

WORLD COUNCIL OF CHURCHES - AMSTERDAM ASSEMBLY

Opening Service of Worship

August 22, 1948.

Sermon by D.T. Niles

"WHO AM I THAT I SHOULD GO UNTO PHARAOH?"

( Ex. iii.II )

Who are we that we should be here at this great gathering of Churches? How is it that this great opportunity and privilege has come to us? Why is it that we, and no one else, are here at this meeting-place with God, to receive from Him the call and the commandment to go unto Pharaoh?

We are here because we have been sent here, and those who chose us did so because they thought of us as, in some ways, important people. We are recognised as scholars, or statesmen, or pastors in the Church; and they have sent us here because they felt that they could depend on us to discern the meaning of our time, to chart a course for the future, to proclaim God's message for to-day.

But surely we shall fail - fail those who have sent us and fail ourselves, fail God and fail the world - if we do not realize at the very outset who and what we truly are!

Moses could boast of his royal upbringing, of his proficiency in the ancient learning of Egypt, of armies he had led to war, of battles he had won for the king; he could boast also of his passion for his own people, of his choice rather to be evil-entreated with them than to enjoy the pleasures of the palace, of his burning sense of justice which had set his hand against the hand of authority and had led him into the wilderness - and yet the word he speaks is a word of humiliation, the confession he makes is one of bankruptcy.

Why? He was standing before a bush that was burning without being consumed, and as he saw by it God's inexhaustible resources he saw also his own resourcelessness; while to his self-revelation there was added the sting of the task to which God bade him, a bidding that broke his nature wide open and showed him his own poverty.

We too must begin at our place of self-revelation, and for us that place is the Cross. It was there that we saw God's inexhaustible resources - His love poured out without being emptied - and it was there that we lost the illusions about ourselves. We began there the life we live to-day, there we were shattered and stabilised, there



we died and were born again, and still it is as we return there that we see ourselves most clearly.

We are not what other think we are. We are not what we have been able to do or to achieve. We are not even what we have become in our striving after goodness. At the foot of the Cross we all simply fall into one category - that of murderers.

"O Jesus my hope, for me offered up,  
Who with clamour pursued Thee to Calvary's top,  
The blood Thou hast shed, for me let it plead,  
And declare Thou hast died in Thy murderer's stead."

His murderers indeed: for the weakness of Nicodemus in the face of unpopularity is our weakness, the lust for power and for profit in Caiaphas is our lust, the treacherous impatience of Judas in his fanaticism for the cause of his people is our impatience and our treachery, the unreadiness of Peter at the time of crisis is our unreadiness, the prudence of the Sanhedrin which would sacrifice the one for the many is our prudence, and the helplessness of Pilate because of his unrepented past is our helplessness.

Who, then are we that we should be sent? Who am I that I should go unto Pharaoh?..... I am one sinner for whom Jesus died.

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This is the inner situation which is effected by and to which is addressed the call of God:

"Come now, therefore, and I will send thee unto Pharaoh, that thou mayest bring forth My people out of Egypt."

Pharaoh knows Moses. He knows him as the man who grew up in his palace, and whom he has now dispossessed. Pharaoh knows the people of Israel. He knows them as the people whom he tried to destroy, and to whom now he has given the task of making bricks without straw. Pharaoh knows his own heart. He knows that he has deliberately hardened it, but he knows also that it was a hardening he could not help.

How true a picture of the world to which we are sent! It is a world where the Christian faith is dispossessed of its hold on the mores of the people. It is a world that has sought to destroy the Church, and now has set the Church the task of building peace without providing it with the material either of repentance or of faith. It is a world that refuses to listen to God's Word, and yet is also unable to listen or to understand. The Word of God itself has hardened the heart and made the ear heavy. And what is more, in the lands of the great religions, Pharaoh will not allow the people whom God calls to go forth and sacrifice to the Lord their God.



But is it to Pharaoh that Moses is sent? Is he not sent rather to the people themselves, to persuade them in the Name of God to accept God's word to them; while it is God Himself who deals with Pharaoh.

"I will stretch out My hand and smite Egypt with all My wonders: and after that he will let you go... And when ye go, ye shall not go empty."

The world lieth in the evil one. We announce to it God's great demand, but it is God Himself who must and will deal with the demons of our time. And where the people obey and march forth at God's behest, Pharaoh's armies cannot follow. The people of God stand ranged on another front, and the Red Sea rolls between.

Precisely here, however, lies the source of our anguish. We may, we must return again in conscious remembrance and renewal to the place of our decisive encounter with God. We may, we must see ourselves as weaklings who go to Pharaoh in the strength of God's promise and His might. But will God act? Will He act in our time? Is the fall of Pharaoh near?

"Lord, dost Thou at this time restore the Kingdom to Israel?"

Those first disciples had been with Jesus for three crowded years. They had shared with hope in His proclamation of the Kingdom, they had watched with dismay His crucifixion and death. And then when all seemed lost Jesus had come back again. They saw Him in power, the power that had conquered death. Their hopes had swelled high and ebbed low; but now seemed to be the time of fulfilment.... "Lord, is it now?"

We are very much in the same mood to-day. Our world seemed to be set for steady progress. The Church was full of the stories of triumphs in many lands. And then in one war after another Christendom broke to pieces and hopes lay shattered. To-day, even after the noise of the guns has ceased - and it has not ceased in China, or in Greece, or in Palestine, or in India - chaos remains. However, those whose eyes scan the far horizons speak of the glow of a coming day. But when?

Here we are as Churches. Some were lost for years in the silence but did not lose their faith. Some were tested by fire but were not found unfaithful. Some were challenged by the need of their sister Churches and proved to be not unmindful. Here we are, witnessing to the power of the Risen Christ in all our Churches and asking the question that lies nearest to our hearts ... "Lord, is it now? When is the hour of fulfilment?"

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Christ's answer to us is the same as His answer to those disciples of old:

"It is not for you to know times or seasons, which the Father hath set within His Own authority: ye shall receive power when the Holy Ghost is come upon you, and ye shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem and in all Judea, and Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth."

That is your task, the rest is Mine.

Remember, however, that it is no new task which I give you, I send you in My Name, and you will go in the strength that springs from God's continuation in you and through you of what I have begun. The power you will show is the power of the leaven which I have already hid, the harvest you will reap is the harvest of the seed which I have already sown. The passions you will rouse are the passions of the fire which I have already kindled, the love you will share is the love of the deed which I have already done, and the end you will proclaim is the end of the end which I have already accomplished. Henceforth, the Son of Man sits at the right hand of power, and shall come on the clouds of heaven.

Therefore shall ye be My witnesses:

- witnesses, as those who are able to discern the doings of God in a world where the doings of man are so obtrusive;
- witnesses, as those who point to the wonderful working of God, and claim for it the attention of their fellow-men;
- witnesses, as those who dare to quote themselves as part of the evidence of what God has wrought.

But even so the poignancy of the original question remains, and remains especially for us who are the young people of this generation. The future is our inheritance, and while we do not ask when the final consummation will be, we do seek to know the immediate prospect. To what end is our witnessing? Are we bidden to bear our witness "until cities be waste without inhabitant and houses without man, and until only the stock remains which is the holy seed"; or are we bidden to bear our witness until "men turn everyone from their evil ways and from the violence that is in their hands and God too turns again and forgives them"? Do we stand as before Jerusalem or as before Niniveh?

The answer to these questions is part of the witness we must bring, and will condition also all our witnessing. But have we an answer? or only the possibility of many



answers, all of which stem from the ultimate answer that God is God? Will it be peace or war? and what must Christians do about it? Many answers to this question are possible, but no answer is true which forgets that neither man, nor nations nor churches can organise an escape from the consequences of sin except it be by way of repentance and amendment of life. God is God, and there is no other God.

"I AM THAT I AM is My name. Go, therefore, and I shall be with thy mouth, and teach thee what thou shalt speak."

Moses doubted the sufficiency of this answer to the questions he had raised, and he took to himself an Aaron to help him - Aaron who later helped the people to worship the golden calf. NO, God's answer is sufficient, and it is sufficient only when it stands alone sustaining faith and undergirding obedience. It is natural to cry "Oh that I knew where I might find Him, that I might come even to His seat where He doth work." And yet this is enough to be able to say, "But He knoweth the way that I take."

Thus are we enabled to bear our witness to Him:

- witnessing in Jerusalem, among those who know us best, whether in church or office or home, and where the witness of life counts most;
- witnessing in Judea, among those whose loyalty to the past hinders their obedience in the present;
- witnessing in Samaria, among those between whom and us the years have erected walls of mistrust and bitterness;
- and witnessing unto the uttermost part of the earth.

For the Christian witness recognises no barrier and allows no partiality. We are witnesses to the Negro in the same way as to the White. We are witnesses within the Western Democracies as well as the Eastern Republics. We are witnesses among peoples of all religions and no religion. We are witnesses among the outcaste, the refugee, the displaced person .... witnesses unto the uttermost part of the earth.

So do we prove the fulness of His promise, "Lo, I am with you alway even unto the end of the world": alway and all the way, unto earth's remotest end and until the end, when shall be established "SALVATION AND POWER, THE KINGDOM OF OUR GOD AND THE AUTHORITY OF HIS CHRIST."