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God asks His questions of us through events that call for decision

The Most Important Question

HERBERT H. FARMER

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THERE IS to be observed in relation to religious matters the growth of what might be called the forum or brain trust habit: it is the habit of asking questions about religion of clever or learned people who may be expected to give lively, interesting and effective answers.

By the asking and answering of questions, we grow in understanding. But in religion this practice holds a great danger. The danger is that there will be one question, and by far the most important question, which will be en-

the doing of His will and the right conduct of their own lives He concluded: "Except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish".

Now, why did Christ say that? What was in His mind? Did He mean quite literally that God would cause towers to fall upon and destroy people who did not do what He wanted them to do? Of course He did not. What was in His mind, and it was always in His mind, was this: that unless the Jewish nation would hear and answer God's call and challenge to them in the events of that time to find a new way of running their personal and national life, a great disaster would overtake them. And that, in fact, is what actually happened. Christ called to the Jewish people to find a different way, God's way, of dealing with the Roman

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By the asking and answering of questions, we grow in understanding. But in religion this practice holds a great danger. The danger is that there will be one question, and by far the most important question, which will be entirely missed. It will be missed because it is not a question which we ourselves can ask; it is a question which is asked of us by God.

Jesus was asked a question: why did a certain tower of Siloam collapse and kill eighteen people? Had God intended it to kill those eighteen people? Had there been a judgment upon them for their wickedness?

Jesus, answering, said: "Those eighteen, upon whom the tower in Siloam fell, and slew them, think ye that they were sinners above all men that dwell in Jerusalem? I tell you, Nay: but except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish."

It was a natural enough question, the sort of a question which might be asked of a brain trust.

But in reply notice that Jesus actually did not answer the question at all. Instead, he drew their attention to another quite different question, God's question of them concerning

them to do? Of course He did not. What was in His mind, and it was always in His mind, was this: that unless the Jewish nation would hear and answer God's call and challenge to them in the events of that time to find a new way of running their personal and national life, a great disaster would overtake them. And that, in fact, is what actually happened. Christ called to the Jewish people to find a different way, God's way, of dealing with the Roman conquerers who had overrun their land, a way not of revenge and hatred and bitterness and wildness. They refused to hear His call. The result was that forty years later the Roman armies descended upon them again, destroyed Jerusalem, their capital city, and scattered the Jewish people to all the ends of the earth.

They did not repent and they did likewise perish.

Do you see, then, the point of Christ's answer to this question? Do you sense the anxiety, the pressing anxiety, of it? Here are these people asking a more or less theoretical question, their question about the collapse of a tower; and they were not hearing God's question at all, God's life and death question, which was being asked through the urgent, pressing events of that time.

This, then, is the first thing I want to say: God speaks to us, He speaks to you, and asks

through
His questions of us through events, through things which happen to us, things about which we have to do something. God does not speak to us only, or even primarily, through sermons or hymns or books read comfortably in an arm chair, or radio addresses listened to, perhaps, with pipe and slippers, by the fire. Those things no doubt have their place but God's primary speech to the human soul, God's question, always comes through living flesh and blood situations where things happen and choices and decisions have to be taken.

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Let me tell you why God speaks to us and asks His questions of us through events and things that happen to us. It is because He does not want from us mere theories and ideas in our heads. Nor does He want from us mere emotions and feelings in our hearts. What He wants are decisions, the faith in Him that a man shows by his deeds and by his deeds alone. It is events, the things that will come this way or that way, according to what we do or do not do, that call for decision. If your house is on fire, it is no use arguing about it or to sit down and think out a pretty theory about the chemistry of the fire extinguisher. It is no use feeling emotional excitement about the horror of fire. You have got to act. If you do nothing, you have acted, for the fire will follow its course because you have done nothing. In events, you see, to do nothing is to make a very grave decision.

In every act, in every decision of any consequence, in your life, whether you know it or not, whether you like it or not, there comes an expression, something of your whole belief, your whole faith and love about God.

It Sounds So Commonplace, Trite and Pious

What is this most important question that God puts to us through events? It is one which I am almost afraid to say, it will sound to you so commonplace, so trite, so pious, so very much what you have heard no doubt countless times before, what you are quite calmly expecting me to say again. But I must say it, for it happens to be in truth the most important question; but I cannot say it calmly. God's most important question is exactly the same one as He put to the Jewish people so many years ago when Christ was there; the same question as He has been putting to mankind ever since. It is, "What think ye of Christ?" Will you or will you not in your decisions and your dealings seem to make Him and all that He was, all that He stood for, all that He was left to die for—will you or will you not make Him the Master, the real Master of your lives, the Master who directs the deed?

Now, does that sound to you an obvious and perhaps rather pious thing to say? If it does, I protest to you that you have got it all wrong. You are then, not seeing in Jesus Christ what He really is; you are seeing a Jesus Christ who

deeds alone. It is events, the things that will come this way or that way, according to what we do or do not do, that call for decision. If your house is on fire, it is no use arguing about it or to sit down and think out a pretty theory about the chemistry of the fire extinguisher. It is no use feeling emotional excitement about the horror of fire. You have got to act. If you do nothing, you have acted, for the fire will follow its course because you have done nothing. In events, you see, to do nothing is to make a very grave decision.

New York to Chicago via Pittsburgh

Or, supposing I am traveling from New York to Chicago and I don't know whether I ought to change at Pittsburgh. So long as I am in the train and the train slides smoothly along to Pittsburgh, I can speculate about it; I can argue about it with my fellow passengers to my heart's content; I am in the train and there I must stay; there is no event yet for me.

But when the train stops at Pittsburgh, I must decide to act; it is in the main event; I must either get out or stay in. I must act; and please note, it is according as I act, according as I answer that question in action, so I give expression to my belief and my faith. If I stay in, I express the faith that the train goes to Chicago; if I get out, I express the faith that it does not go to Chicago but presumably some other train does.

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Now, does that sound to you an obvious and perhaps rather pious thing to say? If it does, I protest to you that you have got it all wrong. You are then, not seeing in Jesus Christ what He really is; you are seeing a Jesus Christ who never existed; you are seeing a Sunday School Christ, a picture book Christ, a stained glass window Christ; you are seeing a nice, gentle person who went around in a white robe and talked vaguely about being kind and forgiving to one another. Men and women, the Christ who is merely that, never existed. I see, rather, and I ask you to see, the real Christ; the Christ about whom God speaks when He asks His great question. I see the Christ who had such penetrating insight into human affairs, that He warned the Jewish people forty years before it happened that the way they were conducting their personal and national life would lead to their destruction. The leaders of the Synagogue plotted to destroy Him; His own friends deserted and betrayed Him; yet nothing could deflect Him from the task which He knew that God had given to Him, namely, to stay in the very heart of human history—not

a mere flitting—stay in the heart of human history, whatever the cost, as the greatest kind of witness that God is righteousness and truth and love, and not any other thing, and in the end all accounts have to be settled.

The question which God puts to us, I repeat again, on the events of every new age, and on the events of our own personal life is, "What think ye of this Christ, in whom righteousness and truth and love of God had been so fully embodied for all to see?"

Whether You Like It or Not

Oh, there is nothing merely flat and commonplace in that. The Christian faith does not grow from sentimentality about how lovely the world would be if everyone loved each other. No matter how commonplace and ordinary your situation may seem to you to be, no matter how unimportant you feel, you cannot avoid making choices and decisions and in those choices and decisions, whether you know it or not, whether you like it or not, you are answering God's question about Christ, regardless.

When things go a bit wrong in your home, you have got to decide, and you cannot escape the decision, whether you will react to the situation as so many people do in fact react, that is to say, with ill temper, moodiness, self assertion, resentment, making things worse; or whether you will react, however falteringly, as

events? Are we going to ask first, last and all the time, "How will this policy affect me, my fame, my prestige?" Are we going to accept and repeat without any thinking, the lowest type of corrupt writing we happen to read in the daily press?

Or, are we going to ask this question first: "What would a Christian man, a man in whose soul Christ is really master, think or say on these matters", and then think it and say it?

There is the question of your relationship to the Christian Church. God knows the Christian Church is full of faults and failures but have you ever considered that it is the only institution, with all its faults, in the world whose sole purpose is to make men good, and not another thing? Have you ever thought that it is the only institution in the world which seeks to enthrone Christ in human affairs? Have you ever read how those airmen, when they were wrecked on the islands in the South Pacific, found, not howling cannibals who clubbed them and ate them, but fine, strong, gentlemenly men and women—yes, gentlemenly men, who cared for them, fed them and clothed them. Why? because the Church had been there and given them something of the spirit of Christ.

You read how one of those airmen wrote to his mother and said, "Because of Christian missions I was feasted and not feasted upon, when I fell from the sky into this village".

THOSE CHOICES AND DECISIONS, WHETHER YOU KNOW it or not, whether you like it or not, you are answering God's question about Christ, regardless.

When things go a bit wrong in your home, you have got to decide, and you cannot escape the decision, whether you will react to the situation as so many people do in fact react, that is to say, with ill temper, moodiness, self assertion, resentment, making things worse; or whether you will react, however falteringly, as one who would bring to it something at least of the selflessness, the large heartedness, the humility, the strength, the maturity, of Christ.

According as you decide in that situation, you have answered God's question.

Or, again, there is a part that you are going to play in the formation of public opinion in this superlatively great country of yours. My friends, the future of millions of men and women and little children in the world will be determined by what ordinary people like you and me think and say and do. That is what it means to be a great democracy. Democracy means the minds of ordinary people, which added together in the end determine policies.

Well, now, are you going to make up your mind on this and that question in such ways that you know you are answering God's question? Are we going to let ourselves in all the great events that arise be at the mercy of these

who clubbed them and ate them, but fine, strong, gentlemanly men and women—yes, gentlemanly men, who cared for them, fed them and clothed them. Why? because the Church had been there and given them something of the spirit of Christ.

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If you, perhaps, have nothing to do with the Church, or give it only occasional and lukewarm support, don't you see that you have answered God's question by your actions? God has asked, "What think ye of Christ?" And you have answered, "Not much", "Not much".

Nothing Right and Good Without Cost

One last thing: you may be quite sure that to seek to answer God's question, even in your own very ordinary life, if you answer it as it ought to be answered, it is going to cost you something. Nothing right and good can be settled for in this life of ours without cost. Yes, and it is precisely at the point where cost begins that the whole thing is elevated beyond the merely commonplace. You say that your situation is drab and flat and commonplace and unimportant. You are perfectly right; and, believe me, it is you who are making it

so, or at least it is you who are keeping it so.

Begin in ever so small a degree to make Christ the master of your choices and decisions and deeds, and at once cost enters. Nothing is commonplace, nothing is unimportant, where there is cost; for where cost is, God is; where cost is, Christ is, the tremendous Christ,

of whom we have spoken—Christ, crucified, the Christ in whom is the wisdom and the power of God, still at work, and calling for fellow workers in this so tortured, unhappy world.

God's question is: "What think ye of Christ?"

In the armed forces religious ministry is by occupational units. Why not apply this technique to industry?

The Industrial Chaplain

FRANCIS B. SAYRE, JR.

While chaplain on the U.S.S. San Francisco, the Rev. Francis B. Sayre, Jr., last fall conceived the idea of an industrial chaplain. He set forth his idea in a letter copies of which he sent to a number of other chaplains and to some bishops and executives of the Protestant Episcopal Church.

This March Mr. Sayre received an appointment from the Diocese of Ohio with the concurrent sponsorship of the Cleveland Federation of Churches to develop an industrial chaplaincy in Cleveland.

Mr. Sayre is the grandson of President Woodrow Wilson and the son of the Hon. Francis E. Sayre, formerly U. S. high commissioner to the Philippines and now diplomatic adviser to the director of the UNRRA.

Without wearying you with the statistics I might sum up the results of this poll by saying that although about 90 per cent had been 'exposed' to some form of organized Christian education, with only about 10 per cent had it 'taken'. And where knowledge was weak, practice was weaker. Though a boy may have a few rather vague and immature ideas of what his religion stands for, in the business of practical life these play but little integral part and that mostly superstitious.