

Last Sunday our minister led us into the heart of the Christian gospel. He prayed that we should not and could not ask for exemption from trouble, but this is precisely what everyone of us does ask for. He read to us the sixth chapter of the letter to the Ephesians on the powers and principalities which promise us just this: exemption from trouble.

We, the lay people of this church, have been asked by him to respond to his ministry on this layman's Sunday, the Sunday of the Reformation. So today, if you will allow me this figure of speech, we respond to his psalm, sermon and prayer of last Sunday.

We go through the responsive readings in the back of our hymn book perhaps with less fervor than we should. The selections in the book are too short, too arbitrary, and I think in our congregation we might give more honor to the great Texts of our Bible, because I think in the responsive readings more than any other part of our service the spirit of the living word comes to life. In the responsive readings there is great revelation because the word comes back to the speaker from the mouths of those who listen to him. Is it not so that when we have listened only then do we know what we have said? A friend's mouth responds? The listener will and must vary the line the first speaker has intoned. Only in this variation does the first utterance gain its full force. As a responsive reading written large, I ask you to consider today's sermon. I have listened to Mr. House in seriousness and my sermon will take up his text from Ephesians, chapter 6, verse 12: "For our fight is not against any physical enemy. It is against organizations that are spiritual. We are up against overlords who sway us as far as we are part and parcel of this dark world, and against spiritual agents who are so impressive because they seem to stem from heaven."

The King James version says here: "against wickedness in high places." My own translation brings out the colossal trickery of the devil a little more plainly by reminding you that the apostle Paul explicitly ascribes to these powers a semblance of the spirit as well as a place in the heavens. Spiritual agencies or agents paralyze us who at first sight impress us as angels of light and as heavenly orders.

It is most difficult for any modern reader to understand either the King James version or the one here offered by myself. What is wickedness in high places? What are the impressive spiritual agents who seem to stem from heaven? A similar difficulty I find today in the scriptural text from Romans. Principalities are mentioned, and powers. Who are they? What are dominions?

I am pressing for a precise understanding of these dark passages. And in order to prove to you that this is a matter in which you are deeply involved yourself, I remind you of your own singing every Sunday. In the doxology of the Praise God from whom all blessings flow, there is at least one line which is every bit as puzzling as the verses in Romans or Ephesians. In Paul's letters we are forewarned against angels, powers and forces which separate us from our true God who is our father through the love of Christ in the communion of the holy spirit. And yet, every the liturgy assumes that these intermediary agencies not only exist, no; we assert that they are benign, that we can speak to them, that we may influence them. For, each Sunday we sing "Praise Him above, ye Heavenly Host".

We then admit that a host of spirits roam above us. But we also talk to them confidentially as we might talk to the creatures here below, to ass and ox, bees and trees. And as we invite the moaning and groaning creatures to help us praise the creator, we also invite the Heavenly Host. Is this just a dead relic? If so, Reformation Day would be a good day to cast out this line forever. Protestants must not carry any dead weight. But let us go slow. Our Doxology was written by Bishop Ken, a Non-Juror of the days of William and Mary. Of him Macaulay has written that he approached as near as human infirmity permits to the ideal perfection of Christian virtue. And the wicked King Charles II used to say: Now I shall go and hear Bishop Ken tell me of my faults.

Now this same good Bishop admits powers between himself and God whom he invites to praise God together with him. I always have been struck by the boldness of his line, and I catch myself in states when I am not too clear about its impact on my salvation.

I do think that we all are accustomed to brush aside the intermediary powers as dangerous to salvation. And before asking for their heavenly character, it may be best to agree on Romans 8 where Paul puts them in their place. I shall begin, that is, with the same negation as Paul - the Christian resistance against powers and hosts of Heaven. A young Christian Negro school teacher in Kenya, Africa, has shown us. She declined to take the Mau Mau oath because it prescribed unlimited obedience to the Mau Mau order of hatred. And she was beaten to death for this refusal to acknowledge the intermediary power of the tribal order.

A very close friend of mine was the most popular Roman Catholic writer of the twentieth century in Germany, Joseph Wittig. We joined hands in our work and we have prayed in responsive reading of the psalms together. But one day his life of Jesus was put on the Roman Index, and as he requested to be told the reason for this, he, instead of being told, was excommunicated from his beloved church. The present Pope ten years later, has said that he never read a more beautiful book than this which Rome condemned. So you must realize that a faithful son of his church was nearly killed by this excommunication which was based on Canon 2314 of the Canon Law Book. He, Joseph Wittig, wrote, 'But I stand in the faith that neither fire nor water nor the canon 2314 can separate me from the love of Christ'. Here was the letter of the Romans in full action, in full agony and as a means of true salvation. For, to this friend writhing in shame and vexation, the Church, his Church, had been the beloved mother, the star from the sea. Rome had been a part of the heavenly host who praised God and whom we beg to praise God.

Let me use a third example: in 1939 a German taught at Union Theological Seminary in New York. He was loved and respected here as well as in Great Britain, and a fine career was open to him. But he hated Hitler and all his works. And he felt that Germany was left without the Guardian Angel which is protecting every nation. The powers of darkness ruled in his native land. Dietrich Bonhoeffer said: 'I must pray for the downfall of Hitler who defiles Germany. But since I pray for his defeat, I must return to my country which I love and when it passes through the valley of defeat, I must share this defeat.' Dietrich Bonhoeffer has become the shining example of a Christian martyr through this act of returning under the intermediary powers, yet resisting them. His violent death by Nazi hand has made his name shine with the saints: Dietrich Bonhoeffer, whose fight was not with a physical enemy, but with wickedness in high places, with "an impressive agent who seemed to be the government."

Out of these three examples, the Mau Mau oath refused, the Canon 2314 weathered, the guardian angel over Germany disappearing, we may find the solution of our riddle. The tribal family, the ecclesiastical polity, the national government, they all are indispensable to our life on this globe. And there is a certain priority in their oppressing us which stems from the date of their appearance. But because they are indispensable, they tend to become God Almighty. It is always the latest garment of God's creation which pretends to be God himself. In our time the latest is the organization, hence the craze for organization, is playing God. Machines promise to replace our mind. When the navy sends out a letter I am told, sixteen copies are made. This number of sixteen strikes me as self-destruction, as a pompous asininity. The Belgian minister of finance had to sign documents for a loan in Washington. He had to sign his name more than 1200 times. We are drunk with organization. Even the church is streamlined with educational directors and what not. Organization is God. An organizer told me already ten years ago: 'WE can and we will' organize adventure and even love and friendship as well for people, and they will be forced to be happy. So as the family once was too arrogant and children had to be emancipated from family bondage, later on the nation poisoned the mind of man. The nation, we heard, could do no wrong. Then the Church set herself up as infallible. Amongst us, science and organization are the latest angels, municipalities. Because they are so recent the text of the King James version does not speak of them. But we must put in this word "organization" clearly, and I am glad to report that the excellent translator, J.B. Phillips, has done exactly this. He has inserted in the letter to the Ephesians the very word "organizations". Our present day tempters get away unidentified because the devil always has new names, and as long as we listen to the new names without subsuming them under the Bible, we are helpless.

Every generation is manipulated by agencies of our Creator, of God the Father, who do not care to praise God but to advertise themselves. Then, these agencies must be checked by the brothers and sisters of the Son and Redeemer. God has given us a twofold access to His will: through the Father we enjoy family, Church State, technology. Through the Son we keep these intermediary powers in their places. This is the deep secret of the Trinity. God's spirit comes to us twofold.

A few days ago I received a letter from a fine medical student whose father is a good doctor of the poor in Lowell, Mass. The student left one school of medicine because there science seemed to kill the spirit of healing. Now, in the new place, he listened to his first lecture with great joy. This is what the professor said: 'The doctor's duty is to comfort always, to relieve frequently, to cure rarely. The number of patients that a doctor sees that he can cure is very few; the number that he can relieve is very numerous; but he can comfort all. And those doctors that don't realize that their primary duty is to comfort, don't realize the limitations of medicine. The student glowed with joy over this religious insight, and the professor will go to Heaven for it.'

In fact, he is in Heaven through this simple humility. And therefore, the professor of medicine and his student both have the right to intone our line, 'Praise him above, Ye Heavenly Hosts'. Let us sum up.

With our body and mind, our laws and mores, we are embedded in God the Father's physical creation, moral institutions and mental histories, our families, our nations and our organizations, our banks and our economical processes of production and distribution, our schools and our sciences and techniques. But with our soul we pierce the curtain of earthly forms and heavenly powers; with our soul we are linked to God the Son's redemptive power. And this power streams into us so that we may be more than farmers, more than bankers, more than universities, more than the United States, and even more than science.

As God's children we must take most seriously his angels. As Christians we must ridicule any exaggerated claim they make of being ends in themselves. This, then, is the trouble from which we never, never, never may ask to be exempted.

The more troubles these powers promise to take from us, the more we have to take the trouble to see to it that they praise Him from whom all blessings flow, and that in praising him, they remain small. Because at all times God himself may enter in his most unexpected manner. Praise Him above, Ye Heavenly Hosts. Amen.

Revised and Reborn
21-0-1382

Pastoral Prayer October 28, 1956

How glorious is thy creation, O Lord. Thou hast placed us in the midst of these green mountains, of these brooks and graves. And above, thy skies declare thy desire for teaching us the grandiose rhythms of the stars and their constellations in the firmament. Waterfalls and rains make haste. Slowly do sun and moon move; they proceed in great solemnity so that our hearts may learn the quick as well as the slow beat.

To our country thou hast given years of improbable plenty, aye of abundance and superabundance. Our poor would appear extremely rich to the eyes of the wealthy of former days. Thou allowest more than one hundred and sixty million people to live in these United States in peaceful cooperation, on a land on which some centuries ago perhaps one million eked out a miserable existence.

And who are these modern millions? Thou hast given this land to fugitives, refugees, immigrants, exiles indentured servants, to the offspring of slaves, to religious sectarians and non-conformists, non-jurors, in short to those rejected by other orders or to those who rejected these other orders, to the hopeless, the stateless, the excommunicated; and thou hast shown thy mercy to their offspring so that they live under a constitution which is the envy and model for whole continents. And our machines change the surface of the globe in gigantic operations.

Free Churches and a powerful government take care of us spiritually the Churches and materially the government, in helpless youth and in helpless old age.

In this thy glory we proudly participate. We are accepting these benefits as though we had done it all. Hence while we should look up to thy glory, how clearly must thou see our weakness from on high. Deep down in our heart, we know, every one of us, that thou art the giver; still when we get together, we are likely to boast that we did it ourselves. We bask in thy sunshine; and in the next minute, we brag about our own enlightened reason. While we peep in the cosmic secrets of thy matter, we explode the globe's resources for our certain destruction.

Thou hast placed us a little lower than the angels, and we align as often as not with the fallen angels who deny their fealty to thee and who strut - be it a science or an art or some fashionable - 'ism' invading even thy church with their fads and organisations and their pagan manipulations of human beings without thy will.

Humiliated by our own faithlessness, exalted by thy infinite faith in us, we do not approach thy throne by our own merit or power. Not as individuals, cut off from the tree of our race by our pride and our rationalisations, we only approach you under the head thou hast given us, thy only begotten Son. We recognize that the Spirit of Jesus must have reformed our minds, the Spirit of the Christ, before we are able to receive the Spirit, Thy Spirit, as thy marching orders for our next day. We recognize that our proud institutions will not give us light unless they are manned by children of thy light. We recognize that the Select men, Governors, the Congress must fail us, if we fail them through cowardice, indifference, greed. Grant us not the television but the near vision. become unsettled by the far away sensation, will turn us into a mob. Instead transform us into a nation that can settle its unsettled affairs. For Fourty years there has been no unanimous peace been concluded. teach us to form those new forms of peace, of collaboration, of intercourse, those new structures of Church or States which shall acknowledge thy perpetual reformation of thy peoples and thy continents. Teach us to acknowledge thy reformation of our hearts.

Thou hast formed us, O Lord. Reform us for thy Kingdom. Amen.