

"CHRIST AND CAESAR"

Acts: 26: 12-29

December 3, 1967

The Romans in the first century were efficiency oriented, practical, well structured and economically sophisticated. They were devoted to two things before all others: order and performance. Only in a very slight, superficial sense were the Romans interested in ideology. Let me show what I mean. In architecture, whereas the Greeks are purists, the Romans are imitative, innovative, practical. The Greeks achieved unrivaled integrity of form but the Romans achieved mastery of the arch and with it such practical things as the aqueduct and bridge. In economics the Romans are the first to realize that the coin is representative of wealth and not wealth itself therefore the Roman copper instituted really the first sophisticated concept of modern commerce. In the pure arts the Roman practicality again proved overwhelming. In 1960 my wife and I visited the little Aegean Island of Santorini in the Mediterranean. I noticed a row of full sized marble statues in various heroic poses. The only observable flaw was that each statue was headless though there was a recess prepared in each of the figures for a head to be inserted. Our guide contemptuously remarked that these were examples of Roman statuary from the 1st century. They were bad copies of Greek works and with the Roman touch, the removable head. You see it makes good sense from the Roman point of view. The sculptor makes the different body poses, whether senatorial, military, philosophical and then as politicians are able to afford their own personal monument he shapes the marble likeness of their head and pops the head upon the body of their choice. The thought of a statue with an interchangeable head was scandalous as far as the ideological Greek was concerned but the economic advantages were obvious to the Roman.

If a Roman is to become a Christian he must know the answer to the following questions before all others: Does it work? How? What are the practical implications of it all? Once a Roman recognizes the power at the heart of the Gospel then he will be able to weigh and face up to the great ideas that are there. I meet a lot of Romans every day who insist upon practical, no nonsense solutions to the issues of life. These people are so constituted that they must see some practical results before they are in any substantive sense able to ponder the meaning of it all. Whereas the Jew would listen because of the endorsement of the family, and the Greek is captivated by the strength of the idea itself, the Roman believes when he sees it at work.

The Roman with his blunt and non-spiritual questions is vital to the discovery of the whole truth and appeal of Christianity.

"There are three sources of belief: reason, custom, inspiration. The Christian religion, which alone has reason, does not acknowledge as her true children those who believe without inspiration. It is not that she excludes reason and custom. On the contrary, the mind must be opened to proofs, must be confirmed by custom, and offer itself in humbleness to inspirations, which alone can produce a true and saving effect. Ne evacuetur crux Christi."

-- PASCAL

Pensees, p. 87 (245)

What exactly is there about Christian faith that will convince a Roman that it all really works. As I see it two things were most impressive in the first century.

(1) Something about Jesus Christ made his disciples unafraid. Take the rugged apostle Paul for example. This remarkable man who journeys all over the empire sharing his discovery of the Lordship and universal relevance of Jesus Christ. At one point in Paul's life he is charged before Festus and Agrippa. These are completely Romanized men. Note Paul's superb understanding of the Roman Brahmin, revealed in his speech in their courtroom:

"Thus I journeyed to Damascus with the authority and commission of the chief priests. At midday, O king, I saw on the way a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, shining round me and those who journeyed with me. And when we had all fallen to the ground, I heard a voice saying to me in the Hebrew language, 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? It hurts you to kick against the goads.' And I said, 'Who are you, Lord?' And the Lord said, 'I am Jesus whom you are persecuting. But rise and stand upon your feet; for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you to serve and bear witness to the things in which you have seen me and to those in which I will appear to you, delivering you from the people and from the Gentiles--to whom I send you to open their eyes, that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.'

"Wherefore, O King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision, but declared first to those at Damascus, then at Jerusalem and throughout all the country of Judea, and also to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God and perform deeds worthy of their repentance. For this reason the Jews seized me in the temple and tried to kill me. To this day I have had the help that comes from God, and so I stand here testifying both to small and great, saying nothing but what the prophets and Moses said would come to pass: that the Christ must suffer, and that, by being the first to rise from the dead, he would proclaim light both to the people and to the Gentiles.

"And as he thus made his defense, Festus said with a loud voice, 'Paul, you are mad; your great learning is turning you mad.' But Paul said, 'I am not mad, most excellent Festus, but I am speaking the sober truth. For the king knows about these things, and to him I speak freely; for I am persuaded that none of these things has escaped his notice, for this was not done in a corner. King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know that you believe.' And Agrippa said to Paul, 'In a short time you think to make me a Christian!' And Paul said, 'Whether short or long, I would appeal to God that not only you but also all who hear me this day might become such as I am -- except for these chains.'"

--Acts 26: 12-29

It is obvious that they typically suspect the ideological-intellectual learning of Paul and express this reservation with the revealing sentence "much learning hath made you mad..." but at the same time they are unquestionably impressed by the sincerity and fearlessness of St. Paul. What these two men silently admire other Romans pursue and in the pursuit of the reason for such courage many of them find the Christ of Paul. Consider something else. The early Christians used as one of the symbols of faith and hope the sign of the Roman cross so that the very instrument that had been invented to strike terror and submission in the hearts of non-Roman slaves and captive people now becomes in the hands of the early church the symbol of Christ's victory over evil and death. Even the cynical 1st century historian Tacitus reveals a hidden respect for the poise and fearlessness of the early Christians in the face of Nero's

melty. What happened is that the Romans who in the course of their work came into personal contact with the Christians were precisely the ones that became Christians. We see the hint of this in the final sentences of Paul's letter to the Philippians which was written from prison at Rome:

"Greet every saint in Christ Jesus. The brethren who are with me greet you. All the saints greet you, especially those of Caesar's household. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit."

-- Philippians 4: 21-23

(2) Secondly, there was something about Jesus Christ that changed men's lives in a positive way. In Paul's speech to Agrippa the Apostle tells his Roman listeners not so much of the ideological content of Christian faith as what in actual fact happened in Paul's own life. He traces his style of life for Agrippa, telling of the road to Damascus experience and then telling him of how Christ had changed his pattern and goals of life. It was Paul who made the statement that "therefore if any man be in Christ he is a new creation, old things are passed away, behold all things become new..." This basic affirmation would make sense to a Roman who with all the affluence and efficiency that the Empire had achieved still in the deep corridors of his soul feels unfulfilled and empty. The luxury of Corinthian week-ends, travel and slaves had become a bore to many so that an ennui had set in a new deeper craving for the very secret present in the prisoner Paul standing there with so few of the external status symbols and yet so inwardly rich, fulfilled and exciting. Little wonder that Paul's guards at Philippi the ones on shipboard and at Rome wanted to know his Lord.

Each fall and Spring it is my practice to hold communicant classes for 7th and 8th grade youth who desire to become members of the church. As part of their assignment each one writes three brief essays. The third essay is to the subject: "Why be a member of the church?" This Fall one lad wrote the following:

"There are two reasons why you should be a member of the church. If you're a member of the church you will learn a lot about the Christian faith through church services and special classes. Then you can follow this faith and your life will be a lot more worthwhile. The church is also a good place to socialize and make new friends. Then... you'll have many more friends to make life fun. If you're not a member of the church, life can be horrible."

There is one Roman who has become convinced of the relevance of Jesus Christ.

Each one of us in this century is a composite person. There are the deep family roots with all of the primitive longings for the tribe and relationships of our childhood. But we are more than the composite of the influences of our past, at some point of our life, usually in our early manhood we yearn for ideas, the facts of science, the dreams of poets and in this Greek period of our life we cannot settle for the concepts of the past without our own struggle for understanding and mastery. Yet from these two strata still another layer that modern technology and economic realities are impressed upon us. The third Roman discovery seems to tell us that neither family alliance nor ideological fluency are enough in the new age. A man must perform and "come through" in the practical business of daily life. This is the situation then and if anything is to have any meaning for modern man it must make sense to these three men that live within me, in my mind, within my very bones. I am convinced that there has never been anything or anyone which can match the relevance of Jesus Christ. He is good enough to win the Jew, true enough to win the Greek and strong enough to win the Roman. Amen.