

524
K65
opy 1

The War's Need of Christ

A PALM SUNDAY SERMON

by

SHEPHERD KNAPP

The War's Need of Christ

A PALM SUNDAY SERMON

by

SHEPHERD KNAPP
II

1917
THE W. B. CROMBIE COMPANY
Worcester, Mass.

1524
K65

WORCESTER, MASS.,
April 3, 1917.

REV. SHEPHERD KNAPP, D.D.
8 Institute Road, Worcester, Mass.

MY DEAR DR. KNAPP:

We were so impressed with your sermon last Sunday that we feel it ought to be printed as a companion to the one which you gave a few Sundays ago, which was put in print.

We should be very glad to take our part in having last Sunday's sermon printed, if agreeable to you.

Very truly yours,

ARTHUR D. BUTTERFIELD,
CHARLES F. FULLER,
CLINTON ALVORD.

The War's Need of Christ

I tell you that, if these should hold their peace, the stones would immediately cry out.—*Luke 19: 40.*

If on this first Sunday of April in the year nineteen hundred and seventeen, when America stands on the very threshold of such momentous decisions and events, some people should object that it is inappropriate for the Christian churches to emphasize, as in other years, the distinctly religious interests of the week which leads up to Easter and includes Good Friday, answer might well be made to them in the very words of this text.*

To-day the Christian churches are announcing to the world, “This is the beginning of our Holy Week: this, O men, women, children, everywhere, is the week for thinking with special earnestness of Jesus Christ, the memory of whose death and passion makes this week holy,—Jesus Christ, the bringer of the gospel; Jesus Christ, the revealer of the heart of God; Jesus Christ, the Saviour of the world. Come, one and all, into closer, surer, fuller fellowship with him this week than you have ever known before. With heart and mind and will declare that he is the power of God on earth, to save and complete the life of man.”

Should Holy Week Be Ignored This Year?

But while the churches of Christ are thus speaking, there are some Americans, even in the churches themselves, who say or think, “That is no message for such a time as this. In other, ordinary years of the world’s history it was right enough to draw men into communion with the loving spirit of Jesus Christ, at the time which commemorates his final act of perfect love for man: but to-day, with the whole world in the grip of war; with Christ’s

*For printing, the introduction to the sermon has been abbreviated.

law of love held in obeyance, or denied and trampled on, over so wide an area, among so many men; with the deadliest conflict that the world has ever known going on in France, in Russia, and on the sea; with our own nation deciding, this very week, what part it must take in these bloody battles—Holy Week spent in a council of war; is there not something grimly preposterous in calling men to special religious observances at such a time, in urging the world at such a time to turn its face with one accord toward Jesus Christ?" As, on the first Palm Sunday long ago, some of the bystanders were displeased at the public demonstration which was being made in Jesus' name, and called on him to rebuke his disciples for their misplaced enthusiasm, so to-day I can imagine some hard-headed men among the world's respected citizens, lifting their eyes toward heaven in impatient protest at the proposal to spend a whole week, at such a time as this, in urging that the greatest need of the world to-day is Jesus Christ. "Father," I can hear them saying, "rebuke thy over-zealous servants."

Back to them, as formerly to those others, comes the instant answer, "I tell you, if these should hold their peace, the very stones would cry out." The very conditions of the world to-day, which make Christ seem like a stranger here, are themselves indisputable evidence of the world's utter need of him. If Christ's own disciples should, indeed, fail at this time to place him in the very forefront of the world's thought; if, influenced by the feeling that the times are out of tune with him, they should subside into silence, and should desist from the attempt to make him supreme in this warring and suffering world, would not *this warring and suffering world itself* cry out its need of him? When, therefore, the world is in agony for the need of Christ, shall not Christians—then of all times—urge him upon mankind as the Saviour of human life, the power of God to free men from their sins and follies and to keep them from despair in sorrow, pain, and death?

1. Christ as the Ruler of Human Passions.

Think, first of all, of the need of Christ to counteract the gathering bitterness and hate which this War has already created in the hearts of the belligerent peoples, and is now rapidly intensifying every day.

In Belgium.

When you read, for instance, the first-hand reports of the experiences of the Belgian people under the iron heel of Germany, strip of their possessions, cut-off from all news of those who are fighting for them against their conquerors, forbidden so much as to speak of king or country, and forced at every turn to see, and obey, and salute their persecutors,—what do you suppose is to keep them from being consumed by hate—their own spirits burned up in the fire of it—except the religion of Jesus Christ, the religion of that brave cardinal of theirs, who loves God as truly as he loves Belgium?

In Germany.

Or, when you realize that the whole German people, shut in behind that impenetrable wall of censorship, are taught to believe that this War is to be laid entirely at the door of Britain, and that Britain, in her modes of warfare, is like a savage beast; for it is evident, from all the information we can get, that the mass of the German people have been effectively taught to regard the blockade of Germany by Britain's navy, and the consequent threat of starvation, as a much more fundamental iniquity than Germany's own submarine campaign—when you realize this, and learn that even the Christian preachers of Germany—some of them—are preaching from their pulpits the doctrine of implacable severity, do you not groan within you at the thought of this winning over of a whole great people to the passion of hate? Can Christianity afford to sleep or to take a holiday, in the face of the need of such a work of regeneration as awaits her there?

In France.

And what of France, what of the soldiers and people of France, as they enter that reconquered strip of soil, but now evacuated by their invaders? There, in that shell-wrecked fragment of their sunny land, when they find, not only the inevitable havoc of modern warfare, but the savage and pitiless destruction of an

enemy who has cared for nothing save to make himself feared, what are the passions that will flame up in the breast of returning France? Can any one with human instincts blame them, if they see blood? But what shall be the consequence of this? When France has thrust the enemy at last beyond her borders, and finds herself on German soil, shall she exact her pound of flesh? Shall she herself do there the same deeds, for which on her own soil she has declared her foe accursed? Shall France, that gallant nation, which has shamed us for our former thought of her as a shallow, scoffing, pleasure-seeking people—shall France, swept away by the passion of revenge, drag her honor in the mud beyond the Rhine? God forbid! Christ forbid! And how shall Christ forbid, save through the living, active, unfailing, unresting power of his religion in the world, knocking without cessation at the hearts of men?

2. Christ to the Rescue of the War's Victims.

Think, in the second place, of what a wealth of Christian love is needed in order to arouse enough benevolence to meet and relieve the unprecedented mass of human misery in the world to-day, created by this War. Surely we have all realized by this time that, much as we have heard and read and thought about it, we are as yet beholding it all from afar off. We hear some pitiful tale, from Armenia, or Belgium, or Persia, and we say, "This is far worse than we had imagined; this is almost too horrible to listen to; it would be altogether too horrible, were it not that, in response, we can give something to help relieve the suffering."

Then we make a gift, or we adopt a plan for making repeated gifts of certain designated sums: and then, after that, when we read in the papers that the hunger in Turkey or Poland is greater than ever; or when the reports reveal the fact that some new nation is starving, like Greece, for instance, held in duress by the Allies, and whipt into obedience with the whip of hunger; or that the beginnings of scarceness have reached still farther a field, as in Spain or Sweden, we say, "This is indeed terrible, but I am already doing something toward feeding the world's hungry, and clothing the world's naked," and on the strength of that, we do not deem

it necessary to feel too keenly these new appeals to human charity. We do not let ourselves realize in a definite practical way that for each man or woman or child who is hungry, hunger means hunger, emptiness of stomach, wasting of body, loss of vitality and of resistance to disease. We do not let ourselves realize that for the latest victims, as well as for those whose misery first awakened our sympathy, cold means cold, sickness means sickness, despair means despair; that the latest reports of want and suffering and death, though they have lost much of their news value for the papers, and no longer claim the big head-lines and the front-page columns, are nevertheless just as much the want and suffering and death of actual individual people as they were at first.

What Is to Be Done about it?

Are we to be blamed because our imagination grows thus sluggish in responding to the hundred-times-repeated story of destitution, because, after giving sums which, three years ago, we should have conceived to be beyond the realm of possibility, we are slow in deciding that we must manage somehow to give even more, and to keep on giving? I do not believe that God himself is regarding us from that point of view. It is no longer a mere question of blame or praise in this utterly abnormal state of things in which the world of men finds itself today; it is just a question of how to get the thing done, which must somehow be done, how to arouse our jaded sympathies to a still greater intensity, how to make the channels of benevolence flow still broader and fuller and further.

What power is going to accomplish this herculean task? What power is equal to this, *except the power of Jesus Christ*, which has already given to the world, at many turning-points of its history, blessings that had seemed completely out of reach, power for good that no one had believed available? That is the force which must now be drawn upon anew. That, just that, is what you and I need today, as we need nothing else, to enable us to do that for which the world holds out to us appealing hands. We need to apprehend, for the first time, "the breadth and length and height and depth of the love of Christ." Oh, for

the sake of the world's misery, that *all* the hungry may be fed, and *all* the cold and naked given clothes and shelter, and *all* the orphans cared for, and *all* the blind men saved from the despair of darkness, and *all* the sick and wounded nursed to health, or eased in dying—for this, must the Christian churches preach their Christ with new faith and passion, the message of that great love—which gave generously, shall we say, and worked tirelessly for men?—oh, far beyond that, which made the greatest sacrifice of all on their behalf, and died for them on Calvary.

3. Christ as America's Leader in the War.

Think, finally, of the need for Jesus Christ of us Americans, who now stand, ourselves, on the very brink of the War, and who look at that hideous conflict as one to which our nation, our people, our lives and fortunes, may tomorrow be committed. Was there ever a time in our history when we needed Jesus Christ as we do for the period extending from to-day to the day when this war comes to its final end, to keep us, as a nation, clean, just, patient, merciful, singleminded in the pursuit of righteousness, while we do our part in a War in which all the passions of the human heart, lowest and highest intermingled, are fiercely active?

The War's Conflict of Good and Evil Forces.

We cannot forget, we have no right to forget, that the motives and causes of this war, with the Allies as well as with the Central Powers, have their deepest roots in the old pagan notions of national and international life, which have always produced hate and war, and always will, as long as nations are guided by them. The nobler ideals and purposes, which the War has called forth, which have done so much to defend and further it and lift it up, cannot disguise the fact that this War itself is the corrupt fruit of an evil tree.

Nor dare we lose sight of the fact that in almost all the warring nations there are influential bodies of men—wholly dominant in

Germany, it would appear; only partly so in the nations of the Allies—who purpose that the result of the War, if their side wins, shall not be merely the ending of the menace of future wars and reparation for the invasions and atrocity of this one, but also the further enrichment of their own nation at the expense of others. China knows this well enough, and we have the humiliating spectacle of that pagan nation casting in her lot with half of Christian Europe, in order that, when peace comes, she may be one its negotiators, instead of a part of the spoils which it divides.

It is a War with this intermixture of existing and threatened evil, that we are being drawn into, as well as a War which resists the policy of murder by submarine, champions invaded Belgium and massacred Armenia, and fights the cause of democracy against tyranny and militarism.

Shall we, when we are in the War, be able to pursue only the good in it, and eschew the evil? Shall we be able to keep our motives pure, our passions noble, our hands clean? When the die for America has been cast, and the crisis brings together in our national cause all who are loyal to America, whatever their ideal for America may be, whether high or low, whatever their standard of national and international morality, will the nobler element in American life be able then, in the heat and strain of war, to guide, and check, and use for its own higher purpose the lower elements?

Christianity Can Keep Us True.

It seems a task almost beyond the power of human nature. It is beyond the power of human nature. No power of man alone can possibly achieve it. America, if she would succeed in this, must seize, for use in this hour of her critical necessity, the power of God. And that power of God, made available for actual human use, is Jesus Christ—the principles, the ideals, the guiding laws of his religion. Do we know this well enough, can we be made to know it well enough, can the belief that Christ is right, and that he has the power to enforce the right, be driven deep enough into the heart, the mind, the conscience, the will of us Americans,

to give *him* the victory in this new epoch of our nation's life on which we are about to enter?

When to-day and repeatedly in the months to come we in this place sing "America", may this be to us not merely an act of patriotism, but a token that we are striving with all our souls to consecrate our patriotism and the land we love by the power of our religion. When we sing of that "freedom" which is the burden of our national hymn, freedom which resounds "from every mountain side," whose song rings sweetly "from the trees," and in whose praise "the rocks their silence break"—yes, the very stones cry out—freedom, whose "holy light" we pray "our father's God" to pour upon our land, may we not merely be remembering America's freedom from old oppressions, freedom from outward invasion and inward tyranny, but be praying and seeking on our land's behalf for freedom from evil passion, freedom from evil purpose, freedom from evil action, the freedom of righteousness and truth and love.