

"SHOCK OF RECOGNITION"

A Communion Meditation

by

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Text: John 13:1-11

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During the 1967 season on Broadway there was a hit comedy by Robert Anderson entitled, "You Know I Can't Hear You When the Water's Running." The play consists of several sub-plays which in various separate ways speak to the question: "What does it take to force a person to see himself as he really is?" Anderson describes this embarrassing and important moment with the phrase, "shock of recognition." Anderson's phrase is intriguing because it seems to me to fit precisely this year of our lives. This is the Shock of Recognition Year. Nothing is hidden from us. Everything is vivid, blatant. This is the year when neither social nor private problems can be successfully deferred because to an extent never before matched in history, the people of a whole civilization have been subjected to continuous, withering analysis and criticism. In the arts the very edge may have already been reached where the shock of recognition theme has become visually and verbally abrasive to a deeper, never before equalled degree. The fact stands that within the last months the whole of the social order has been deeply shocked by the recognition of the apparently impossible problems of our time; everybody knows about them; whereas such delicate and personal matters were once covered up by technical language, today they are at the surface. The result is that the year that ends today has been a humiliating and frustrating year.

The war in Viet Nam has posed a crisis of humiliation for those who are willing to acknowledge involvement in one way or another. The chances of decisive victory in this war are remote and at the same time the attempt to seek acceptable terms for peace is just as awkward and frustrating. But not only in this issue but on almost all difficult questions this has been a shock of recognition year. Devaluation has struck the British pound and threatens the other currencies of the West. Student and worker unrest and demonstrations in both East and West have outwardly challenged the establishment of the older generation. The United Nations has been unable to keep peace in the Middle East. The widening gap between rich nations and poor is growing and with it an intensified resentment between underdeveloped and industrialized nations. Racial tensions between many of the minority and majority groups in the United States have brought to the surface an inner wound in American society that must be healed and can no longer go on ignored. It has been a hard year for the developing nations as economic gains fail to keep pace with population growth.

At the personal level too this has been a humiliating year. Modern psychology has popularized most of the ordinary defense mechanisms that we have used to shield ourselves from others so that they hardly work any more.

Added to that it is increasingly hard to amaze even our relatives with strange behavior and get the little relief or satisfaction that used to be there. Producers of the avant garde play "Hair" in New York were actually disappointed that stark naked actors were only able to embarrass an average of one person per performance. What has happened to us is that a dull ache has replaced the startled gasp of previous generations. Nevertheless, the shock of recognition has taken place, and each evening all of us finally go home to face the mirror on the wall. If it has been our lot to live as successfully placed active members of the community, generally respected, etc., the situation is still humiliating if we have really read the signs correctly. Many teenage youth are verbally disappointed in their successful parents and the minority groups that live across town have in large numbers lost respect for the leadership of the traditionally solid middle-class citizen. Therefore, the hardworking man in the inside class is hurting for the first time as much as all the rest. This hero of democracy must now face up to his failures too. Our trivial ideologies are simply not holding up: hedonism, the acquisition of goods, escapism, these are not good enough, and whoever I am, these ways of life have been called into question during this year.

Have you ever thought of the fact that the last evening that Jesus Christ spent with his disciples began with a shock of recognition experience?

"Now before the feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. And during supper, when the devil had already put it into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon's son, to betray him, Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, rose from supper, laid aside his garments and girded himself with a towel. Then he poured water into a basin, and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel with which he was girded. He came to Simon Peter; and Peter said to him, 'Lord, do you wash my feet?' Jesus answered him, 'What I am doing you do not know now, but afterward you will understand.' Peter said to him, 'You shall never wash my feet.' Jesus answered him, 'If I do not wash you, you have no part in me.' Simon Peter said to him, 'Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!' Jesus said to him, 'He who has bathed does not need to wash, except for his feet, but he is clean all over, and you are clean, but not all of you.' For he knew who was to betray him; that was why he said, 'You are not all clean.'"

The act of Christ and his words suddenly posed for his friends an identity crisis of overwhelming proportions. "Is it I?" He had forced each man to face up to his ambitions, loyalties, weaknesses and the evening left them utterly worn out, frustrated, humiliated and confused.

But Jesus Christ was not then nor is he today content to confront mankind with ourselves, to reveal our inadequacy in a kind of wholesale shock of recognition. His purpose is deeper, more radical, more total. His goal is not only confrontation, but the healing of the wounds that

recognition revealed. Jesus not only shocks his disciples with the withering question, he also motivates them with a new kind of strength which at this Last Supper evening they discover in the sharing of bread and wine. It would be a small matter, a very little victory after all, if Christ's only purpose were to achieve a kind of shock of recognition. His purpose is to heal and make genuine men of his disciples, and to this day the Last Supper is the sign to all men of the twofold gift that Jesus Christ has granted to the world. Truth and grace -- the shock of recognition had the shock of justification.