

A Ministry of the Significance of Christ

T. Austin-Sparks:

"And his father and his mother were marvelling at the things which were spoken concerning him; and Simeon blessed them, and said unto Mary his mother, Behold, this child is set for the falling and the rising of many in Israel; and for a sign which is spoken against; yea and a sword shall pierce through thine own soul; that thoughts out of many hearts may be revealed" (Luke 2:33-35).

THE MEANING OF CHRIST MUST BE INWROUGHT

In the passage quoted above we have given us something of the meaning of Christ, something of what is involved when Christ comes into our lives with ministry in view. That is the real significance of Simeon's vision and service. Sooner or later, to those who are "called according to his purpose" the meaning of Christ will be brought home in a forceful and much fuller way. It may be that we have a deep and very real knowledge brought to us at our conversion; but whether that be so or, on the contrary, we are born again in a simple and comparatively easy way, the time will come when, through deep crises and upheavals in our lives, we shall move up to the fact that Christ, and union with Him, is something infinitely greater than we had ever imagined. It is true that salvation is free and all of grace, but it is not cheap and superficial. If we so regard it we may just fade out, count for little, or be amongst the offended. The eternal counsels of God, comprehending all ages and realms, and centering in a redeemed people, are so full of meaning, so vast in their import, that much deepening work has to be done to bring about a correspondence with them. We have to come to a realisation of what it means to us that we have been called into fellowship with so momentous and so vast a One as God's Son. There are three aspects of "the fellowship of his sufferings:" the first, co-operation with Him in His work of delivering souls from a jealous and bitterly hostile enemy; the second, the discipline and purifying which makes for Christlikeness; the third, the enlarging of capacity, and developing of faculties for apprehending and understanding the greatness of Divine things, particularly the knowledge of Christ. All this is suffering indeed. We cannot attain unto this knowledge along the line of merely being informed; it has to be inwrought. No amount of listening to teaching will bring it about. Often a large amount of long-standing teaching only springs into life when the one possessing it passes into an almost devastating experience of suffering and testing. One world seems to be entirely breaking up and falling away, and a new one is essential to survival. Those who know Christ more fully and really are those who have discovered Him in deep spiritual agony and perplexity. Christ is the door into an immense realm of Divine meaning, and there is nothing casual or haphazard about that way. The whole being becomes involved in this issue if we are really going to represent spiritual measure for others. "A sword shall pierce through thine own soul."

John Bunyan, in his great dream allegory, sought to personify characteristics and propensities, and to represent them in life-size form, so that they could be seen in full stature. By his characters he would make us see ourselves, our weaknesses, our perils. As we see them passing before us we smile, we feel ashamed, we are disgusted, and then we find that Bunyan has portrayed ourselves.

One of these characters, in which Bunyan has concentrated his genius for humour, sarcasm and irony, is Mr. By-Ends. He tells us that Mr. By-Ends' ancestors gave their name to the town of Fairspeech, that his great-grandfather was a waterman, who always looked one way and rowed the other. Mrs. By-Ends, his wife, was a very virtuous woman, the daughter of my Lady Feigning, and By-Ends and his wife had two firm religious principles to which they most strictly adhered, and brought up their family accordingly. These established religious principles were (1) never to strive against the wind and the tide, and (2) to walk with Religion when he goes in his silver slippers, and if the sun shines and if the people applaud him. Bunyan says that is a tendency found in human nature to pretend, to feign, to look one way and really be going the other, to make-believe, to choose the line of least resistance, to go the popular way, but to disappear when things are difficult. We all have nothing but contempt for Mr. By-Ends. But that kind of thing can be the peril of us all, more or less. Indeed, it is going to be disastrous unless the Lord deals drastically with it, for it is so utterly incompatible with Christ and with God's eternal purpose as centred in Him.

Let us look again then at the words of Luke and see something of what is involved through Christ being brought in.

CHRIST DETERMINES DESTINY

First of all, Simeon says that this Child - the Christ - is going to determine destiny. He "is set for the falling and the rising of many in Israel." There are several different translations of these words. Firstly, they may mean that some will fall, never to rise again, as they come up against the Lord Jesus. They will find Him a stumblingblock.

It was said in the Scriptures that He would be a stumblingblock to many (Isa. 8:14). Many would strike their foot against Him and go headlong. How true that has proved to be! Coming up against the Lord Jesus, and not being willing to accept the offence of the Cross, not being willing to suffer affliction with the people of God rather than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season, not being willing to take up the Cross and follow Him, they have gone headlong, and their destiny has been settled by their contact with the Lord Jesus. It is ever so. On that side He is set for the falling of many; that is, He is put there to find out whether we really mean business with God or not; and many coming up to Him and finding Him and His way an offence have turned and gone again, God only knows to what. "Set for the falling... of many."

"And the rising of many;" and oh, what a glorious story is bound up with that! Many have come to Him, sensible of something of the cost, recognizing that in which they will be involved if they should link on and go with Him. Nevertheless, they have chosen Him; and what a lifting it has meant for them! Yes, from the dunghill to be set amongst the Princes of His people (1 Sam. 2:8). "We maketh the rebel a priest and a king." You and I know just a little of what it means to have been lifted by reason of union with the Lord Jesus. But how much more there is yet to be, for He has given His word that some shall sit with Him in His Throne, even as He overcame and sat down with His Father in His Throne (Rev. 3:21). What a rising! A long and wonderful story could be told of men who have been lifted by the Lord Jesus. The settling of destiny: some will fall, some will rise. Their attitude toward the Christ will determine for ever which it is going to be.

These words may also mean that many will fall and also rise, and in this connection there is a mighty army. I see Peter in that company. Oh, this self-elevated, self-confident, self-assured, boasting Peter! "Even if I must die with thee, yet will I not deny thee" (Matt. 26:35). There was a man who was up, but up on a false platform, and when he came really into touch with Christ crucified he fell - but, praise God, to rise again. Christ, Who brought him down, brought him up. See the great Saul of Tarsus riding his highhorse to Damascus; and what a highhorse it was! Oh, how self-sufficient and self-important and self-confident was young Saul of Tarsus! He came down off that highhorse into the dust at the feet of Jesus of Nazareth - the most humiliating thing that could ever have been conceived by him. 'Jesus of Nazareth, that false prophet, that impostor, that blasphemer of God, that one who was hanged on a Cross, bearing what our law declares to be the mark of the curse of God resting upon him!' Think of that man humbled at the feet of Jesus of Nazareth and saying, "What shall I do, Lord?" Has he not come down? Yes, but did he not come up? "This child is set for the falling and the rising of many".

It will always be like that, one thing or the other. We shall go down before Jesus Christ, we shall come up, according to our attitude and response to Him, according to whether we refuse or accept, obey or disobey; He determines it. Coming down from our own natural strength and fullness, in brokenness, humiliation and shame at His feet, confessing Him Lord - a hand will take us and lift us to such wonderful heights of grace.

CHRIST A SIGN SPOKEN AGAINST

(a) THE CHALLENGE OF HIS PRESENCE

Then said Simeon, "and for a sign which is spoken against". What is that? It means that He is set for a provocation by implication. A sign is an implication. It implies something, and the effect of this implication is to provoke. Should you begin to see what Jesus implies, there will be some reaction; and if you are not prepared to accept the implication of Jesus Christ you will be strongly provoked. You will not remain neutral, you will begin to fight. That is where Saul of Tarsus was. Deeper down than all else, he was fighting against the Lord, kicking against the goad. That was the innermost meaning of it. He was provoked by the significance of Jesus, the significance of Christ Himself. In the person of Christ you have a different kind of man, no mere earthly man, but a heavenly Man. Here is a Man embodying in His own person a holy, heavenly standard, the standard of heaven, and men are being measured and weighed by heavenly standards in the presence of the Lord Jesus: not only by what He says, and the judgments that He verbally passes, but by His presence. They are discovering that here is a standard that finds out their smallness, their lack, and their difference. You know that is very true. We have often said that if a true child of God, indwelt by the Spirit of Jesus Christ, goes into a business house to work or into some ungodly home, it often happens that, without their saying anything about their being a Christian, a strain begins to be felt, and people begin to be nasty or pass remarks. Something in the very atmosphere has been stirred up and provoked by the presence of Christ in the believer. Without being awkward or difficult (some people are that, of course, and provoke by their foolishness) by even a true, humble, loving child of God something is provoked, and he or she becomes a marked person and known to be different, and that difference is awkward for other people. People begin to feel uncomfortable. If that is true of some simple child of God, how much more true it must have been of the very Son of God Himself. His presence was the standard measure of heaven. Men could not measure up to it, and they felt all wrong and uncomfortable in His presence. He was a sign. There was a significance about Him, about His very presence, which was spoken

against: it provoked.

It is a grand thing to be at home in the presence of Jesus Christ, to know the grace of God which makes it possible to sit down with this holy and righteous and perfect One. But He finds us out. Often that is just what is going on. We are being provoked, upset, annoyed, we know not why; but if we did know, we should realize that the Spirit of Jesus Christ is at work upon us because we are out of harmony with our Lord. In such a case we can take one of two attitudes, either get right, or go from bad to worse and become more and more bitter, even against the Lord. He is a sign spoken against.

(b) THE CHALLENGE OF HIS MANNER OF LIFE

His life and behaviour constituted that significance which was so provocative. You see, He did not conform to their earthly system, even their religious system. He did not fall into line and do the customary thing. He belonged to a heavenly system. Spiritual and heavenly principles were everything to Him and not just outward rites and performances, and He was not going to be drawn into the mere externalities and formalities; He was holding to the inner principles; and the significance of His behaviour provoked those who were concerned for the form of things rather than for the spirit, for the framework rather than for the heart. This people offer lip service: God is seeking heart service. The presence of the Lord Jesus is the repudiation of mere formalities and customs and traditions. He brings in the heavenly standard, the heavenly laws, the heavenly system, and it is not easy for you unless you are on the side of heaven. Follow that out, for that was the sign which was spoken against. They could not get Him to conform to the customary thing, because He was not going to be a party to their falsehood, their hypocrisy, their formality, to their unspiritual condition which lay back of their outward ritual; He was not going to be involved in it, and therefore He was a provocation; and He is always like that. He will find out whether we are governed more by policy than by principle, whether temporal interests concern us more than eternal considerations. He was always bringing a whole series of things like that into the world, and in that sense they just could not bear Him and His way of going on. We have often cited the occasion when He said to His brethren, after being urged by them to go up to the feast, "Go ye up unto the feast: I go not up unto this feast." "But when his brethren were gone up unto the feast, then went he also up, not publicly, but as it were in secret" (John 7:8-10). It looks a little difficult, does it not? as though He is involved in some duplicity. But what does it mean? It was the feast of tabernacles that was at hand; and what was the feast of tabernacles? It celebrated the consummation of the emancipation from Egypt and the entrance into the kingdom of God, the deliverance from this present evil world and translation into the kingdom of the Son of God's love. That kingdom was embodied in Christ Himself, not in Jerusalem, nor now in any earthly celebrations of historic feasts. He is the kingdom of God, therefore He does not make it a matter of mere occasional celebration in an external way like that. The celebration was empty, false. Their deliverance from this present evil world! Why, they were as much involved with the prince of this world as anybody! Worldly considerations governed them altogether, and the Lord Jesus said, in effect, 'I am publicly having nothing to do with that. I stand for the true essence of this heavenly kingdom, and for absolute separation from this world.' Thus in no way would He allow it to be thought that He was in that. He was apart from it, and if He did go up "not publicly but as it were in secret" it was because He went to try to get people out of the false representation of heavenly things, to bring them to Himself as the embodiment of the heavenly thought of God about the feast of tabernacles.

I have just cited that by way of illustration in order to try to focus what I am saying. He was a provocation because in His own behaviour He signified something of another, a heavenly, order. It is ever so. Where the Lord's children become heavenly and spiritual people in very truth, emancipated even from the established religious system, and are living by heavenly principles, what provocation it arouses, what speaking against! You cannot be a heavenly child of God and not be spoken against. Do not try to escape being spoken against. You signify something, and everything of this world is against that something. We come to that with the next point that arises in connection with Simeon.

(c) THE CHALLENGE OF HIS CROSS

There was further the significance of His death and of His resurrection as a sign that was spoken against. Yes, His Cross indeed was the signal for much speaking against. Has it not been so all the way through, and is it not so today? How hated is that Cross, when given its true interpretation! It is all right as heroics: yes, men will have the Cross on that basis. But bring in the true meaning of the Cross of Christ - that it is God's No to man and all his heroics, His final and utter No to every man, good and bad, and that when Jesus cried, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" (Mark 15:34), He was bearing our curse in God's utter No to the fallen race: bring that in, and it is an offence. Say that to anyone who has any feeling of his own importance and dignity and goodness, and who considers there is something of account in himself and he will be very offended. We never accept the Cross of the Lord Jesus until we see how utterly worthless we are, and then the Cross becomes our glory; we side with God and say, 'Thou art right, Lord, in saying No to me.' Have you got there, are you being brought there? You see what God is doing if you are being brought where you recognize you have no claims

upon God, no rights before Him, and where you realize your utter wretchedness and unworthiness and unfitness for His presence. You are in agreement with the Cross as heaven's No when you get there. They all had to come there - Peter and John and all the rest. But to be there is to be very near the great Yes of God in the resurrection. The resurrection proclaims that another Man, other than ourselves, passes through into heaven. The door is wide open to this other Man, Who has taken that first man down into judgment and death and has left him there. Heaven is opened to this new Man, this risen Man, and "if we have become united with him in the likeness of his death, we shall be also in the likeness of his resurrection" (Rom. 6:5). It is God's great Yes to the risen Christ, and we who have been united with Him come into that Yes; we have the open door of heaven. Now, you see, that doctrine is an offence to any self-important, self-sufficient flesh in this world, and it is spoken against. Christ crucified is a sign spoken against; to the Greeks foolishness, to the Jews a stumblingblock; but to us who believe, Christ (yes, crucified) the power of God and the wisdom of God (1 Cor. 1:23-24).

THE FRUIT OF THE FELLOWSHIP OF HIS SUFFERINGS

And Simeon said to Mary His mother, "yea and a sword shall pierce through thine own soul; that thoughts out of many hearts may be revealed." The significance of Christ - "a sword shall pierce through thine own soul!" The sword there is not a little thing. The word used to describe it is the same as that used by the translators of the Old Testament into Greek, the word which was used for Goliath's sword. Here the Greek word signifies the great Thracian sword, an immense thing. 'A great sword shall pierce through thine own soul,' speaking of course of her suffering, her anguish, when she would stand and see this child, then grown to full manhood, stretched upon the Cross. Simeon said, 'That will have the effect or be the means of disclosing the thoughts of many hearts.' What it really amounts to is that the fellowship of Christ's sufferings is the means by which hearts are revealed. It is when we are brought into the fellowship of His sufferings and are suffering together with Him that the thoughts of many hearts come to light, either sympathetically or the reverse. Some hearts, as they see the Lord's people suffering for His sake, will show bitterness, resentment, and be all against the Lord because they do not understand. Oh, how often do parents rise in rebellion and resentment when a young man or woman, in full consecration to the Lord Jesus, accepts the fellowship of His sufferings, and goes out into a life of self-sacrifice - a life in which eternal and heavenly interests take precedence over earthly advancements and privileges, and the things of the Lord are very costly in terms of worldly things. How friends turn against such and call them fools, and all the rest of it! The hearts of others are beginning to be exposed by their fellowship with their Lord in His sufferings. It is coming out all round; hearts are being laid bare. It is necessary that that sort of thing should happen. You will so often find that the effect of such a thing is to precipitate a crisis in those very hearts sooner or later. Oh, what a story is bound up with this? How often has a man been called upon, because of his devotion to the Lord, to suffer terribly at the hands of his own family - persecuted, subjected to every kind of ignominy, shown no favours. That may have gone on for a long time, increasing all the while, but the one has stood faithfully, yielded no ground, gone on with the Lord quietly, humbly, meekly, lovingly, showing no resentment; and that very exposure of what was in those other hearts has at a later time become the means used by God to break those lives, and to bring them to Himself. That is only one aspect of this matter - the thoughts of many hearts being revealed by the fellowship of His sufferings.

The disclosure comes out also in the other way, thank God. Many hearts are revealed as to what they have of love for the Lord when His children are going through bad times in fellowship with Him. But whichever way it may issue, the principle operates. If we are, like Mary, brought into the sharing of His travail, it has a tremendous effect upon other people. The fact is that it has always been by way of the fellowship of His sufferings that other hearts have been touched. If the Lord takes you into a deep way of suffering with Himself, in sharing something of the cost of the coming of the Kingdom, that in itself is a testimony which touches hearts; whereas we may stand and preach and nothing happens. When something happens to us, when we go into the depths, something begins to happen in other people.

So, servant of the Lord, realize that the Holy Spirit works upon other lives through your suffering with the Lord, and takes you into suffering for this very purpose. Hearts are disclosed. The worldly heart will be uncovered by the Cross of the Lord Jesus. Paul said, "Far be it from me to glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world hath been crucified unto me, and I unto the world" (Gal. 6:14). The Cross finds out how much worldliness there is in our hearts and brings it to light. By worldliness we mean, of course, the standards of this world, its ways, its opinions, and so on.

The Cross finds out what is in our hearts as to ourselves - how much selfishness there is about us. You cannot know the Cross in any real way and be a really selfish person. The Cross will expose all selfishness and demand the setting aside of all that is self; self-interest, self-consideration, self-pity and every form of self comes to light by the Cross.

A Ministry of the Significance of Christ

Well, this is the particular ministry of any end-time, which is also always a time of transition.

We have seen that Simeon represented a remnant clinging to a heavenly vision in a time when what was of God had become earth-bound and largely traditional and formal; that he gathered up in himself all the fragmentary, diverse and partial revelations of God's speaking; that he embodied the idea of spiritual maturity, while at the same time he signified that which had waxed old and was nigh unto passing away. But, with all, he linked on with God's new and full manifestation as he held the infant Christ in his arms. Thus he showed by declaration and prophecy the immense issues bound up with Christ, and the course and cost of a ministry of "the fullness of Christ." Here we leave the matter for the contemplation of all such as look for "that blessed hope," and, in looking, ask what the Lord would have as the ministry of this present transitional phase which will issue in His appearing.