

THE SCRIPTURE LESSON: Philippians 3:20-4:5

"Our constitution is laid out in the heavens whence we accept as our Healer-to-come, the Lord Jesus Christ. HE is going to REFORM the body of our low appearance so that it will share in the shaping of the body of HIS transfiguration in virtue of the energy with which HE is mighty enough to put the universe under HIS mastery.

"Correspondingly you, the brothers whom I love and for whom I long, my joy and my crown, stand firm in the Lord in WHOM we love each other. In the Lord I call upon Euddia and Syntyche to make up their differences. More than that: I request YOUR assistance, my noble comrade under the yoke. Help these women who, after all, have fought the battle of the Gospel together with myself and with Clemens and with the other teamworkers whose names are written in the book of the Life-in-God. In every hour REJOICE in the LORD. I must repeat this: REJOICE! 'THEY live becomingly' all the people shall think of you. - The LORD is near."*

TEXT:

"Our political constitution is laid out in the heavens whence we accept as our Healer to come, the Lord, Jesus the Anointed Ruler. He is going to re-form the Body of our low appearance so that it may share in the shaping of the body of his transfiguration. In every hour rejoice in the Lord. I must repeat: rejoice. The Lord is near."

Old times old words: Reformation Sunday. 440 years ago the term Reformation made history. Old then is the term, old is the age. Can they, should they usher us into our own new age and new language of tomorrow?

With our misgivings about the worship of things merely old we already have plunged into the heart of the Reformation. Our Church is the leveller who flattens out the differences between things new and old. He cannot be a Christian who pretends that old things are better than new things because they are old, or that new things are better than old things because they are new. For a Christian knows that God has created the sun and the moon in the beginning and they are good tomorrow and to the last of days. And he also created the stumbling block of all merely old things, Jesus of Nazareth and he, too, this eternally new Christ, is good, holy and perfect. Hence, Christians should be immune against any preference for tomorrow or for yesterday because as our text says: God is near. He is the God of all times. He opens one eon and he closes the preceding one, and those who help him close the old, are as much his servants as those who rush forward into the next. The end is as good as the beginning.

Now God not only created all things good. When He created man he created him very good because he added mortality and death to our portion. He laid it upon us to end and bury the dead as well as to beget new life.

Those good Christians tried to hew the line between burying the old and begetting the new. Under the new satellite system of technology we are drowned by novelty. They were drowned by antiquity. The Church of Luther's times seemed to have lost the power to do away with any necessity or frills. Hence, we might say that we labor under too much change and too many new gadgets and they labored under too many antics.

Reformation produced a new equilibrium between the old and the new, the right equilibrium. As we need the right balance too and must learn how both, the future and the past, are God's creatures and remain good, let me speak of the manner they found the equilibrium in the sixteenth century following the Beginner and Perfecter of our faith, Christ the Lord.

*Translated by Eugene Rosenstock-Huessy

The term "Reform" occurs in the Latin Bible from which the Reformers took it. However, it only occurs in two places, in Romans and in Philipians. It occurs as the verb, "to reform," and it occurs in the white heat of Paul's witness as a command. He demands us to be reformed instead of being conformists. Unfortunately, the modern translations have obliterated the connection of the two texts in Paul and the Great Protest of the Reformation. For, they translate the expression by the word: transform.

In order to regain the power and the comfort of the term REFORM, we do well to rediscover it in the Latin. "Recoil from conformism," it says today as much as yesterday. Then people lived by praying twelve hundred rosaries: today, they live by buying twelve hundred gadgets. Then, people lived on the litanies of the past; today, they live on the installment plan. If reformed, we would not do either. This, however, is only a first step. The new shape of ours, the new form or new formation negatively is not a conformism with things because they are old or because they are new. But it is a second step only which positively brings us up short to the gates of either heaven or hell, in our own decision.

Obviously, the Reformers did not use the term Reform and Reformation for some work of their own. For, they claimed that no work led to salvation. Not the works of the reforming party could lead them to their justification. You could become a Protestant and go to hell by the wrong works and you could be a Roman and yet go to heaven. I do think it is good for us to be reminded of this and to believe with the Reformers that the actions even of the most fanatic Reformer offers no more security than the inaction of the most quiet conformist. If the Reformation was the human work of one age, it would be pertinent to that age and it would have little meaning for our road.

The secret of the Reformation was a total indifference to mere action and to mere works. It was the rediscovery of the true and divine relation of action to passion, Our Lord's Passion bore so rich fruit in the acts of his Apostles! The interaction of passion and action, of passive and active, goes to explain why man is not justified by works. But in trying to explain this secret to you as well as to myself from the text, I ran into the serious trouble that we do not read more than the one verse in which "reform" occurs. For only then shall we realize how the translations of the King James and the Authorized Version and the latest one of the Rev. Phillips have sidestepped the great issue and the goal of our being transformed. Among us, the Reformation lies sick because we are told in these translations something which the Reformers did not read in their Latin text. And what you read now, may have a paralyzing effect. As this is a sermon and not a treatise, I like to point this out for the unauthorized version only of Dr. Phillips. I wish to show you that in a seemingly humble and modest toning down of the meaning of re-form, the Greek, the gnostic, the idealistic spirit of our time is weakening our faith, painting false hopes, and, I am afraid, misleading our affections.

I wish to strike the tocsin of alarm lest the Reformation among us be smothered by the hands of Reformers, activists, idealists, on the one side, and by conformists to the old fashioned ways of Churchgoing on the other. Mr. Phillips' wrong translation, as you will see, is the same wrong which most of us commit daily.

Mr. Phillips translates: He will remake these wretched bodies of ours to resemble his own glorious body. This will remind you of the well known expression in the King James' version: it may be fashioned like unto this glorious body. But this is an even stronger deviation from the promise of Paul. Dr. Phillips' deviation, however, is a liability which we may turn into our asset.

Here, then, are you and me, Mr. Johnson and Mr. Huessy and Mrs. Smith and John Hicks, in our wretched bodies. In what are we to be re-formed or transformed?

Are we going to be a likeness of Jesus, a second Christ? Are we, every one of us by himself, to be brought up into the body of our own glory in likeness to the body of his glory? Their word semblance or like seems to suggest that we all, and sundry, shall lead a second

life somewhere on the moon, in continuous bliss; everyone, however, so endowed with a body of his own, as to constitute a semblance to our Lord's glorious Body.

If this is the great Reformation, then I know of nobody who still believes this. The duplication of Christ's Body by innumerable bodies created in the resemblance, is neither believable nor desirable nor is it a part of the Christian message. We believe, on the contrary, that we all of our fleshly bodies are called to form one single Body of the Resurrection in side of which One and single Body our Lord is the Head and we are members.

Now this is exactly what our text in Greek and Latin says. It says that if we allow ourselves to be re-formed we shall be shaped into such an agent of God's will that we will contribute to the shaping of the One Final Body of his Son, the humanity who are lead on and headed by the first man in whom passion bore action and action bore passion, and God's and Man's will, active and passive, could not be distinguished.

The Reformation cannot possibly lead to a duplication or reduplication of this world in another second beyond. If we all were resemblances, we would be true to type. But you and I are not stereotypes, true to a pre-conceived conformist pattern. We are, every one of us, called up to making our own and unique personal contribution. Jesus has not abolished any one of his disciples' original features. Paul is more Paul, Peter more Peter, John the Evangelist whom the Lord loved was more John the more he was loved. Are Charles Wesley, Jonathan Edwards, Reginald Heber, Cotton Mather, John Greenleaf Whittier not originality incarnate? Idealists try to form themselves after an ideal. Christians, however, hear the small still voice say to them: do the one thing needed. Forget the preconceived security of being a well liked member, a respectable citizen, a conspicuous do gooder. No, do the risky, the necessary deed which produces much raising of eyebrow, much contempt for yourself, but which future generations will bless in fact even though they may never know of your intervention. Take the stripes without the stars. Then you will be shaped by helping to shape, you will be reformed by helping to form the body of our Lord.

You will cease to be a purged edition, a white clothed, always smiling angel, without teeth or nails or spine, a bore. The term resemblance, then, is the misleading term. We are images of God, yes, but only because he is invisible. You can't go before a mirror and find out if you look like the Creator. But any resemblance to any Man smells the mirror image, the abstract and the merely typical. Christ is so little a model of inspection or mirroring that he has asked us to eat his flesh and to drink his blood. He thereby wished to show us that we cannot remain outside each other, one impenetrable to the other. We cannot stand in parade in our uniforms and resemble each other or even Jesus, for that matter. We must resemble our Father in Heaven who creates new creatures inexhaustibly. You and I have no common denominator, above which we can be tagged by mere numbers one, two, three, four, five, six. A Christian is statistically unimportant or he has not yet been reformed. He is not an idealist but a creature to be created into an unheard of shape. Now, I promised you that I would turn the liability of the wrong translation by Dr. Phillips into an asset. And I shall now proceed to explain why it is not so much his translation which makes us stumble but our not reading on in Paul's letter. As you may know, Paul did not write his letters by chapters. They are an invention of later Sunday School teachers in the Church.

Paul wrote in one holy passion and he barely could get in a pause between his great cry: Be reshaped by helping to shape: and his outcry: Rejoice, I repeat: rejoice, the Lord is near, the Lord is our neighbor. This sentence, the Lord is near, now, separated from chapter three and lodged in chapter four, reads like an interloper, an intruder. All of a sudden this, the Lord is near! I have heard many clever men sigh: These early Christians truly are impossible. All the time they expect the second coming of Christ. Of course, they were wrong. My dear friends, a Christian in order to become a shaper of the shape of the body of Christ not only has he to become statistically unimportant. I am afraid that from the very beginning, the Christians had to live as latter day saints. I am not a Mormon only because I am not allowed to be a latter day Saint in any true Church of Christ.

Please consider this. Paul is in bondage in Rome, expecting the best, fearing the worst. In the same breath, he announces his instant

visit in Philippi and his possible execution. He lives in the indescribable suspense between life and death of the German concentration camp inmate who has no sentence but the two extremes of immediate execution and possible overthrow of the hated regime itself by the approaching allied armies. A former student of mine lived for eight years in twelve different Nazi Camps, was liberated by the Russians and now is a citizen of France. He thinks that you and I just do not know either what life or what death is and thinks that we shall perish because only men who have lived under St. Paul's suspense have the right to govern others.

Paul is not a stoic. He does not say: ye shall resemble. Or, I shall be fashioned like unto the Lord. He shouts on the top of his lungs: whether I shall re-visit you actively or whether I shall be tortured and killed passively by the teeth of the tigers in the circus I shall be re-shaped into an organ of the Body of Christ; for the head of the Body Christ is present as our Head. It is he who draws me after him, assimilates and incorporates me through my living or my dying into a functioning limb on his body. In Paul's agony, there is no dualism: there is no Christ somewhere in a picture book, and I myself drawing my picture nearly after him. No, there is the knock at the door of Paul's fearful and trembling heart: Gangway for the Lord. Enters the Lord and it is He who reshapes him into his witness by the love he bears and he inspires. The term reformation, then, and the shout: the Lord is present, are intertwined. Christ's message is neither a doctrine nor a prophecy nor a philosophy nor a law. Christ always is an event. He eventuates as he is ever present. In the latest theology this is universally reclaimed and rediscovered as the eschatological aspect of the orthodox faith of all Christians of all times. Our sects have torn off this parcel of our truth in protest against the Church's wrong idealism and wrong translation of the shaping of our final humanity. All Christians are latter day saints or there never was a Cross. The Lord knocks at the door. Why does this knock perform effectively, destroy conformism, give us our true form, sum up the Reformation?

Well, we started at the contradiction of the old times and the new, by the question is the new or is the old better in themselves? The impact of the knock at our door lifts both, the future and the past, out of limbo. While I am supping or listening to the radio, I have excluded my solidarity with the whole process of creation before me and after me. While I listen to the broadcast, I am immersed into this one ten minutes solely. When Christ knocks, the whole creation story jumps to its feet so to speak. The incredible length of creation from the redwoods to the abolition of war is flung into the crucible. And we who the day before have been mere building material, mere human beings, mere war potential, mere statistics, mere selves, go up into the cathedral as the next living stone of His Living Body: The head is near, and he draws His limbs. He is in us at work creating us into that special shape just now here necessary to complete the father's work. My friends, if the Lord is our neighbor, we have no interest in trimming our moustache or binding our beau tie according to our own ideal, for fitting into the art gallery of our own preferential heaven. We are in the one and only melting process so that Christ as the Head may weld us into the lacuna on his body which needs to be filled by a new image of the father, the unseen. Instead of being compared to him in a museum of anthropology, we must complete his body; overcome our gravity, our separateness, our preconceptions of what we plan to do in life. Then, we shall share in the shaping of his configuration, and then, the body of his glory will take on this glorious meaning of paradise regained, creation redeemed, and then the revelation given us by our Lord will not be a vain knowledge of a fact of 1517 or 29 A.D. but the re-formation of our mind from a private mind into a public agent; from a reporter on somebody else's Passion, I and you shall then act out his Passion and suffer so that our children may be free to act, in turn. Christ has shaped us by being shaped by his Father. His passion was his Action. He has reformed us by being reformed first. This, then, is not a pun, but reformation is the victory of the Cross over our sterile falling either for the new or for the old. In virtue of the Lord's nearness, the Reformation is his work, not ours. The reformation being not a work of ours but his work in us, tests our faith. Our faith ends our separation, our sea-shell like existence lying on the beach of life as things. Our faith in God, our love of Christ and the communion of their Vivifying Spirit makes us into his officers under the political constitution of the heavens, under which constitution we are taking part in the shaping of the body of his Transfiguration.

(This sermon was delivered by Eugene Rosenstock-Huessy on Reformation Sunday at the Methodist Church, Morrisville, Vermont at the invitation of the Lamoille County Ministers Association, representing the Protestant Churches in the Lamoille County area, Vermont.)