THINKING CHRISTICALLY

--a sermon by the Rev. H. Paul Santmire
Houghton Memorial Chapel
Wellesley College
January 19, 1969

Two texts from Philippians, "I count everything as a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord." (3:8) And, "Finally, brethren, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things." (4:8)

This isn't a good time of year to be told to <u>think</u> about anything. By this time most people around here have had enough thinking for awhile. You can feel it when you walk through the library and see people stuffed into all of those little cubicles. The time has come, and indeed the time is near, for a break.

All this, of course, is understandable. Given a pressure situation with a number of exams and papers, a person will naturally look forward to the time when he or she can take a break, ease off. But it seems to me that the problem runs deeper than a particular period of reading, exams, and papers. It seems to me that this particular time is as depressing as it sometimes is, not so much because of what it is in itself, but because it brings to the surface and symbolizes a style of life which pushes itself upon us all year long.

This morning I want to talk about that year-round style of life and then juxtapose it with a syle of life which is informed by Christian thinking.

I.

That year-round style of life has a <u>cubicle</u> model. I mean, there's a body of information for you to learn and digest. So you take yourself to a cubicle and try to ingest that information as best you can.

On a much larger scale that's the way our society seems to run, too. The major difference is that the information-ingestion is performed by the computer, not the individual. Ours, as you know, is the "Age of Analysis". Just about anything, any group, or any individual can be reduced to a formula or to a set of formulae, which can then be stored and drawn forth at will. Now analysis, by definition, means isolation. Things are broken down into parts in order to be efficiently stored. The computer is fed with thousands of isolated facts, facts which of their essence do not belong to any larger fabric of meaning. That's the intellectual side of the cublicle style of life,--analysis and isolation.

The practical side of the same style of life corresponds to it, that is, individual management. You manage your life so as to fit into the societal system. You organize your behavior so it can function in society analogously to one of those carefully analyzed, isolated facts. You yourself become more and more like an item of information inside the societal machine. You are there, virtually, to be drawn forth at the will of the machine according to a program over which you have had little or no control. Life, then, is more or less a continuing exam-period, throughout which you are periodically called upon to produce.

You will recognize that I'm exaggerating. The cubicle isn't the model for all people at all times in our society. Here and there, from day to day, we can see signs of intellectual and practical creativity and spontaneity. Yet I think you will agree that we are seriously threatened, if not yet overwhelmed, by the prospect of a one-dimensional, analytic-technical society. On a large scale, everything is all too programmed. We live immersed in a world of isolated facts, which are drawn together continuously by a program over which we seem to have little or no control.

II.

Now, it's fashionable these days, in some theological circles, to minimize the threat of analytic-technic reality. It's fashionable, indeed, to run up to our cubicle world and embrace it just as it is. That is the advice of many of our avant garde secular theologians. If you don't do that, if you begin to raise questions about the intellectual and practical fragmentation and pre-determination of our experience, you'll quickly be told that you're a romantic, who's out of touch with the modern secular world.

It could be. But then again, I like romance. In particular it seems to me that the traditional notion of courtship has a good deal to commend it. I mean, you don't simply run up to anybody on the street and embrace him. At least you ask him his name. Then, in due course, the embrace can come, when and if it's fitting for that particular relationship.

Likewise, I think, for our relationship to contemporary analytic-technic society. We ought not to be embarrassed, however thick the epithets, by our desire for a courtship period, a getting-to-know analytic-technical reality as it is before we embrace it.

III.

To say this much, however, is just to begin to touch on the radicalness of the New Testament message. St. Paul doesn't mince nice words about some cautious courtship of this world. He maintains, simply and straightforwardly,--don't be related to this world, first and foremost. For Paul it's like this: Paul is out in the outer space of a religious orbit. There he sees the sun, on the one side, and the earth on the other. He chooses to concern himself first and foremost with the sun. He turns his back on the world of everyday experience.

Recall that Paul's life as a Christian began with his experience of seeing a great light. "Now, as he journeyed he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven flashed about him." (Acts 9:3) I take that at least to be a metaphorical statement of what we might call the first moment of Christian experience, or the ultimate moment of Christian experience. The mind's eye shifts away from the self-enclosed system of daily experience and looks to a blazing source of light.

For Paul, moreover, and for early Christianity generally, that light had what we can call a christic tone. So the account of Paul on the road to Damascus tells us that in the face of the light Paul falls to the ground, and hears the voice of Jesus. "And he said, 'Who are you Lord?' And he said, 'I am Jesus whom you are persecuting...'" (9:5) Paul turns away from the coordinate system of everyday experience and turns to the sun, to the face of Christ. So he says in Philippians,--"I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord." Everything as loss. Paul sees only the shining of the sun. The earth is now behind him.

I wonder if you and I are prepared to do this. We have already done it, 'tis true, insofar as we have in some sense taken the name of Christ for ourselves. We have already, to some degree, acknowledged that we want his Light to be the primary focal point of our lives. But are we prepared to do that on a continuing basis? Are we prepared to turn away from the coordinate system of daily experience every day in order to contemplate the face of Christ?

I ask this question since it seems to me that many of us are hung-up on the self-enclosed system of contemporary experience. We are rather tied to the world the way it is. Item, try to find a student radical during exam time, at least around here. Item, try to find a college teacher, or a preacher, who is really willing to jeopardize his monthly check. Item, try to find a resident of this affluent town who really wants to work for low cost housing. Of course there are exceptions. But many of us seem to be identified rather closely to the world the way it is, notwithstanding occasional expressions of righteous indignation. We tend to live first and foremost in the one dimension of the given, societal world. Our eyes are usually focused on the earth.

New Testament faith is different. It calls for a radical reversal of priorities. Turn away from the earth to the sun. Turn away from your everyday coordinate system to a transcendent source of light. See the face of Christ, and his face alone. "Indeed," says Paul,"I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord."

IV.

But unlike some classical forms of mysticism, New Testament faith doesn't stop at this point. It doesn't point us to the ultimate light and leave us there. It shows us the way from the ultimate light back to the mundane world. If we have first been called to give up the whole world, to crucify our world, we now receive it back, gloriously, under the sign of the resurrection. So the movement of faith goes from the earth to the sun, back to the earth, which is now illuminated by the sun.

At this point, however, you and I--American Christians, born with the puritan ethic in our blood--are prone to give the New Testament a social-action twist, or at least a personal moral twist. When we do enter into that existential moment of giving up the whole world as it is to focus our lives on the man Christ, we usually return to the world in order to reform it or to revolutionize it, or at least to reform ourselves morally. That's the characteristic American form of the faith, as you know. We look to Christ, when we do, as the moral revolutionary, the moral light, the ultimate moral teacher and leader.

Clearly, I think, we are right in this. And on this international day of Christian unity, we can take some pride in our puritan heritage. The ecumenical church needed the American contribution of moral activism. Sometimes in the history of the church that theme was severely underemphasized. Yet in the New Testament it's as clear as daylight. As the writher of the first epistle of John says: "He who says he is in the light and hates his brother is in the darkness still. He who loves his brother abides in the light..." (I Jn. 1:8-10)

But I am convinced that if we American Christians are rightly to understand and to live our own catholic faith, we need to be instructed by the whole church, particularly the orthodox church. The orthodox church has always celebrated the light of God in Christ,--not first of all as the moral light, however. First of all, the <u>intellectual</u> light. Hence the season of Epiphany,--which begins with the story of the wise men of the orient coming to the nativity of Christ,--has always been of central importance for the orthodox church.

This reflects a genuine New Testament concern. We can recall here not only the story of the wise men coming to Christ, but also the exhortation of Paul to "take every <u>thought</u> captive to obey Christ."(II Cor. 10:5) Or, our text from Philippians,--"Finally, brethren, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think of these things."

Perhaps that is just what we fragmented, programmed American Christians need today, a <u>christic intellectual vision</u>, no less than a christic moral impulse. <u>Think</u> of these things, says the Apostle. He means,--let the light of Christ illuminate your intellectual experience no less than your moral experience.

V.

Now it would be overly ambitious, and actually quite unrealistic, for me to stand here and try to tell you <u>what</u> to think. You know the major elements of your daily experience much better than I. The responsibility to draw intellectual lines from Christ to the world, then back again, is yours, much as the responsibility of drawing the moral lines from Christ to the world and back is yours.

Perhaps the best thing I can do at this point is to single out one impressive example of contemporary Christian thinking, as the kind of thing I have in mind. I refer to the creative work of the Roman Catholic paleontologist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. He has projected a cosmic vision, with Christ at the center. He sees the whole of evolution, which he takes very seriously, as culminating in the person of the resurrected Christ. That is the kind of Christian intellectual dreaming I have in mind.

But if I cannot, and do not want to, tell you what to think, I will venture to tell you how to think. I will venture to tell you about the proper method of thinking, if I read the New Testament aright. That much I have already said: To contemplate first the face of Christ and his Light, and then to turn your mind's eye to our sorely fragmented yet highly programmed sphere of daily experience.

In practice this means that you will have to read the New Testament, especially the Gospels, more that you do, and meditate on it and the picture of the man Christ which it presents. In practice, it seems to me, that's the way we come to see the light of Christ, by ourselves or when we come together. Then you will have to make some kind of an audacious and imaginative intellectual leap into the midst of contemporary experience, perhaps particularly into contemporary experience as it is interpreted by that academic discipline which is dearest to your heart. Think christically about your physics, for example. Or about your art history. That's what I'm telling you to do this morning; that's what I'm telling myself to do: To turn to the ultimate Light and to see His face; and then to allow that light to unify, to liberate, and even to glorify the mundane things of our analytic-technical world.

But to do this, you'll have to leave your cubicle, and I mine. At least for awhile. Take a break. Maybe even go skating, with your mind as well as your feet. Let your mind wander as the runners take you gliding around the lake. Look up at the sun, then, illuminating your world. In your mind's eye, see the Light of the man Christ. Then return to your cubicle. To your surprise, see how it glows, more than you had ever thought possible.

Says the Apostle, "I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus, my Lord." Then he concludes, "Finally, brethren, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things."

When you have the mind of Christ, you can fall in love with the world.