

THE 1980's: A DECADE OF LENT?

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Customarily liturgical seasons are thought of as having purely private significance. At most we may from time to time think of them in terms of an ecclesiastical frame of reference. Nonetheless, the argument pursued in the following pages makes a quite different case for the significance of the approaching lenten season. The claim is that in the decade upon which we have already embarked, Lent may have a social significance of the first order.

To explore this view it is necessary first to specify something of the specific, theological meaning which belongs to Lent. Only then will it be possible to say how it has a unique social significance in our age. A second major concern is the characterization of the relationship between North American Christians and the non-industrialized world. The conviction to be elaborated is that fundamental changes in the relationship are inevitable and that certain kinds of changes are more desirable (pragmatically and theologically) than others. Finally, the sources of courage and conviction needed to accomplish such desired changes require clear identification to insure that Lent's important social significance might be realized.

I

THE MEANING OF SACRIFICE

As is undoubtedly true for many other Presbyterians of the same vintage, reference to the church year in my Sunday School experience never got beyond Christmas and Easter. Thus what I first learned about other Christian seasons was owed in no small measure to playmates of Cajun, Middle Eastern, and Eastern European ancestry who shared with each other the common rootage in Roman Catholicism. In those pre-Vatican II days there was established a kind of ecumenical dialogue on the neighborhood playground which far outstripped anything of that sort inside the churches of the community.

Of all the Christian seasons, Lent was most indelibly fixed in my mind by these peers. No doubt its vividness corresponded to its public dimensions which began on Ash Wednesday when my friends showed up for afternoon play with sooty foreheads. Dirty faces were not uncommon among us, but this distinctively different facial discoloration set the stage for extended theological inquiry.

Initial questions concerning why the priest was allowed to inflict what parents otherwise insisted should be avoided--a dirty face--led to a more substantive revelation: these playmates were all "giving up" something for Lent. That phrase became the formula which defined Lent for them and hence for me. Lent was when one "gave up" something. Even today I do not hear the term without associating it with this formula, though at the time I raised some questions in my own mind about the authenticity of the sacrifices some of my friends reported.

It took no strong measure of cynicism to doubt if "giving up" spinach (or any other similarly distasteful commodity) represented either deep devotion or significant sacrifice. Still, some of these peers made conscientious efforts to identify

something which represented either genuine temptation (e.g., a surfeit of candy or other attractive junk foods) or a behaviour deemed inappropriate (e.g., the injudicious use of a certain adolescent vocabulary) and to forego indulgence in "it."

While it has proven necessary to refine the theological meaning beyond these first definitions embodied in my youthful peers, it has proven useful to hold onto the fundamental meaning of Lent as "giving up." Further developments in this understanding of the sacrificial dimension of Lent have revolved around the notion that such sacrifice ought to be functional. First of all this means that our sacrifices properly aim at meeting certain needs which might otherwise go unmet. The point of sacrifice is never to flagellate or even to renovate ourselves. It is rather to take cognizance that by doing without or with less of something, we can make a contribution toward meeting an otherwise unmet need. Sacrifice has a job to do beyond its effect on the one making the sacrifice. It is the redirection of resources we might otherwise deploy simply for the sake of ourselves to someone or some situation which has a fundamental need of them.

This brings us to the second element in a functional understanding of sacrifice. Sacrifice involves acceptance of the fact that we will receive a different share of the resources involved than would be the case if we engage in no sacrifice whatever. It is worth noting that sacrifice does not mean necessarily that we will have no share in the resources involved. If one person sacrifices time which would otherwise be spent on a project especially important to her in order to spend time with someone who has a fundamental need of companionship, the resource of time is not utterly lost to her. But it is no longer time which can be employed on the original project. Now it is time in the specific form of time spent with this friend. What is given up is our sole determination of the way we will deploy the resource, not any share in the resource whatever. Thus sacrifice in this functional sense does not mean giving up sharing in resources, but it does mean a different share for us in the face of the fundamental need of others. The risk involved is that we might not be as satisfied with such a different share in the resource.

As a consequence a third element in the functional understanding of sacrifice is especially important. It is the trust that God is poised and ready to utilize such sacrifice to provide adequate sustenance for all. The fundamental theological conviction that makes sacrifice intelligible is the prevenient activity of God which relentlessly seeks the well being of the whole creation. The companion theological conviction is that God provides adequate resources for the well being of the creation. Thus the risk included in surrendering our control of the resources, while clearly changing the specific share we will have in them, is both reasonable and acceptable. The fundamental needs of both ourselves and others will not be cruelly mocked by the God who is both Creator and Redeemer. What God needs from us is the avoidance of any miserly hoarding of resources that prevents their extension to the fundamental needs of us all.

Although it may rarely be employed as a lectionary text for Lent, the Gospel tradition regarding the feeding of the 5,000 poignantly depicts this sense of functional sacrifice. Control of quite limited resources is given up for the sake of responding to human hunger and fatigue. Those who give up the control have a share in them as the resources are made available to meet the need in the broadest possible way. In each of its appearances in the four gospels, the persistent features of the story are that limited resources were put at the disposal of the broadest need, and "all were filled."

II

THE DECADE OF THE EIGHTIES

The kind of functional sacrifice explained above is uniquely relevant to the decade of the 1980's. Especially as North American Christians ponder their relation to much of the unindustrialized and partially industrialized world, it becomes apparent that Lent does in fact have a large social significance.

For the past several decades the entire world has had to face and respond to a series of resource shortages. Though it is probably overly neat to identify trends in terms of decades, there is some justification for the claim that food was the resource crisis of the 1960's and that energy has been the resource crisis of the 1970's. To be sure there have been various calls to sacrifice both from within and without the Church. We have heard the call in forms ranging from advocacy of temporary relief efforts to commitments to longer range life style modifications. While many have responded in varying measures to these and many other appeals, the truth is that the scarcity of both of these basic resources has continued unameliorated.

The continued appeal for some kind of sacrifice respecting these resources needs to be examined critically, if for no other reason than significant sacrifice to date seems not to have produced the desired result. Either there is a flaw in the reasoning about sacrifice which has been advanced above, or the sacrifice has not been radical enough--or the sacrifice has not been focused around the crucial resource. It is the latter of these alternatives for which there is increasing evidence.

One way to focus on what genuinely is the crucial resource in the world today is to focus on the resource of world employment as the one which seems destined to become the "designated crisis" of the 1980's. We are familiar with the issue of domestic unemployment. However, the severest forms of unemployment in our society only hint at the magnitude of the problem on the global scene. Unemployment is a serious personal and familial problem for those who are its victims. What may go unrecognized is its inevitable social impact. Richard Barnett, writing in the April 7, 1980, New Yorker, underscored this point.

In an industrializing world, in which the principal activity is getting and spending, more and more people are becoming irrelevant to the productive process, both as producers and consumers. More than 800 million people cannot find enough work at wages adequate to provide food for their families. Every sign suggests that the number will increase. It is the monumental social problem of the planet--the cause of mass starvation, of repression, and of crime. Just as the energy crisis was the time bomb of the nineteen-seventies, the world employment crisis is likely to be the time bomb of the eighties.(86)

When the resource in short supply is world employment, it becomes clear that indefinite sacrifices to share other resources such as food and energy are doomed to defeat. For the mechanism by which another can share in them, even when we do not demand them for ourselves, has malfunctioned.

The truth is that these scarcities of basic resources of food and energy are not a problem of resource availability nearly so much as a problem of resource distribution. To analyze properly the shape of appropriate sacrifice, then, we are

led quite specifically to a critical look at the system of economic distribution. It is only by a system of such distribution that any concrete sacrifices which might be made can be translated into a net gain for those who are disadvantageously placed. However, when the distribution system leaves perhaps as much as 25% of the world's population outside of its effective reach while keeping still others on its margins, then the concern for effective sacrifice necessarily moves to a new level of intensity.

In a recent book called Management in Turbulent Times, Peter Drucker has apparently dismissed the malfunctioning of the distribution system. Claiming that economic development always includes a kind of unevenness, he views the situation in parts of the third world as simply another illustration of the point. However, we are confronted with a key error of analysis when such "unevenness" is thought of merely as unfortunate for those for whom the system does not work. Its significance reaches far beyond the plight of the family which not only does not produce or consume, but has no meaningful prospect of doing so. As dire as their plight is, the significance of that plight, when multiplied by roughly one quarter of the earth's population, extends to the whole human race.

The earlier quote from Barnett provides a more comprehensive assessment of the palpable unevenness of economic development. It is indeed the "time bomb" of the eighties, cause of "mass starvation, of repression, and of crime." Moreover, in a world which sits on a nuclear arsenal such as now has been assembled, the time bomb is associated not with random terrorism, but with global destruction.

This furnishes the context in which Lent has preeminent social significance in our day. Our call to sacrifice is not simply a call to lessen our demand on certain resources such as food and energy. It is rather a call to give up control of the economic process in order that a system of distribution might be developed which provides adequate sharing of the world's wealth. Currently the system of distribution is directed and controlled principally by capital. Those of us who live where capital is relatively plentiful obviously are situated in a controlling position. For the system of distribution to change for the sake of more adequate sharing, it is required that we at least be willing to shift to some other principle of control--which means a willingness to give up our control.

It goes without saying that we will need the best economic minds available to discover the shape of an economic process that will take more seriously into account the survival needs of this age. Perhaps some form of democratic control of the capital which fuels economic systems will be a partial answer. In any event, the world is at a place where it cannot afford to be restricted by economic models of the past, whether of the right or left. Fresh and vigorous economic imagination is called for if we are to have any confidence in a global future.

III

PREACHING ABOUT SACRIFICE

Yet the grandest economic imagination will have no chance apart from a readiness to sacrifice. Preachers cannot be expected to be the source of economic imagination, but they can be expected to cultivate a readiness for sacrifice. In the decade of the eighties, preaching will do well to clarify the nature of the sacrifice needed: a willingness to forego control of an economic system which clearly works to our advantage, but just as clearly does not work to the advantage of (nor even takes into account) a large segment of the world. For the sake of meeting

fundamental survival needs of this large segment in the short run, and for the sake of the fundamental survival needs of the planet in the long run, it will call on us to give up a blind commitment to a system because it works well for us--at least for the present. The point of such sacrifice is not to punish ourselves, but to help brothers and sisters who simply cannot survive in the present arrangement. Our preaching needs to be clear about this aim of sacrifice.

Equally important for our preaching is the honest acknowledgment that this sacrifice involves basic changes in the way the system of distribution will apply to us. To put it bluntly, we will probably not do as "well." However, the aim is certainly not that of reversing the situation so that we now stand outside the system of distribution while others are moved within. As with all sacrifice, we will participate in the sharing of resources, albeit in a new way. The sacrifice calls for a shift to a new criterion for assessing the adequacy of an economic system. The criterion is not how it helps us in isolation from others, but how broadly it makes economic goods and services available. The broader sharing of a finite supply of goods and services means that no one is likely to have as much. To evoke faithful response to this call for sacrifice, preaching needs to be clear about the cost that is thus involved.

However, even more important is the accompanying proclamation that God is able to use such sacrifice to do for all far more abundantly than we can either ask or think. Fundamental to the adequacy of our preaching about sacrifice is its representation of the readiness and power of God to utilize such sacrifice for the well being of the whole creation. Because God is Creator, it is possible to avert the fear that the earth does not have enough for all and the mentality of hoarding that goes with it. Because God is Redeemer, it is possible to avoid the cynicism which doubts that any changes can come to any good effect and the inertia associated with it. This God and no other is the author of the call to sacrifice in the eighties. Therefore the sacrifice is by no means an invitation to self-destruction. It is rather an invitation to believe more in the power and graciousness of the good God than in the inevitability of a niggard distribution of the earth's sustaining resources.

What Christian preaching will have to remind us all is that sacrifice is never efficacious in and of itself. But sacrifice is the raw material out of which God can and does extend these sustaining resources of the earth beyond every chauvinistic scope into which we might otherwise fix them. Not magically but politically, economically, and socially, God works on the human heart and imagination to create an earth that reflects God's glory by nourishing adequately all its inhabitants. And our sacrifice of control over distribution of the earth's goods is both an effect of and instrument for God's work on behalf of our universal welfare. It is a declaration of partnership with the God who lives and reigns for the whole human family.

In conclusion, a most serious theological point about sacrifice must be raised. Karl Barth has pointed out that the real problem with sacrifice is that it is inherently a substitute for what we really ought to render to God but never do. It constitutes a gift from the sphere of our cherished possessions and symbolizes "the life which has not in fact been offered to God." The sacrifice demanded for the eighties cannot be such a sacrifice if it is to be responsive to the peril which the age portends.

Therefore, it cannot be our sacrifice in the first place. All our sacrifices are inevitably the substitutes for what we really ought to render to God, but never do. The only sacrifice which is adequate to the need is one which does not symbolize "the life which has not in fact been offered to God," but rather one which precisely

represents that individual commitment to and trust in the kingdom of God. Only the one sacrifice of Jesus Christ is not a substitute for, but the reality of, utter devotion to God's cause.

Thus the sacrifice we are called to offer in the eighties is not our sacrifice but a participation in the one, authentic sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Only as the Spirit at work in him moves in us to give us a share in his sacrifice will we be truly responsive to the difficulties that define this decade. However, to be sure, sharing in his sacrifice is not a simple, tension free prospect.

Lent is a season which calls us to stand ready to give up something. The coming decade will be one in which such sacrifice can have social consequences of a fundamental sort if it takes the form of giving up blind commitment to a system of economic distribution that simply overlooks myriad individuals, groups, and regions. The sacrifice involved in Lent has its penultimate symbol in Good Friday where the cost of the authentic and faithful sacrifice for the sake of human well being is unsentimentally manifested. However, it has its ultimate symbol in Easter, where the power of God to confirm and render effective such sacrifice through its reception into the everlasting divine is irrevocably declared.