THE CITY OF MAN AND THE CITY OF GOD

--a sermon by the Rev. H. Paul Santmire
University Lutheran Church
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"For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city which is to come."(Hebrews 13:14)

Recently a group of parents called on a minister of a certain suburban church and requested that the church's youth group cancel its scheduled joint-meeting with another church youth group in the center of the city. The parents explained that they only had the best interests of the children in mind, since that area of the city was not too far from where the riots had been the preceding summer.

That, I think, is a possible interpretation of our text. Implicitly it was the recognition that the center city should be of no lasting concern to us as Christians, since we are seeking a city which is to come. This is an interpretation, as you know, which has a long and venerable history. We see it in the very early Christian centuries, when men left the cities to live in the wilderness as hermits. This even went to the extreme of the development of a cult of dirt among certain circles of Christians. It developed over against the urban life of the Roman Empire which had one of its focal points in the public bath. Since these Christians sought not the city of Rome, but the city of God, they felt compelled not to bathe. (I sometimes tell this story to students who tell me how lousy the contemporary church is.)

The cult of dirt aside, however, it seems clear that that kind of interpretation of our text is highly dubious. We need do no more than think of our gospel lesson today which refers to the Christian as one who feeds the hungry, gives drink to the thirsty, welcomes the stranger, visits the sick, and goes to those who are in prison.(Mt. 25:31-46) This thrust of biblical faith has been all too conveniently forgotten at times. For example, one of the leading and the most liberal of American theologians of the last century wrote paeans of praise for child labor. That kind of thing is a truly scandalous stench in Christian history, the stench of unnoticed decaying human flesh. And I am afraid that we still can smell it, from the fumes that still hover over Hiroshima and Nagasaki, to the smoke which rises from the regular flash fires in our city ghettos.

At this point, I think, we should beware of an only slightly different kind of cult, the cult of the great open and wild spaces. More often than not, the so-called return to nature, which so moves so many Americans, is only the other side of a refusal to return to the city and its polluted air. This is why I for one find the thought of a man like Thoreau suspect. Thoreau couldn't have cared less about urban life and about transforming its power structures. He was chiefly interested in cultivating his own private world of natural purity away from the hungry, the thirsty, and the estranged.

Which leads me to a further question. This concerns the present heated discussion about civil disobedience. I think we must say that civil disobedience, from a biblical perspective, is unquestionably wrong, -- <u>if</u> it is predicated on an attempt to escape from social

realities, as Thoreau apparently tried to do, in order to establish a private world of moral purity. If civil disobedience is to be justified, biblically speaking, I think it has to arise from a life which is emersed in care for the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, and the estranged. That is to say, the criterionfor civil disobedience is social justice, not private purity of conscience.

Let me read you a little poem, not the best poem ever written.

I have come back to the city,
With its clang and its screech and its din;
Its halls are filled with madness,
And its eyes are blind with sin.

. . . . .

I will go back to the mountains,
Back to the prairies I've trod;
Some day I shall stand in silence
And speak once more with my God.

Thank God we don't have to sing that. Thank God our church was able to sing this morning--

Where cross the crowded ways of life,
Where cries of race and clan,
Above the noise of selfish strife,
We hear thy voice, O Son of Man.

. . . . .

O Master, from the mountainside,
Make haste to heal these hearts of pain;
Among these restless throngs abide,
O tread the city's streets again.

Thank God for the Social Gospel, which has called the Church to its senses, away from the cult of dirt, away from the cult of nature, away from the cult of private moral purity.

On the other hand, to do justice to our text we will also want to say that the Social Gospel isn't enough. It has to be tied to what we might refer to as the Eternal Gospel. "For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city which is to come." This is a word, I think, which our generation of church members also needs to hear. For without the Eternal Gospel, we have no perspective for the Social Gospel. We become men without hope. And men without hope will sooner or later find their faith and their love withering away.

In the city there are times of darkness, which often seem to overcome and stamp out the times of light. This, notwithstanding the commitment of those enlivened by the Social Gospel. The city can frustrate even the most relentless aspirations for social justice. It was only a few years ago that a leading Protestant writer was calling on all of us to celebrate the secular city and to embrace it. Well, I suspect that now in the wake of the riots in Detroit and Newark and Boston and elsewhere some people are wondering whether they had not been called upon to celebrate and embrace a man-eating tiger. And now a leading authority on the contemporary city tells us that we can expect more, not less, riots and violence.

If there were no future City of God, I think it would be all too easy to fall from time to time, even permanently, into a mood of hopelessness, into a mood of despair, into a mood of bitter apathy. For,

our wondrous Social Gospel can be and often is frustrated. G. K. Chesterton tells the story of a man who set out from England in a small boat on an adventurous voyage to discover new lands. Soon after England had disappeared behind him, however, fog and high waves and storms came upon him. But he fought his way through the rough seas and finally made it to land. He then discovered, however, that he had sailed right back to England. Sometimes the advancement of the Social Gospel can be like that. You crusade through the roughest of storms, only to find yourself right back where you started. And that can be pretty discouraging.

That kind of discouragement is underlined for us in the Old Testament in the words of the great preacher:

> Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher,
> vanity of vanities! All is vanity.
> What does man gain by all the toil
> at which he toils under the sun?
> A generation goes and a generation comes,
> but the earth remains for ever.
> What has been is what will be,
> and what has been done is what will be done;
> and there is nothing new under the sun.(Eccl. 1:2-4,9)

Nothing new under the sun. That saying is authenticated by the permanent place it has in our consciousness even to this day.

That can be the circle of hopelessness into which even our most committed adherence to the Social Gospel can take us, if we are without the Eternal Gospel, -- if we are without the hope that one day we can sail from England and come upon a New World, -- if we are without the hope that one day the city of Rome, the city of London, or the city of Boston will truly be transformed into the City of our God. <u>With</u> that hope, however, we <u>can</u> return to the city again and again, no matter how rough and frustrating the going may be. And we <u>can</u> be attuned to the "signs of the times," the penultimate dawnings of light which foreshadow the final coming of the glorious City of God; we will have grounds to look for these flashes of light even in the darkest of times. We will be enlivened by the awareness that ultimately, and even penultimately, there is something new under the sun.

Another way of putting all this is to say that when we take the name of Christ, we assume the identity of one who is continually ministering to the hungry, the thirsty, and the estranged in the darkest corners of the city. That is where the life of Christ is to be found in this world. In the city, as we sing, "We hear thy voice, O Son of Man." But that is not all. The same Son of Man will one day come to the whole world in his glory, in the transcendent and incomprehensible End of all things. And we are identified with him in that mysterious second coming as well. Then, in God's own time, the life of Christ will shine openly throughout the world. The city of man will have been transformed into the City of God. That is our hope.

This is a good thing to meditate about next time you ride the subway down town. "For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city which is to come."