a century and more it seems so strange that the birth of Abraham Lincoln could have gone all but unnoticed. True, the frontiersmen of Kentucky and Illinois had little chance to appreciate his eventual greatness. Perhaps it is because we are trying to make up for that original oversight that we now build great monuments and even an elaborate building around the log cabin in which he was born at Hodgenville, Ky. His greatness is so impressive now, that it seems hardly possible that he could have been born in obscurity. One takes pride in the large statue in the heart of London, just in front of Westminster Abbey, which pictures Lincoln larger than life size. The most impressive shrine in our own nation is his memorial in Washington. Travelers from around the world remember him as the most significant American who ever lived. Yet, at birth "nuthin' happened."

Just here we might contrast this with the expectancy of Martin Luther's schoolmaster who used to remove his hat when he met his class of small boys. Explaining, he pointed out that no one could know what might be included in the group. To use his own words he said there might be a "future mayor, or chancellor, or learned doctor!" Few people are so far-seeing or so wise.

Robert Hichens, the noted painter of the sea, once sought a boy whose face might reflect the wonder of the sea. After searching he discovered that he could not find such a lad in one of the sea-coast towns of England. In order to find a face that reflected wonder in connection with the sea he had to choose a boy from the slums of London, a boy who had never seen the ocean before. Familiarity breeds contempt. A prophet is not without honor save in his own country and in his own house.

Bitter Results

Christ's rejection at Nazareth bore bitter fruit. "He did not many mighty works there because of their unbelief." It was not that he could not have worked miracles there, but the climate was so unfavorable. The seed was ready, but the soil was unreceptive. The townspeople hurt themselves, cheated themselves, by their rejection of Jesus. We are reminded of a sentence in Acts 13:46, which summarizes the feelings of the apostle Paul when he had preached for several sabbaths to deaf ears in Antioch of Pisidia. He said, "It was necessary that the word of God should first be spoken to you. Seeing ye thrust it from you, and judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life, lo, we turn to the Gentiles." The people of Nazareth judged themselves unworthy of Christ's physical and spiritual blessings. They hurt not only themselves but their neighbors, for few if any of Christ's miracles were worked in Nazareth. Few of the sick, or maimed, or halt were helped. Christ's great miracles were performed in Capernaum, a few miles away, or in Jerusalem or other areas of the land. Think also of how much this rejection must have hurt Christ. Nowhere does one want to be appreciated and loved as much as at home. The acclaim of people at a distance is pleasant, but appreciation at home is the ultimate satisfaction.

This story that we have read in the closing verses of Matt. 13 is a strange one indeed. God's love had been manifest in Christ, "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son." (John 3:16). Christ's love was shown by his willingness to come to the earth and to die for man's redemption. Jesus had loved people supremely, often having "compassion" on them. This was clearly demonstrated as he performed the many miracles of healing and as he fed the multitudes on at least two different occasions. How strange it was that this love of God, manifest through Christ, should have been spurned by the people who knew Jesus best.

A Controversial Figure

Jesus was a controversial figure. The seventh chapter of John has in it several verses of significance in showing how controversial he was. For example, verse 5 reads, "For even his brethren did not believe on him." Late in his public ministry, just a few days before his crucifixion, his own blood brothers did not believe him to be the Messiah. Later on, they did believe, and James even became one of the great elders of the Jerusalem church. It was also he who wrote the little book of James in the New Testament.

Verse 12 of this chapter says, "And there was much murmuring among the multitudes concerning him: some said, He is a good man; others said, Not so, but he leadeth the multitude astray." Verse 15 reads, "The Jews therefore marvelled, saying, How knowest this man letters, having never learned?" Verses 40 and 41 add, "Some of the multitude therefore, when they heard these words, said, This is of a truth the prophet. Others said, This is the Christ. But some said, What, doth the Christ come out of Galilee?"

This is the same chapter that also includes in verse 32, "The Pharisees heard the multitude murmuring these things concerning him; and the chief priests and the Pharisees sent officers to take him." Later, in verses 45 and 46 we hear their verdict, "The officers therefore came to the chief priests and Pharisees and they said unto them, Why did ye not bring him? And the officers answered, Never man so spake." It seems that these officers who were strangers to Jesus had a greater appreciation of him than did his own fellow townspeople.

Jesus was extremely popular at times in his life, though that popularity was a fickle, changeable thing. After his feeding of the five thousand, we read in John 6:15, "Jesus therefore perceiving that they were about to come and take him by force, to make him king, withdrew into the mountain himself alone." The people were so enthusiastic about Christ that they wanted to make him king, yet in that same chapter in verse 66 we read, "Upon this many of his disciples went back, and walked no more with him." Only the twelve apostles remained, and one of them was destined to prove himself a betrayer.

In the 12th chapter of John we read of the triumphal entry into Jerusalem on the Sunday preceding his crucifixion. The people shouted "Hosanna: Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord, even the King of Israel." (John 12:13). They put down their garments and cut palm fronds to place them along the path over which the donkey upon which Christ rode should enter the city of Jerusalem. On Friday of that same week, as mentioned in John 19:6, the multitude cried, "Crucify him, crucify him."

The fourteenth chapter of Matthew tells how that on one occasion Jesus was tired and left the city of Capernaum to cross the Sea of Galilee to find rest and quiet on the opposite side. However, the crowd that had surrounded him in Capernaum outran the boat and was on the shore when he reached the other side of the sea. He had compassion on them, continued to teach them, and ultimately fed them miraculously. In Luke 14 we find the opposite reaction as Jesus tells the story of the great marriage feast, with the people making excuses rather than attend the feast. Of course, he is thinking in terms of God's offering of the feast of salvation, which the people refused.

Just how did Jesus feel about this tragic rejection by the people whom he had come to save? Perhaps we have some indication of his feelings in Matt. 11:16-17, where he says, "But whereunto shall I liken this generation? It is like unto children sitting in the marketplaces, who call unto their fellows, and say, We piped unto you, and ye did not dance; we wailed, and ye did not mourn." It is almost beyond understanding that the love of God, manifest in Christ, should have been unseen by the people or else blatantly rejected.

Conclusion

But why this particular study? The answer is very simple. It sometimes seems that man is in a conspiracy against himself. Man seems to be his own worst enemy. As we observe mankind with the prevalence of certain attitudes, we cannot help but feel that man has knowingly chosen to go the hurtful way. With hate, jealousy, rivalry, retaliation, and war dominant in so many parts of our world, we cannot understand how man can so avoid the opposite attitude of love, unless he has purposely set out to destroy himself. It is so illogical and so hurtful that it does not make sense.

The same is true of many of man's everyday habits. As we watch man cigarettes that bring on lung cancer and other physical ailments, as we know of the widespread nature of drinking, and the use of dope, as we observe man's harried rushed pace of life, and as we see so many evidences of his mistreatment of himself physically, mentally, and spiritually, we can hardly see how he can destroy himself so effectively without setting out to do so. Similarly, how is it possible for man to reject the love of God so consistently without being aware of what he is doing?

Our purpose is a very simple one. We do not want to make the mistake the people of Nazareth made in the long ago. Their tragic blunder in rejecting the Christ must not be our blunder, too. We close with the question with which we began, "What think ye of Christ?"