

When Did We See You Sick

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[0 : 00] My topic today is, when did we see you sick? Well, now I've thought about this for a long time. I had an extra week to think about it this week.

And so I had it pretty well put together this morning. I knew what to say. I knew pretty well all the answers. And I knew how to explain this whole thing to people and impress them with how much I knew about it.

But I wasn't really quite ready to talk to you, and it was getting on towards 11.30, and the phone rang. Now, when I went to university, there was a guy who really bugged me.

And I didn't get along very well with him. Nice fellow, though. And I was under some pressure to finish what I had to say to you today.

And I got this letter, and it was his daughter. And my friend is sick. And he's out of the country, and he can't get back into the country, and he needs accommodation, and he needs help.

[1 : 11] So I, of course, said, well, I'm sorry I'm busy. It was a wonderful reminder from the Lord that saying these kinds of things is very costly.

Getting yourself caught in the situation. But it was, it was, meant something to me. Probably doesn't to you. Anyway, I have another little, I have this friend from Australia who talks about throwing a brick in the foul house by night.

That, you get the picture. Chickens are all at roost, and somebody throws a brick in. There's a terrible clatter. Well, in the Manchester Guardian this week, there's a letter, which I think is sort of like throwing a brick in the foul house by night.

And he says, this fellow says in the letter, I happen to be in England over Christmas, and my friend who went to church on Christmas Day told me his grace, the Archbishop of Canterbury, had called for prayers for peace.

In all churches. I understand his holiness, the Pope, did the same. The result is now plain for all to see.

[2 : 33] Prayers for peace didn't do any good in 1914, nor in 1939, nor have they done any good in 1991. They never have, they never will.

If you really want peace, and there are plenty of people who don't, you'll have to convince his grace, his holiness, Mr. Boyd, and Mr. Major, et al., that they will have to do a hell of a lot more than pray. Praying is so easy, isn't it? And so utterly futile. The only possible function it can serve is to bomb the conscience of those, that's B-A-L-M, the conscience of those responsible for war and or those like his grace who tell us it is a just war.

No doubt it was an oversight that he forgot to add, God is on our side. Now the thing, the reason I really like that letter is that he doesn't make any pretense about being very religious.

He says very clearly what he thinks, and he, in a sense, lobs a B-O-M-B on the whole religious establishment and tells them that they're not there.

[3 : 57] They're not with it. So I've thought about that letter a lot this week, and I noticed that it's from a Professor Pengeli, who is a Professor Emeritus, which means retired from active service, but still holding rank and title.

Dangerous people, people like that. And he knows how the world works, or at least he appears to know how the world works and was trying to remind us of that basic reality.

And he has also a transcendent dimension to his thinking, which I observed. Did you observe it? He doesn't want his holiness, the Pope, and his grace, the Archbishop, Mr. Bush, Mr. Major, et al.

He doesn't want them to pray. He says there's a hell of a lot more to do than pray. Now that's where I see the transcendent dimension breaking into his life.

You see, the understanding is the uselessness and futility of prayer.

[5 : 22] And the reason I present that to you is because what I guess I'm concerned about in our Wednesday noons at the cathedral is that that kind of cynical attitude is very pervasive in our culture.

This fellow who gives expression to it in the Manchester Guardian is unusual, but what he expresses is the opinion of a whole lot of people.

And I think it's the opinion of a whole lot of people because they don't have any awareness of any other reality beside what we do and what we are able to accomplish by doing a hell of a lot more than pray.

You know, I mean, that's the kind of macho approach to our world. Prayer is of no significance. What we do is of great significance.

And I just think that it's a very interesting kind of statement. And it was in wonderful contrast that I read this week from Eugene Peterson who describes what he thinks prayer is.

[6 : 42] And I just want to put that letter and this paragraph in juxtaposition so that you will see, in a sense, the two realities. The one reality where it's all up to us and we got to get down and do it.

And the other reality, which is quite different and which Eugene Peterson describes in this way. Prayer is political action.

Prayer is social energy. Prayer is public good. Far more of our nation's life is shaped by prayer than is formed by legislation.

That we have not collapsed into anarchy is due more to prayer than to the police. Prayer is a sustained and intricate act of patriotism in the largest sense of that word.

Far more precise and loving and persevering than any patriotism served up in slogans. That society continues to be livable and that hope continues to be resurgent are attributable to prayer far more than to business, prosperity, or a flourishing of the arts.

[7 : 58] The single most important action contributing to whatever health and strength there is in our land is prayer. Not the only thing, of course, for God uses all things to affect his sovereign will.

And the all things most certainly include police and artists and senators and professors, therapists and steel workers. But prayer is, all the same, the source of action.

So you can see the two positions in juxtaposition. And I just wanted to make that, point that out to you in order that I could talk to you about this passage, When Did We See You Sick?

The passage that we've been working on for a little while. Here's a story.

And I'd love to give you a pencil and paper and let you write down the features of the story that hold in your mind. You know, what could you carry out that door with you of this story?

[9 : 05] I mean, you can carry out this piece of paper. But I'm talking about the, what I would call, the purpose of this story is that it should have an honored place in the ready reference of your mind.

In other words, wherever you go, it goes with you because it's in here. And it's a simple story. And I just would like to be sure that as we go at this from week to week and seek to understand it and come to grips with it, that this story is part of your permanent reference library because it's a powerful picture indeed and one on which the whole understanding of Christian faith and God's purpose is enshrined in this story.

So, I mean, you have it. You have the Son of Man coming in great glory. You have all the angels of heaven. You have the throne.

You have Jesus acknowledged to be the king. All this, in just a couple of lines at the beginning, a tremendous picture, a powerful picture indeed. It's there for you, you see.

That picture you can take away with you. It's not like sort of abstract theoretical prose about the latest technical development. It's a powerful picture that you can carry right here.

[10 : 28] Now, what happens to that king who comes in glory? And glory, as I heard this definition this week, which gets to me, glory means reality.

So that what you have Christ saying is that into the mystery of human existence, into the fog and into the mire and into the mystery of it all, there breaks in a reality, which is the glory of God in all his angels.

Christ is revealed as king. Christ is revealed as the authority. And suddenly, all the crumbling artifice of our world breaks way to make room for the reality, which is the glory of God, breaking into our life.

Now, if any of you are like Professor Pengelly of the University of California in Davis, California, I'm sure that you would be nauseous at this point after what I've just said.

But this is the reality which Christ himself portrayed for us in the last picture that he gives in the Gospel of Matthew before the Passion narrative begins.

[11 : 51] A very important place in Christ's teaching. So there it is. And what I think it tells us is that all of us live in the light of four events.

This is where you are, right here. And the four events around your life are creation, that is, you came from somewhere, judgment, and that is, you're going to somewhere, you know, you're... And then there is what I would call the incarnation here, the life of Christ, his life, death, and resurrection.

And then... And then over here is... the day of your life, you see. These are the four kind of time reference points within which you are to understand your life.

Somewhere there was creation. Somewhere in the process of time. Creation. Someday there will be judgment. At one point in the midst of history, Jesus Christ came into the world as God incarnate.

[13 : 10] And for a fleeting moment in the process of time, you broke into the world. So in order to understand who you are, you have to sort of draw these lines.

You have to relate to these four events. And what Christ is telling you is that he's putting this event in place. Creation is put in place in Genesis.

This event is put in place by Christ's teaching about the last things. This event is Christ's coming into the world. And this event is you. So to find out who you are and where you fit in, what the meaning of your life is, you have to see your life in terms of these four events.

So that we are given this story and we're told that this is what we have to do. Now, if you look at one word in the Gospel according to St. Matthew, it recurs quite a number of times.

And the word is... I'm not sure whether to lift this... Just is nations. And it's translated pagans.

[14 : 26] It's translated Gentiles. I think there's at least one other translation. But it's the same word that we have when we talk...

I mean, the Greek word is ethne and it's where we get our word ethnic. So that when Jesus gives us this picture of his transcendent glory, the reality of Christ's coming breaks into the unreality of our world.

And Christ says that the nations are going to be brought for judgment before the king. Now, these are the ethnics of the world. They are brought.

Now, when I say that this word appears a number of times, one of the most famous locations of it is at the end of Christ's ministry when he says, go ye into all the world and preach the gospel to every nation.

And so that when he talks here about judgment, those nations to which the gospel has been preached now come before Christ in judgment.

[15 : 40] You see, that's important, I think, to understand this story, that it's talking about the gospel having been preached to all the nations and then all the nations coming before Christ and for judgment.

There's a picture of the great feast in which all the nations will gather together. But these pictures run throughout. Now, what the significance of this, I think, for us right now is that we live in a world where people are retreating rapidly towards their ethnic identity.

You know, that the native peoples of Canada, the French people of Canada, the Sikh people in Canada, you see on the pages of every newspaper and every day, you see people drawing together, trying to find the meaning of life in terms of their ethnic identity.

You see it all through the countries of Eastern Europe where you thought you had a country which was one political entity, but it's breaking down into ethnic groups.

And people are striving all over the world to find meaning out of their ethnic belonging. And that's going on in our world at a great rate.

[17 : 06] And I have to sort of leave you to fill in all the gaps about that. You can perhaps talk about it this afternoon over coffee. But the thing is that people find their identity.

You know, that the businessman who puts on his slippers and his kilt and goes out to dance on Friday night with the Highland Dancers is trying to get back to his ethnic roots.

And this is part, I think, of the riches of our world that that should be the case. But the difficulty that it raises is that the nations are now, the ethnics are now brought under judgment.

And the implication that I think is clearly seen here is that people of all nations are to find a new identity in the person of Jesus Christ.

And that their ethnic identity is secondary to that. That's hard because, I mean, I think it's hard to say in our world because I think a lot of people think that their identity is to be found in the kind of reincarnation of their ethnic origins in some way or other.

[18 : 27] You know, when you, when you, when I went to an Indian reservation not long ago and all the kids were there in a, they were gathered around a red convertible all with Walkmans over their ears and music and a whole sort of North American pop culture was everywhere to be seen, you know.

But the somber and serious elders were trying at the same time to get hold of their ethnic identity. Now, what the gospel means in our world, and this is a picture of the judgment of the whole world, what the gospel means is that there is another and more profound reality in which we are to find our identity and that is the God who has made himself known to us in Jesus Christ.

The gospel offers you a new identity. Your ethnic identity becomes of secondary importance.

When I was in, in Kenya last year, one, at a conference, there was a woman from India, you know, who talked about the place of, of women in a Hindu and Muslim culture and how, how, how, how Hindu and Muslim cultures treat women.

You know, well now it's perhaps easy to point that because you may want to point to our own culture and ask that question as well. But the thing that she said was that for me, the only hope for the people of our subcontinent is that they will find their identity in Jesus Christ.

[20 : 16] You know, this is a new kind of identity. And so you have the picture of the nations, the ethnics, coming before her, the judgment seat of God and being judged, not on the basis of their ethnic origin, but for who they are, themselves.

And what happens is you get, you get a, you get a new kind, a new classification of people. It's no longer, you know, white, red, yellow, brown, or, you know, the different sort of ethnical groupings are no longer given to us.

The whole of humanity is divided into six categories. And those six categories are the thirsty, no matter what ethnic origin they belong to.

The hungry, no matter what color their skin is. The, uh, the stranger, no matter where he comes from. The naked, the man in prison and the person who is sick.

[21 : 29] And he says, that's the difference between people. And those are the denominations of humanity. And how you relate to them is what's important.

Finding relationships to people in terms of ethnic origins is just a constant dividing. But what the gospel says is you are to go to all the people in the world, the sick, the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the stranger, the prisoner.

And you're to find in that person the lost image of Christ. And you're to minister to Christ in that person.

And why are you to do it? The reason you're to do it is because you have found out who you are through the gospel of Jesus Christ. You have found your identity in him.

And now you're helping this person to find their identity in him. That's what you are to recognize in this person.

[22 : 37] If you have heard the gospel, then your response is to, in relating to people in whom you see the image of Christ, but who have not yet found themselves through faith in Christ.

And that's what judgment is about. That's the process that we're to be involved in. That's what our life is. That's what the meaning of our life is as it's illustrated in this story of Christ's coming in judgment and us all standing.

And we're not going to stand there with the pride of our ethnic origins because our ethnic origins do as much to condemn us as they do to sanctify us.

What happens is that the gospel has been taken into all the world and preached concerning Jesus Christ so that you will find your identity in terms of the God who created you, the God who revealed himself to you in Christ, the God who will finally, before whom you will finally stand in judgment and that you bring your life into that reality and know who you are in Christ.

And knowing that, you reach out to help others identify themselves in Christ to find out who they are. Not in terms of the superficial boundaries that exist between us.

[24 : 12] boundaries are created only by the fact that some people, you know, it's divided very simply into sheep and goats.

Some people have found who they are in Christ and some people need to find who they are in Christ. And those who have found need to find someone.

my friend who's an alcoholic and has, you know, has had a long history with AA now. And he says when you're in trouble the thing to do is to go out and find a wet one and try and work with them. You know, that strengthens you in your own understanding. And in terms of our own Christian faith, in order to help find our own identity as we go out and help others find theirs, find out who they are in Christ.

Let me pray. Our Father, we ask that you will burn into our hearts and minds this amazing story of judgment and that you would give us grace to submit to the reality of your judgment upon us.

[25 : 37] we live in a world which has passed judgment on you and finds you wanting and inadequate. Help us to come to the reality that we indeed are under your judgment.

And help us, having found our identity in Jesus Christ, having come to put our faith in him, give us grace that we may go out to the hungry and the thirsty and the stranger and the naked and the sick and the prisoner and help them to find their identity in Christ as well.

We ask this in Christ's name. Amen. Amen. Thank you.