Wellesley
May 14, 1978
Sermon

(1)

Two texts this morning from the 26th chapter of Acts, the first is Paul speaking to a certain King Agrippa, a local dignitary: "And so...," says Paul, "I did not disobey the heavenly vision."

The second is Paul speaking to another government official ~~in the same place, a~~ dignitary from the Roman administrative system, a certain Festus: "I am not mad," says Paul, "what I am saying is sober truth.L"

This sets my theme for this Pentecost Sunday sermon: the heavenly vision and the sober truth.

I must say, at first I was inclined to preach a^relevant sermonj[4] given the time of year hereabouts, with another text *3® the same chapter, the 24th verse: "Festus shouted at the top of his voice, 'Paul, you are raving; too much study is driving you made.'"

Be that as it may, I will stay with -fefetS theme, the heavenly vision and the sober truth, because I think that it brings us face to face with aM deeper problematic, which is present not only in the narratives of the Book of Acts, but also very much in our own lives as Christian people today.

I.

We're approaching graduation time, as we all know. **WSu** That day will be a glorious one for many of our seniors: pride in their accomplishments, relief that they made it, satisfaction with the attention heaped on them by friends and relatives. But then the day will be over: and they'll have to pack up their things, deal with tensions with their family and friends maybe, move somewhere, pay the bills, get settled, and all the rest. This is the tension: on the one hand, the extraordinary experience of gaaduation; on the other, the ordinary experience of making their way in the world.

-x*~*z*w yP'F

JiiKC is also the time when some people plan to get married — a few still 4o. You've been to weddings; some of you have even gone through that wonderful day of madness yourself. Well, they are festive days, times of joy and expectation, by and large. But then comes the post-wddding realities: beginning to get used to each other in your bumpiness, figuring out how to hold two vocational courses together in one place, dealing with two sets of in-lawsK, doing the shopping, the housework, maybe even changing the dopers. Again the tension: the extraordinary experience of the wedding day and the ordinary experience of everyday marital **enparimicfl >**

Z4MS is the time, likewise, when an incredibly excited enthusiastic bubbling batch of prospective studen^s^uacfeniy*"o^ finally accept the fact that such a wonderful institution as Meliesly has accepted them. But there will be times, maybe about

the middle of next October during the first wave
hourlies, when everything liTTWhiju I ; in this ^academiAic
~~nether nether world,~~ will seem incredibly commonplace,
if not positively dull and deadly. Once again: the
tensions between the estraordinary experience of
having been accepted by Wellesleg.^and the ordinary
experience of daily academic jvpnimimtatj. as a student.

II.

We see what seems to be the same kind of tension in
the Book of Acts, especially vivid today **pcaahap**s, in
view of the fact that we are celebrating the first
Pentecost, while our KKXK from the end of Acts seemtk>^
to be yet one more familiar account of daily life
in the early Church. The Book of Acts seems to get more and more mundane
with each passing chapter.

Acts begins with the glorious story of the descent
of the Spirit on the early Church, the tongues of firsL,
the ecstatic moments of speaking in many tongues, the
first powerful HKKK sermons of Peter and the other Apostles. >>
Much of the rest of the story is an account of^ controversies '
in the Church, disputes about jurisdiction, negotiations
with authorities, — apostolic committee meetings, as it were.

Paul's own life shows a similar kind of polarity.
On the one side we see the heavenly vision. "I shall go on
to tell of visions and revelations granted by the Lord," he
writes in II Corinthians(v.K12:If.): "I know a Christian
man who fourteen years ago(whether in the body or out of it
I do not know—God knows) was caught up as far as the third heaven.
And I know that thisjiame man (whether in tie body or out of it,
I do not know—God knows) was caught up into paradise, and
heard wor^zso secret that human lips may not repeat them."

This is the same man who in the same chapter of the same
letter has to deal with the mundanities of ordinary chnuch
life, such as people's Keelings about their money. So Paul
tells these Corinthians: "It is you I want, not your money;
parents should make provision for their children, not fckmiK
children for their parents.... Btit, granted," he continues,
"that I did not prove a burden to you, still I was unscrupulous
enough, you say, to yse a trick to catchs you. Who, of the mem
I have sent to you, was used by me to defraud you?"(12:14-16)
Then, he writes, as he looks forward to visiting with them:
"I fear I may find quatreling and jealousy, angry tempers and
personal rivalries, backbiting and gossip, arrogance and general
disorder. "(20b) That's a long way from his heavenly vision,,
~~it seems.~~

So here is this polarity, then, between the extraordinary
experience and the ordinary experience, between the heavenly
vision and the sober truth; What are we to make of all this?

There are those who would have us believe that we have to have it one way. Some believe that the Christian life is chiefly about the heavenly vision. Others maintain that it's chiefly about the sober truth. Allow me to refer to these twel groups here, by stereotype, as the charismatics and the pedestrians.

Some -sestefeftfeyied charismatics seem to belfeze that the born-again experience, ecstatic sxpsxxMxs: involvement with the Spirit, speaking in tongues, and all the rest, is basically what makes a true Christian. Other, more conventional locking Christians — hence my term pedestrian — insist quite fervently that,^when everything has been said and done, it's the day—to -day expjstxeiace ^the discipline of daily prayer and devotion, the attention to discipleship where one works and the quest for justice in society, really what being a Christian is all about. They also insist, in many instances, that that is what the Church has always intended, especially through its ritual of infant baptism: a lifelong, perhaps unglamorous, but steady life of discipleship.

At times, -inktaed-. the party of the heavenly vision and the party of the sober truth have turned on each other. The one looks at the second as not truly knowing Christ; the second looks at the first as not truly knowing the kind of worldly discipleship Christ xaiiax expects of His followers. So the charismatics look down their noses at the pedestrians and the pedestrians return the favor, and the Church begins to drift in midstream, with no one at the oars and no one at the rudder.

Now a couple of weeks ago I was standing in this very pulpit telling you that being a Christian, as Kierkegaard said so forcefully, £s basically a matter of either/or. Eitheryou choose the way of light or the way of darkness. Either you Choose the wyy of God or the way of Mammon. Either you choose to follow Christ or Artemis, or whomever. You can't have it both waystr **'-Af r.hi,n,amaa=aaia**^^, I still hold that to be the **plain** truth of the biblical witness: either/or.

But being a Christian is never boring. No sooner did you hear one thing, and try to take it seriously, then along comes the preacher and tries to tell you another thing; anj it **nnnndg HIrr feou-bave-^te-^stai*t a-11 ■"u~ Christmas** sentences, predicated on that either/or choice; you hold to that. But, then, once you've made ZVWMyou immediately xwfcxsxxax switch to bo th/and.

To be a Christian, I'm saying now, is not to VoHow either the way of the heavenly vision or the xateKxkxxkkx way of the sober truth, but both the one and the other. /That should be clear enough from Paul's own narrative. In chapter 26 of Acts we see him talking first to King Agrippa, telling about his heavenly vision, and indeed speaking with great power, apparently, ***Usrfy*** great enthusiasm. So much so, that the XHISKK conventional-mmnded Roman official, Festus, who's witnessing the whole thing all of a sudden interrupts Paul's impassioned speech and says ^hey man, calm down, you're losing touch with your senses, show a little

restraint, would you? You've been studying too hard,, says Festus. Why don't you take a study break and calm down; go over to XfiKKX Schneider and watchaaxthemX play tennis or something. Get a grip on yourself ,. " says Festus *■

It's at this point that Paul remarksk "I am not mad. Your Excellency,... what I am saying is sober truth." That's Z&c. reality.

Likewise, if you'll recall the glooious theological heights of Paul's discourse in the first **eight'^or-Mlsvsn** chapters of his letter^ to the Romans, especially chapter Kight where he talks about^the^ vitalities, of the new Christian life in the Spirit ztKafee chapters' are immediately followed, especially in chapter 12 and 13, wJbfc a wide ranging ethical discourse on the life of the Christian in the daily world of the first century.

So for Paul the extraordinary and the ordinary are inseparably linked, the ecstatic and the mundane, the its intense and the commonplace, the twice—born and the first-born, the day of Pentecost and the daily life of the Church that ensued. (I suppose, on reflection from our own experience ~~indeed,~~ we wouldn't have expected it to be otherwise: for no one really believes that life is either graduation day or work in the world?"Me marriage festival or mundane married existence? either getting accepted into an excellent college, ^or^doing the conventional kind of things that such a college requires from day to day.x either

So the Christian life is definitely both/and? in this respect! ~~in this respect~~ Both the heavenly vision and the sober truth.

IV.

But if so, how do we hold it all together? How dft we both can be obedient to the heavenly vision daily live the ~~kandxxixka~~ and life of sober truth?

The first thing I want to say htre is prudential. On a spectrum that extends from the ecstatic to the mundane, from the heavenly vision on one side to the sober truth on the other, each one of us will find oursel^at one point or antiiiher. Maybe you are a twise born Christian. Maybe you are a once born Christian. Perhaps you're somewhere in between.

I want to suggest ~~So I'm telling~~ ■ you now Jti^t Christian maturity means that your experience will^wan't to coder the whole spectrum^, in one way or another. But^this i—»point **wfaaec** I don't want you to run right out and start practicing what I'm preaching.

I happen to believe that the LKnxxx life of the Church is enriched rather than impoverished by this spectrum of diversity. We need the charismatics and the mystics, surely, lest we begin to lose touch with the heavenly vision. But so do we need the worldly disciples and the folks who seek to serve God in their various callings in the world, lest we begin to lose touch with the sober truth.

So I don't want you to run right out -- if perchance the thought should cross your mind — and try to become something that you're not. It's good that you^r^you. It's good that you bring your own personal strengths^ to' this community and to the Church at larve.

But then, of course, all o£ us will want to be open to the promptings of the Spirit, who blows like the wind, we know not where, who at one moment will drive us into torrents of ecstatic experience, who at another moment will force us to be good committee members, for the sake of the Kingdom.

And, of course, we can learn from each other, in this respect. Those who are better at speaking tongues can teach L those who are better at getting their discipleship done where they work, and vice versa.

So ws a community, here and wherever the Church may form itself, we can get it together, we can join the heavenly vision and the sober truth, by allowing the Spirit to speak to us through the glorious diversity of the saints.

V.

But that's only a preliminary, prudential kind of answer to the question I'm raising -- how do we get it all together, how do we hold together both the heavenly vision and the sober truth, how do we allow the Spirit to shape our lives more and more in wach of these ways.

You will ionsrecognize that I have saved the good wine until last. You know the answer already. All it has to do is dawn on you, like the dayspring from the East, if it hasn't already.

This is the import, I think, of a poigant little interchange between Paul and Agrippa, following the interruption by Fedtus, trying to calm Paul down. As Paul apparently returned to his impassioned address to Agrippa, the king responds, perhaps deeply, perhaps evasively, we can't be sure: "In a xhxax short time you think to make^^me^a Clir i st ianl" That is to say: you think I should be co^nr^^rialLtZn? No, says Paul, that's not the point.

"And Paul said, 'Whether short or long, I would to God that not only you but also all who hear me this day might become such as I am—except for these chains."

Now what does he mean by that? If we know anything about Paul at all from his epistles!, we know that it can only mean one things to follow the way of Jesus Christ, to take on the form of Christ in our own lives, as Paul tried to in his.

Which is to say: you and I dnn't hold it together. You and I don't somehow find the wherewithal within ourselves to follow both the way of the heavenly vision and the tey of the sober truth. But we look to Christ, whoxa perfectly unites heaven and earth,/the reality of God and the reality of humanity, in one glorious life, and kind the unity we tzeeA in him.

Remember those stirring words of Paul in Philippians 2? "So if there is any encouragement in Christ," he writes, "any incentive of love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, Complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same 1 .ove ,*' b iiii

'■ffiiad "(vv.1-2) What does this mean?

Paul immddliately explains: "Have this mind among yourselves, which you have in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count eauality with God a thing to be grasped, but empttsd himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of our humanity."

This is the symphonic movement^of^G^d's grace, from heavenly^Sife- to earthlyfiiom the perfect divine, ecstatic vision of divinity to the total MMHRit in the mundaneness of humanity, and then back again: "And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and kaksfcBMadx bestowed on him a name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every kneHU should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Creator."

In Christ the heavenly vision and the sober truth are one, and in Him,kx as we more and more identify^ our lives with his, the heavenly vision and the sober truth can be one 6/5^ as well.

So we can give thanks this morning, that the Spirit who leads us into ecstacy, at times, and the Spirit who calls us to daily obedience in the world around us, all the time, is no stranger to us. So we can give thanks that ggRfcRisrwRk the Day of Pentecost makes the beautiful sense it can make for us, because it follows the Tuj **HfnfiTinfl** Tirn'il'lli**mil** ~f-l |i Day?of EAster. So we can give thanks that the Spirit who enlivens our hearts with heavenly viiionsX and who inspires us to lead lives of sober truth, is at once and always the Spirit of Christ, our crucified and risen Lord.

In Him, through the Spirit,cpx'JwLa« the Lord, it all holds together.

"So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any incentive of love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind,.^®** having the same love." Amen.