

Witness to the World

A sermon by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the 24th Sunday after Pentecost, November 29, 1989. Scripture Lessons: Zephaniah 3:1-9; Psalm 3; 2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18; Luke 18:9-14.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

In 1952 history was made in Edinburgh, Scotland. You won't read about it in text-books however. Nevertheless it marked the beginning of a new era in Christian missions. Dr. David H.C. Read, who is now the Minister of the Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church in NYC was then the chaplain at Edinburgh University, in ~~Scotland~~. He invited D.T. Niles, a Methodist minister from the nation of Ceylon, to address the students in a series of evangelistic meetings. This was the first time a native Asian had come to evangelise a Scottish Presbyterian University. Immediately the question was raised, "Why bring someone all the way from Asia when we have lots of good Presbyterian evangelists right here in Scotland?" *In the eyes of many it was like*
wording to tax-collectors to evangelize the Pharisaees.

But there couldn't have been a better choice because the students continually raised the question with Niles about other religions, and Niles, of course, had a first hand knowledge of Islam and Buddhism. When a student asked Niles if the Moslem religion weren't just as good as the Christian religion he replied, "Are you a Moslem?" If the answer was No, Niles would say, "The first thing you have to do is to take a look at the religion of your own background. Make up your mind about Jesus Christ. If you decide to reject him, then start investigating Islam and Buddhism."

On one occasion the person who asked Niles this question was indeed a Moslem. D.T. answered, "Then you and I have a lot to talk about that others here wouldn't understand. Come around and see me." The student did visit Niles in Dr. Read's home that evening, and the discussion went on for hours.

D.T. Niles never failed to issue the challenge to consider Jesus Christ. When Dr. Read took Niles to meet the principal of the University, a very

part from the rest of the world... we've lost our sense of being distinctive... of being separate.

Zephaniah warns us that the Lord's vengeance would fall especially upon the sinful people of Judah and Jerusalem, God's own people. God had chosen them to be a blessing to the world but instead of becoming a blessing Jerusalem had become a corrupt, rebellious city that oppressed its own people. God's people had become no different from the rest of the world.

May God give us grace to repent. May God open our ears to listen to the Lord and accept his discipline. May the Lord give us grace to put our trust in the Lord and ask for his help. May the Lord give us a will to serve him.

Every week we pray, "thy kingdom come." Do we pray that with the hope that all the suffering, injustice, war and misery, and our incomplete and poor grasp of God's truth, will be replaced by justice, by peace, by a new creation, by complete knowledge of the truth of God in Christ?

Jesus Christ is the Lord of the universe. Are you a living expression of his lordship in every aspect of your life in our society? Let us commit ourselves into his hands so that wherever we are the Lord will make us a missionary presence. Jesus Christ is the Lord of history. With him we can only move forward. Under him we can only live in obedience. And this obedience is to go wherever he sends us. Amen.

overwhelming. What God calls us to do is not to solve all the problems of the world but to be sure that we're a part of the answer, God's answer, rather than part of the problem. I believe very strongly that the Presbyterian Church in its commitment to world mission over the last 150 years has been and will continue to be in the future, part of God's answer to a world in crisis. Ours is a commitment to the evangelization of the world. It's a commitment to being Christ's ministers of compassion. It's a commitment to being agents of peace and justice in the world in turmoil.

Bruce Rigdon made a startling comment last Thursday that I'd like to leave with you this morning. He said that if a person were to convert to Islam a definite change would be required... you'd know exactly what you'd have to do... you could eat no pork... there'd be set hours of prayer several times a day. To be a Moslem would be to adopt certain outward signs that would distinguish you from the non-Moslem.

But what if someone were to come to our church and ask us, "What must I do to be saved?" We might say, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved. We might further explain that God's grace is free... that Christ died for sinners... that we need only cry out, 'Lord, be merciful to me a sinner.'"

But what if this convert would then ask us, "How will my decision to receive Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior and to join this church affect the rest of my life." How would we answer that? Would we be able to answer? Or would there simply be silence because all too often no change whatsoever is expected or required because we have basically been co-opted by our culture. To be a Christian has come to mean little more than to be a good citizen. We have no distinguishing marks as Christians or as Presbyterians. We've lost them. We're no different, for the most

CHRISTIAN RESOURCES - money, scholarship, people - are concentrated at the moment, the commitment to the advance of Christ's kingdom and involvement in the task of taking his presence and proclaiming his name is being abandoned. Every year, local churches are spending more and more money on themselves who already have so much, and less and less on the wider mission of the church. There's been a retreat from the missionary field in our own denomination. And why is that? I can't help but think that it's because we've lost sight of the Lordship of Christ over all the world.

Our world has within it a number of grim realities. We live in a world where there's unprecedented hunger and poverty, where close to a billion people live below any minimum level of sustenance; a world of continued war and conflict.

But we also live in a world that's hungry for spiritual renewal, for a new order of human relationships, and for a new sense of peace and justice among people. Look at what's happening in Eastern Europe, China, Lebanon, Central America, South Africa. We live in a world that hungers deeply for the reign of God in human affairs, but it's a world that also lives with great crises and overwhelming forces of evil... where officials are like roaring lions... judges are like hungry wolves, too greedy to leave a bone until morning. Where the Lord's own prophets are irresponsible and treacherous and the priests defile what is sacred and twist the law of God to their own advantage.

The message of the Gospel, the good news of Christ, and the kingdom of God comes to just that kind of world, and it's to share the Gospel message with the world that Presbyterians are involved in world mission. The needs, the hurts, the pains and the evil of this world can seem

merely an Eastern guru who taught us how to feel good about ourselves or was he and is he the Lord of heaven and earth? Is Christ Lord?

Zephaniah is one of the least known of the OT prophets. He lived about 600 years before the birth of Jesus. His message contains little that's cheerful. His message emphasized, not the love of God, but God's justice, a theme which we don't hear very often today from the pulpit. The central teaching of his prophecy is that the day of the Lord is coming soon. This will mean destruction not only upon Israel, but upon all nations. And yet amid all the gloom and doom the prophet has a word of hope for the world. The fire with which the Lord will judge the nations will not be a fire that will destroy them but purify them. "Yea, at that time I will change the speech of the peoples to a pure speech, that all of them may call on the name of the Lord and serve him with one accord".

Who is this Lord all nations will call upon and serve? The answer of the New Testament is, Jesus of Nazareth. Christ is Lord. And it's been the great mission of the church in every age to go into all the world with the proclamation that Christ is Lord. God has vindicated this crucified Jew by raising him from the dead and making him Lord. Paul dreamed of the day when all nations would call upon the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and serve him. Despite his imprisonment and impending death Paul writes with great joy to Timothy, "I was able to proclaim the full message for all the Gentiles to hear." It was Paul's great joy in life to suffer for the cause of Christ so that the nations might call upon the Lord Jesus Christ and serve him.

We've lost that sense of joy in proclaiming the Gospel throughout the world. We need to rediscover the richness of the meaning of the lordship of Christ because in the Western world, where the majority of the

distinguished scientist, he asked Niles about the likelihood that Jesus Christ, a Palestinian Jew who lived nearly 2000 years ago, was the unique Savior of this mysterious universe. Dr. Niles quietly said, "First you have to read the New Testament and make up your mind about him."

Today my theme is world missions. Thursday night some of us heard Bruce Rigdon speak about what's going on in the Soviet Union. I wish all of you could've heard. It was thrilling to think that this church nurtured Bruce in his global vision. Ever since Thursday I've been wondering what our church today is doing to nurture the elementary children, the junior highs, the senior highs as well as the adults in a global vision of the role of the church.

So much of Christianity in the second half of the twentieth century has been "me" centered. The focus has been on what Jesus can do for me... how Jesus forgives my sin, how I can go to heaven, how Jesus can give me confidence, help me to think positively, be a better parent. And all that's good as far as it goes. But it doesn't go far enough.

Robert Wuthnow makes a devastating statement in his recent book entitled, *The Restructuring of American Religion*. He writes, "... God is relevant to contemporary Americans mainly because the sense of God's presence is subjectively comforting; that is, religion solves personal problems rather than addressing broader questions."

What has happened to us? Bruce Rigdon spoke on Thursday about the Presbyterian and Reformed influence on our culture. We shaped American culture. But now we've turned inward upon ourselves.

And so the statement of D.T. Niles seems to be very relevant to us today. "Make up your mind about Jesus Christ." We can't hope to regain our global vision until we make up our minds about Jesus Christ. Was he