

"THE MARKS OF A MAN"

Second in a Series of Sermons

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by

Rev. Earl F. Palmer

II

"Cool Under Stress"

Text: Acts 27:13-26

Reflect for a moment on a second mark of a man -- balance. The ability to roll with the punches, to keep cool under stress.

The graduate of 1969 will want the attribute of balance because the intensity of our age is perhaps greater than ever before. There is a volatility today or built-in explosiveness across the boards in everyday living. Everything is geared to a very high level of energy output and tension. I think the set up requirements of the average dance band are a fair indicator. A five-piece, first class, teenage orchestra will need at least six power outlets: five will be necessary for the individual amplifiers and individual microphones for each musician, plus an outlet to supply the many-faceted revolving blue-green mirror ball with theatre spotlight. This combination of energy and light will mean continuous and omnipresent sound and darting lights throughout the whole room. Not only that, but add to this volatility the high level of controversy which surrounds every institution and social reality today. Controversy is with us at every place; even such routine aspects of social life as job interviews are now highly controversial. The engineering student must climb over demonstrators stretched out at the doorway to visit the Dow Chemical job interviewer. The course offerings at schools, the right of some students to take ROTC, these and almost all that goes with the university scene, is now controversial, crisscrossed with recrimination and bitterness. I wonder if the students of today will in future years have any sentimental attachment to the old campus quadrangle and buildings of their volatile student days. "Ah, here, Son, is where we burned the president in effigy and over there my class toppled down the Campanile....those were the days."

How these present days will be evaluated in the long term is another important question when it becomes clear in what direction the social institutions of our time finally move, but as for now, the problem is one of the individual managing to somehow keep his balance, his stride, to keep cool, calm and collected when everything around him is tense and bitter with the angry crossfire of charge and countercharge, how to think clearly with the noise level earbreaking and the assault on the senses total.

At this point, let me shift focus to an interesting event in the life of Saint Paul. He is a prisoner en route to Rome on a military ship. Luke, his companion, tells of the eventful trip in great detail:

"And when the south wind blew gently, supposing that they had obtained their purpose, they weighed anchor and sailed along Crete, close inshore. But soon a tempestuous wind, called the northeaster, struck down from the land; and when the ship was caught and could not face the wind, we gave way to it and were driven. And running under the lee of a small island called Cauda, we managed with difficulty to secure the boat; after hoisting it up, they took measures to undergird the ship; then, fearing that they should run on the Syrtis, they lowered the gear, and so were driven. As we were violently storm-tossed, they began next day to throw the cargo overboard, and the third day they cast out with their own hands the tackle of the ship. And when neither sun nor stars appeared for many a day, and no small tempest lay on us, all hope of our being saved was at last abandoned.

"As they had been long without food, Paul then came forward among them and said, 'Men, you should have listened to me, and should not have set sail from Crete and incurred this injury and loss. I now bid you take heart for there will be no loss of life among you, but only of the ship. For this very night there stood by me an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I worship, and he said, 'Do not be afraid, Paul; you must stand before Caesar; and lo, God has granted you all those who sail with you.' So take heart, men, for I have faith in God that it will be exactly as I have been told. But we shall have to run on some island." .....

Acts 27:13-26

In the dream experience during the Mediterranean storm, Paul gains an over-all perspective within which the separate parts are integrated. He catches the assurance, "You are to stand before Caesar." Therefore, Paul is convinced that he still has a job to do beyond the immediate task of keeping body and soul together on board ship in a storm. He recognizes this larger setting and it affects him in two very important ways:

(1) When Paul discovers the larger context of his life, it has the result of sharpening the significance of the particular moments of his life. Since the discovery is of significance to the others too, he urges the men to stay with the ship. Jesus Christ called his disciples the "salt of the earth", and by this Jesus meant that in a real sense his disciples are a preservative influence and force in the situations of life. It seems to me that this shipboard incident in a symbolic way helps to place into focus what is a basically conservative thread that works its way through all Christian attitudes toward the earth and the Christian's role as a sojourner in history. The Christian by instinct tends to have a high regard and respect for each part of the whole, not because we worship the parts because we do not, but we respect the separate parts because we see in them their important though penultimate task. This is what Charles Malik means when

he points out that the Christian is and should be the true materialist. We do not reject the ship, run away from it, escape from its rat-race struggle against the storm; we are compelled to value it, preserve it as long as possible, and even enjoy it. This results in a balanced view of whatever ship we are destined to be aboard. The graduate of 1969 will be tempted to write off as a lost cause many ships, many of the social institutions in society. There appears on the surface of it a certain kind of bravery and purity in rejecting the structures that have been inherited from the past. This is part of the inescapable appeal of the revolutionary spirit and atmosphere. But, the experience of our century has demonstrated that the dogmatic claims of anarchy and revolution are always over-simplified. The really important values of justice, freedom and the humanity of man can be as easily destroyed by the revolutionary who hates the ship and part of its passenger list (some of the soldiers wanted to kill the prisoners) as by the reactionary who adores the ship with its beautiful carvings and fittings but could care less about the men on board. Paul stands at the very hardest place somewhere between these extremes and in a place where both groups will hate him either for his conservatism or his foolishness. But Paul kept cool under stress. "He served the sailors dinner and gave thanks to God."

(2) Paul's awareness of the larger context has a second effect too: If the particular moment has been infused with more significance, it also must be noted that in healthy tension with that effect is an opposite one: Paul respects but will not absolutize the local particular moment. When the time comes the Apostle and his companions leave the ship for land. Once on the island of Malta Paul is at a peak in popularity and importance, having been the best seaman during the crisis and the one who supervised the safe exit from the beached ship. But he shows as remarkable a quality of balance and poise in his moments of success as he does in danger. While building a fire on the beach, a poisonous snake bites his hand; when he does not die from the bite, the islanders and the Romans superstitiously conclude that he must be a god. In this critical situation, Paul is as clearheaded and cool as he was at sea. He proves himself a true revolutionary with no permanent dependence upon human institutionalism. He journeys on to Rome. What a remarkable complexity! He is free of any inordinate love of the ship or the status of Master Seaman, or of hero of Malta. Paul is an en route man who has a journey set before him, and, therefore, he will not become enslaved to the forms and institutions of his generation. He worships only Jesus Christ and, therefore, that kingly reign overshadows every other reality. I recommend that loyalty for us today. The realization that Jesus Christ is Lord protects me against my own tendency toward infallibility as well as my fear of other tyrannies that try to swing their weight in daily life situations. The realization that Jesus Christ is alive and personal, not an abstract religious principle, gives hope and courage to keep trying even when the odds are discouraging.

Combine these two effects and the result is a balanced man in the face of the volatile and controversial challenges of contemporary society.