

Scripture: John 11:1-16

Text: John 11:16

Neil Simon, one of the most successful playwrights of our day, on the Dick Cavett show was asked by Dick Cavett, "Do you make lots of money." He said, "yes." He said, "Are you concerned about money?" He said, "No." Dick Cavett said to him, "What does concern you." You could have heard a pin drop in the studio when Neil Simon said, "What concerns me--the fear of dieing!"

I suppose in the back of our minds we all share that same fear and anxiety about dieing. It is not something we like to think about. But death is one quite decisive event in our lives to which we might give some profitable thought, for it rarely comes at the end of life. It usually intrudes somewhere in the middle of our lives at the most inopportune times.

Time is a dimension that really eliminates the generation gap and places the youngest and oldest on the same level for none of us live somewhere in between birth and the grave. Whether we are young or old, all of us live at the end of our lives. Each step is a new birth. Every moment is a reprieve.

Obviously we don't like to give much thought to this. I'm reminded of a 13th century English lyric that stuck in my mind several years ago. "When I think of things three/ Never may I happy be./ The one is that I must awa;/ Another, I know not that day;/ The third one is my greatest care./ I know not whither I must fare."

The 17th century French mathematician and philosopher, Pascal, almost seemed to be referring to that poem when he wrote, "Man wishes to be happy...but how will he wet about it? To be happy he would have to make himself immortal, but, not being able to do so, It has occured to him to prevent himself from thinking of death."

But not all men have expressed this fear of dieing. "Do you know what death is?" Charles de Gaulle asked his former Minister of Culture, Andre Malraux. "The goddess of sleep," the French novelist replied, adding: "We belong to that category of people who don't care about being killed."

The words of Thomas capture something of that same feeling. "Let us also go, that we may die with him." Being the realist that he was, Thomas knew that all roads we take lead eventually to death. But being the follower of Christ that he was he realized the more important fact that the road one takes make all the difference. And that road was something that he could choose. And the road he chose placed him in that category of people who don't care about being killed.

Secular history is filled with examples of men who chose to die, scorning any escape or compromise, so that with them death was not just some misfortune that had over taken them, but something that they took upon themselves.

Socrates refuses to escape from prison, choosing rather to submit to unjust laws, and by his death, give courage to all men who love and follow the truth wherever it leads them.

In British history, King Charles I redeemed the shortcomings of his reign by the nobility of his death; refusing to compromise with usurped military power, he chose a martyrdom that impressed even his enemies and helped to save from ruin some of the most cherished institutions of the British people.

We do not have to be thrown headlong into death. We can choose the road that leads us to our death.

One of the roads that we may travel is Christianity. Christianity is not itself a New Testament word. The earliest equivalent of it is simply the "way" or the "road" and the first Christians spoke of themselves as following this road. When Jesus asked his first converts to follow him, he meant that they should take the road with him in a quite literal sense, up to Jerusalem and to the crucifision.

The problem we face today however, is that Christianity is not the only road that

lies before us. In Robert Frost's familiar poem, he tells us. "Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,/ and sorry I could not travel both/ And be one traveller, long I stood/ To where it bent in the undergrowth;/ Then took the other, as just as fair."

But our situation is much more confusing than the dilemma that faced the poet because there are more than just two roads we can take. There are many roads, and they diverge not in a beautiful New England wood, but in a tangled 20th century mechanical jungle. So many roads diverge before us and all seem to bend into the undergrowth. And we stand where the roads diverge wondering which one we should take.

In the middle ages there weren't many roads open to a person growing up in a small town. Many times one was born, baptized, married, and buried without ever having left his village. There were not very many viable options for a person to live and die by.

Today, Christianity is one of many roads a person may take and it doesn't necessarily have the edge on any other way of life. And it certainly appears to many religious observers that it is becoming the road less traveled by.

Eastern religions, such as Hinduism, Buddhism, and other forms of mysticism and spiritualism abound. These forms of religion are among the many viable roads that we stand before. And if we are completely honest we have to admit that to some degree these religions contain features valuable to some which they do not find in Christianity.

I heard a former Hindu speak a few months ago. He had been raised in India in one of the Hindu sects and went to Cambridge University in England to study Hindu philosophy. There he began to take his religious faith more seriously by undergoing the severe discipline of yoga, which led him to what he called the "enchanted valley of mysticism."

He was able to sit motionless for hours putting all thoughts from his mind until he would hear the most beautiful and unearthly music ever heard. This to him was salvation and it brought him peace and contentment.

Although he became a Christian while at Cambridge he nevertheless confessed Hinduism to be one of the most beautiful religions in the world. He said that if one was willing to undergo the severe discipline of a yogi he would achieve a peace and contentment that was otherwise impossible.

But just as appealing as the Eastern religions are the many forms that naturalistic humanism takes with its emphasis on the value and dignity of every individual person. No one can deny the tremendous influence for the good that humanists have had in the world. This has a tremendous appeal to any person sensitive to the suffering and injustice that goes on in the world.

Because of the tremendous strides that scientific research has had in this century in the cure and prevention of disease and the success we have had in placing men on the moon, there is a confidence that technology and sociology are the only ways to solve the problems of poverty, disease, war, and pollution. Naturalistic humanism is a viable option for many people today.

So these religions and ways of life have a real emotional and intellectual appeal to many people. A person can follow a road other than Christianity and be just as intelligent, just as sensitive, just as perceptive, and just as sincere as the Christian and many times more so.

So as we look at the many roads that diverge before us Christianity does not necessarily stand out as the obvious choice to take. We stand before these roads and remember the words of Frost...."Sorry I could not travel both...long I stood... and looked down one... then took the other, as just as fair."

All these roads cause confusion because they all appear to be "as just as fair" and as just as true. How can we ever know for sure which road is ultimately the best one?

-3- the road less traveled by

How can we know for sure how or where we are going to finally end? I am reminded of what William James said in his Will to Believe, that there is no bell that rings within us when we come upon the truth. So we stand where the roads diverge trying to decide which road we will travel.

But there comes a time in the life of any person who sincerely wants to know what is true...there comes a time when he realizes that if he waits until all the facts are in before he decides anything, whether it be Hinduism, Christianity, Or Humanism,... if he waits until all the facts are in before he decides what is worth dieing for he will never decide... because the facts are never entirely in.

And if we are not to be paralysed by indecision we must, like Thomas, risk being wrong. We must choose before all the facts are in. Sometimes I hear people say that it would have been easier for Thomas to decide because he knew Christ. Yes, he did know Christ, but not all the facts were in for him either. As he traveled up the road toward Jerusalem he had no assurance of Easter morning. He had only the certain fact of death. He saw only the cross.

I'm afraid that the majority of men and women are so afraid of being taken in that they never fully commit themselves to anything including their religious faith. We all want the comfortable feeling that, whatever the real universe may be really like, we will not have backed the wrong horse. We are afraid of commitment because we are afraid of failure.

But we cannot wait for absolute certainty. We cannot wait until all the evidence is in before we decide what our truth will be. We will die before the evidence is all in. One must decide on the fragment of evidence. He must seize the truth and love it and marry it and sleep with it and die with it.

We must say with Emily Bronte, "No coward soul is mine,/ No trembler in the world's storm-troubled sphere:/ I see Heaven's glories shine,/ And Faith shines equal, arming me from Fear."

Just before the events that we heard read this morning, Jesus' disciples were arguing among themselves as to who would be the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven. Thomas disregards this. He will have nothing to do with rewards and bribes for discipleship. He is not concerned about his spiritual status now or later. He is concerned for the truth.

C. S. Lewis writes: "you know my history. You know (that) I was (not) bribed--that I was (not)lured into Christianity by the hope of everlasting life. I believed in God before I believed in Heaven. And even now, even if--let's make an impossible supposition--His voice, unmistakably his, said to me, "They have misled you. I can do nothing of that sort for you. My long struggle with the blind forces is nearly over. I die, children. The story is ending, would that be a moment for changing sides? Would not you and I take the Viking way: 'The Giants and the Trolls win. Let us die on the right side, with Father Odin.'"

Thomas says, "Let us also go, that we may die with him." But not long after this he asks Christ. "Lord, we do not know where you are going, how can we know the way?" Thomas was willing to follow Jesus not because of where he was taking him, because he didn't know where Jesus was going. He was willing to follow Jesus, not for any reward he might receive, because he was willing to die with him. He was willing to follow Jesus only because he had come to know and trust and love him. He was willing to follow with no strings attached. For in the words of Thomas, "Lord, to whom shall we go. You have the words of eternal life."

The church does a disservice to Thomas when it emphasised his doubt. Thomas was a doubter, but only because he took truth seriously. No one who takes truth seriously can afford the luxury of apathetic certainty. Because truth is not cheap. It is rare. It is the treasure hidden in the field for which a person will gladly sell everything to buy. It is the pearl of great value. It is the one thing needful.

Thomas was a person who was more concerned in the way of truth than the road of security. Much of religion today is predominantly concerned with security or rewards. It is presented many times in terms of what we want. "Are you happy, are you satisfied, do you want peace of mind, do you feel that you have failed, are you fed up with yourself--then come to Christ. He will meet your every need." As though the Lord Jesus Christ were to be thought of as a fairy god-mother or a super-psychiatrist.

I clipped out an advertisement in the paper recommending an evangelist who claimed to have spent "35 million minutes in prayer" and whose files were filled with "thousands of letters from all over the U.S. reporting miracles and great healings of nearly all manner of sickness and disease, and a multitude of needs supplied including the improvement of financial circumstances."

Compare this with Thomas, "Let us also go that we may die with him." That is what challenges and attracts me to him. He was not interested in the improvement of his heavenly financial circumstances. He was not concerned with the benefits of following Christ. He was interested in knowing and following the truth where-ever it led him.

Thomas was convinced that the value of truth was to be preferred to life. He confirmed the words of James Russell Lowell who wrote, "Though the cause of evil prosper Yet tis truth alone is strong; though her portion be the scaffold, And upon the throne be wrong, Yet that scaffold sways the future, And behind the dime unknown, Standeth God within the shadow, Keeping watch above His own."

Tradition tells us that after the resurrection of Christ that Thomas carried the good news into Parthia, Persia, and as far as India where he preached and suffered martyrdom. In my mind, there is no doubt about it. Thomas chose the road less travelled by.

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