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CERTAINTY

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Trinity Sermon No.16

LANCE R. SHILTON



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by the Reverend

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Trinity Sermon No. 16

CERTAINTY

Not long ago someone said to me, "I won't believe anything I can't prove. That's why I can't accept Christianity." I immediately asked if he could prove conclusively that he was the son of the person he claimed to be his mother. For all he knew he may have been an adopted child. Yet without examining the evidence he was prepared to accept the stated relationship.

Some philosophers tell us that we cannot be sure of anything. What we think we see may be an optical illusion; or we may be suffering from hallucinations, or we may be dreaming. We must admit that when we dream it appears to be real enough. Can we ever be certain that what we perceive with our senses does actually exist? We cannot even be sure that the sun will rise in the East tomorrow. If we say, "Of course it will", then we are merely assuming that it will because it has done so every other morning, but we cannot be absolutely sure that it will tomorrow. Perhaps you are saying now, "Let's use our commonsense. Of course, I'm the son of my mother. Of course, I'm sure that what I'm looking at really exists. Of course the sun will rise in the East tomorrow." All I am trying to say is

that the Christian has a number of certainties about which he can say, "Of course, I'm sure." What are these certainties?

I. THE CHRISTIAN IS CERTAIN OF THE SINFULNESS OF MAN.

We may try to take a light view of what used to be known as sin and call it human weakness. We may try to make out that it is a trifle but God calls it a tragedy. We may pass it off as an accident but God declares it to be an abomination. We may pretend that this old-fashioned word no longer has any real meaning in a cultivated society, but deep down in our hearts we know that it is serious.

If you take a bottle marked "POISON", tear off the label and put on another marked "COUGH MIXTURE", it does not alter the deadly nature of the liquid inside, but is still deadly poison. Change the label for sin if you like, but it is still deadly. The Bible always regards sin as a distortion. It is a mal-adjustment which did not belong to the original nature of man. How often we hear it said by way of excuse when a person does something wrong,

"Well it's only natural." It shows how far we have moved from our original nature when we say it is natural to do the wrong thing. When we sin we do something less than we should do; less than what by the purpose of God we were constituted to do.

Isaiah the prophet put it this way: "All we like sheep have gone astray; everyone of us has turned to his own way."

Sin is distortion. It is no use comparing ourselves with other people and saying, "I'm pretty good. I'm as good as most people", because when we look at man we are looking at mutilated material. When we start to compare ourselves with the perfect Son of God, we begin to see how distorted we really are. The Bible also sees sin as a CONSCIOUS WRONG ACT. It is a deliberate act of the mind and will. It is the making of a positive choice with the preference of self instead of God.

Recorded in the Bible (Mark 10) is the story of the rich young ruler, who came to Jesus with a question: "Good Master, what shall I do, that I may have eternal life?" When Jesus saw

him, He loved him, for he was a fine attractive young man. "One thing you lack," said Jesus, "Go your way, sell all you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven: and come, take up the cross, and follow me." But the young man went sorrowfully away because he had great possessions. That was a demonstration of sin as a conscious act. It was a deliberate choice in the wrong direction. Those who cling to themselves, those who spend everything on themselves, those who are fighting all the time to protect themselves against any kind of competition, these are sinners as much as the drunkard or the harlot.

Jesus said, "What shall it profit a man, if he gain the whole world and lose his own soul?" Put into a modern setting His words could be, "What shall it profit a man if he build a great business by wrong means and lose his conscience." "What shall it profit a dictator though he conquer the world and live in fear of an avenger's bullet." "What shall it profit a man if he please himself all his life and die in the utter loneliness of his selfishness?"

The sin of a wrong conscious choice is deadly.

The Bible also says that sin is an UNBELIEVING ATTITUDE. Unbelief is an insult to the truthfulness of God. St. John put it this way: "He that believeth on Him (that is, Christ) is not condemned: but he that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God." John 3.18. It is only too easy for us to adopt an unbelieving attitude as a kind of protection against the force of the truth of God.

While no doubt there are a number of honest doubters with sincere intellectual difficulties, there are many more dishonest doubters who try conveniently to use an unbelieving attitude to protect themselves against the claims of God. Such a person will state first of all his difficulty in believing in the existence of God and when you produce powerful arguments to meet his difficulty, he shifts his ground to the problems arising from the difference in various denominations; and when you explain how these have arisen, he moves on to the problem of pain and so on. There is no end to the questions he can

raise to prevent himself from believing. When this unbelieving attitude is insincere it is sin.

II. THE CHRISTIAN IS CERTAIN OF THE SALVATION OF CHRIST.

He has proved it and is proving it day by day. Previously the whole question of sin was an unsolved problem. Various ways of dealing with it were attempted.

GOOD RESOLUTIONS. No sooner were these made than they were broken. For instance, a man, in his better moments, realised that certain habits were getting a grip on him and he decided to give them up, but he could not. Then in despair he lowered his standards accordingly. Finally he made one resolution which he was able to keep; that is, he resolved not to make any more. Perhaps he tried.

RELIGIOUS OBSERVANCES. Now do not misunderstand me. I am not suggesting that you can be a real Christian without going to Church. What I am saying is that not all people who go to Church are necessarily Christians. They may attend Church in an attempt to find an

answer to life. They may follow through certain religious observances simply because it is their good habit to do so.

Remember that it was the religious people who refused to receive the new truth brought by Jesus Christ in person. The person who is formally religious and not really a Christian has no certainty about anything: but the mark of a Christian is the fact that he is certain that Christ is his Saviour. What does that mean? It means that Jesus Christ did for us what we could not do for ourselves. His death upon the Cross was sufficient to take away our sin. The benefits of His sacrifice, made once for all, are now available to those who will receive Him.

St. John reminds us that "As many as received Him (that is, Christ), to them gave He power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on His name." John 1.12. But this is

Too HUMBLING for the proud man. He will not accept anything for nothing.

Too DIFFICULT for the unrepentant man.

He wants it on his own terms.

Too EASY for the moral man. He wants to make himself worthy of it.

Too CHEAP for the rich man; he wants to pay for it.

Too SIMPLE for the religious man; he wants to sacrifice for it.

I wonder is it just right for you? As many as received Jesus, to them gave He power to become the children of God. Have you received Jesus? Are you certain that Christ is your Saviour? Is he transforming your life day by day? You can be certain right now, if you will receive Jesus. This act of faith is not a 'shot in the dark'; rather it is counting on strong evidence:

There are all the clear statements of the Bible.

The historic evidence of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The testimony of other Christians who have put it to the test in their own lives.

There is the inward witness of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer and the living presence of the Lord Jesus Christ to give victory over sin and temptation.

To receive Jesus is to know the forgiveness of sins, and the deep peace of God, which passes all understanding. That is why the Christian is certain that Christ is his Saviour. His assurance is expressed in the hymn writer's words:

"He died that we might be forgiven,
He died to make us good,
That we might go at last to Heaven
Saved by His precious blood."

III. THE CHRISTIAN IS CERTAIN OF THE PROVISION OF ETERNAL LIFE.

If you asked the average person this question, "Do you expect to go to heaven when you die?", the reply from most would be, "I hope so".

In the back of their minds there is the idea that they would have to be good enough and that after death their good deeds will be measured on one side of the balance, and their bad deeds on the

other, and that their eternal destiny will be determined by whichever is the heavier. Christianity knows nothing of such teaching for the Christian knows that Heaven is his eternal home. On what then does his certainty rest?

ON THE FINISHED WORK OF THE CROSS.

When our Lord was dying in lonely agony upon the Cross, in the darkness, this great cry rang out, "It is finished". Then He died. It wasn't a cry of weakness. It wasn't only an indication of the end of physical life. It was a cry of triumph. He had completed the work He came to do. God's plan of salvation was finished. We cannot take away, nor can we add to that which the Son of God has done. God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself. Permanent fellowship is now possible to all who trust in the Christ of the Cross.

The Christian's certainty of heaven rests also on

THE FIRM WORDS OF THE SAVIOUR.

Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth and the life: no man

cometh to the Father but by me." John 14.6.

Jesus said, "He that heareth my word and believeth on Him that sent me, hath eternal life, and shall not come into condemnation; but is passed from death unto life." John 5.24.

Jesus said, "Him that cometh unto me I will in nowise cast out." John 6.37.

Jesus said, "Let not your heart be troubled; ye believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house are many mansions; if it were not so I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you." John 14.1.

It is not presumptuous for a Christian to say, "I know I have eternal life", because he is simply taking Christ at His word. He is not saying, "I hope I am good enough. I don't want to pretend that I'm better than I am." He knows that he is not good enough in himself, but he also knows

that his certainty is dependent upon the promise of Christ.

The Christian's certainty of heaven also rests on

THE FACT OF PERSONAL EXPERIENCE.

Christians throughout the centuries, and thousands of Christians all over the world today witness to the fact that Christ has given them new, eternal life. Death holds no fear because it has become simply the opening into a fuller experience of the eternal life already possessed. Christ is their Saviour, God is their Father, Heaven is their Home. I wonder if I am speaking to someone who is afraid of death? You may come to a place of real faith right now.

I remember talking to a lady in hospital, who was dying. She knew she was dying. Quietly she said to me, "I'm afraid." I said, "I want to bring a verse from the Bible; it is God's word, 'Perfect love casts out fear'." "If I were to try to reason with you and say, 'There is nothing to be afraid of. Cheer up! It's not as bad as you think', it wouldn't be much help to

you. The best thing I can say is that God loves you. His love casts out fear."

Can you imagine a child trying to cross a busy city street on his own during the peak period. You say to him, "Go on, make your way across, there is nothing to be afraid of." As he looks in one direction and then the other he sees the cars speeding toward him, he says, "I am still afraid." But if his father were there to take him by his hand and go with him his fear would disappear. When we put our hand into the hand of our loving Heavenly Father, He takes us across the other side and there is no fear, because "perfect love casts out fear."

My friend, all your fears and uncertainties will be cast out today if you will follow the simple A.B.C. of Christian certainty.

A. stands for ADMIT YOUR SIN NOW

This does not mean merely saying, "I'm sorry", or attempting to escape the consequences of my wrong doing; it means repentance. That is, "I must resolutely turn my back on everything

in my past life which I know to be wrong, and I must be willing for Christ to cast it out of my life for ever. I will cease trying to make excuses before God and others and will face these realities squarely."

B. stands for BELIEVE GOD'S WORD NOW

In the Bible, the way by which we can come back to God is clearly stated. Belief or faith means utter confidence. I have never been to the South Pole and yet I believe there is a South Pole. How do I know? Because someone has told me and because I have read about it. As we read about the salvation of God in His Word, then we can take His Word for it and be absolutely certain. This does not mean, however, just believing about a person who lived two thousand years ago and whose history we know, but believing in a Living Redeemer who came and died and rose again and who is in our very presence now. Believe God's Word. Believe that Jesus Christ died upon the Cross. Believe now that He makes this free offer of salvation to those who will receive Him. Believe His word when it says in a text which we know so well, "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only

begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life." John 3.16.

C. stands for COMING TO CHRIST NOW.

Do not let us wait until we are WEAK enough. Thank God that He will meet people in their weakest condition. He will be with them in their greatest need. But do not let us wait until then. Let us come now in the full bloom of health. Let us come to Him with all our gifts and potentialities. Let us come to Him so that we might serve Him wholeheartedly.

Do not let us wait until we are OLD enough. Thank God He will meet those who come to Him when they are at the eventide of life, but let us come now. Let us come while we are still young enough to serve Him.

Do not let us wait until we think we are BAD enough. There are some people who feel that they are not bad enough to come to Christ. They want to go their own way. But, of course, we are bad enough as we are, for "there is none righteous, no not one." All of us have gone astray, each one of us

comes under the condemnation because of God's justice.

Do not let us wait until we think we are GOOD enough. I do not know how long you intend to wait, because not one of us will ever be good enough. We simply receive what Jesus offers as a free gift. We come to Him just as we are to receive it. I wonder at this time, has the Holy Spirit been speaking to you? Are you ready to come to Him just as you are? Are you ready to receive the great assurance which He can bring to your heart? Are you ready to enter into the certainties of the Christian life, and say with the hymn writer, these well known words, as your personal prayer of faith,

"Just as I am - without one plea,
But that Thy Blood was shed for me,
And that Thou bidd'st me come to
Thee,
O Lamb of God, I come."

* * * * *

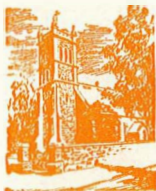
MY PRAYER

O God, I pray that Thou wilt give me grace to come to Thee just as I am, and enter into the certainty that Thou canst bring to my soul. For Christ's sake.

Amen.

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