

November 12, 1967

Bruton Parish Church, Williamsburg, Va.

The people who sat in darkness - have seen a great light; they that dwell in the land of the shadow of death, upon them hath the light shined.

Isaiah 9:2

Moses' exploits in leading the children of Israel out of Egypt, once dull as dust - leap with front page applicability. The Red Sea, Sinai Peninsula, the Negev, Jordan and Jericho - are things we talk about at breakfast.

Moses thought he had escaped the cries of his oppressed countrymen when he fled to Midian. But as he watched his father-in-law's flocks he heard the voice of God remind him - "The slaves of Egypt are your brethren - go, lead them to freedom." He was annoyed, remembering them as a shiftless lot, crude, unreliable, - people with whom he'd prefer not to associate. So he made excuses - "I don't speak well - I don't have the facts - send someone else". God's promise that He would be with him came with such authority, when Moses appeared before Pharaoh he declared with unmistakable power - "Let my people go!"

Alone, we shirk responsibilities, tallying our small capacities. With the assurance which comes from study, prayer and worship - we take on a boldness which reflects the voice of God. What could have been more futile than the penniless monk Martin Luther speaking his mind to Charles V, ruler of most of Europe and much of the New World? Out of that dialog came our religious freedoms.

Today, we seem surrounded by insoluble problems. Irresistible forces appear to be approaching collision with immovable objects.

The most immediate and demanding conflict arises from the insistence of racial minorities to be given all the rights and privileges the majority have achieved. The race problem can no longer be evaded either in this country or abroad. Seemingly impossible questions will require even more goodwill than brains. Probably the only effective way out will be to provide better schools for everybody, and develop a more inclusive type of community life. Lives will be far richer as our society becomes more inclusive. Isn't this what our Lord Christ prescribed? - "love the brethren"; "bear ye one another's burdens"; "to whom much is given, from him shall much be required". Now we are seeing the pragmatic necessity of what we once thought impractical idealism - fortifying us - as it did Moses.

Getting Catholics and Protestants together appeared ten years ago as wild idealism. Today the Holy Spirit is leading us into an increasing number of intimate contacts, -- and a united force for Good is becoming a possibility. Some deeply loved prejudices may have to be put aside - but God is working His purpose out, invalidating what seemed a stalemate.

The overshadowing problem before us is in the international realm. The political complexities of our involvement in an undeclared war in Vietnam are so baffling that I feel presumptuous even in asking questions. But since there is rather general consensus that something is wrong in Vietnam (a conviction voiced by leaders of nations traditionally our friends - leading military experts - and the rank and file of American citizens) - we wonder if some logical, straightforward explanation might be given without endangering whatever military or political advantage we hold.

Relatively few of us plan even the mildest form of disloyal action against constituted authority. "United we stand, divided we fall." We know the necessity of supporting our leader. But we cannot close our Christian consciences to consideration of the rightness of actions as they are reported to us, - perhaps erroneously, perhaps for good cause (of which we have not been apprised). We are appalled that apparently this is the only war in our history which has had three times as many civilian as military casualties. It is particularly regrettable that to so many nations the struggle's purpose appears as neo-colonialism. We are mystified by news accounts suggesting that our brave fighting units are inhibited by directives and inadequate equipment from using their capacities to terminate the conflict successfully.

While pledging our loyalty - we ask humbly, WHY?

We know we must avoid the oversimplification which views the war as a struggle against a monolithic Communism. Communism seems to be an irresistible force - and we are sure we are an immovable object. Geographically, Communism is getting closer and closer to us. The peril is that we may panic and do foolish things. Many people are badly scared. It's almost impossible to think straight when we are frightened.

West Berlin and Hong Kong are quite literally within the jaws of Communism. If their psychology were our psychology they would be gloomy, depressed spots. On the contrary both cities are enjoying a building boom; visitors are astonished at the vigor of life. The Communists are 40 miles from Helsinki, Vienna, Trieste, yet these communities are less concerned about the threat they offer than are our cities. The closer we get to the real Reds, the less we are intimidated by them.

The economic problem is simpler than was commonly assumed. Even the cursory presentation of LIFE magazine this week, bears out this. Both pure Communism and pure Capitalism were the creations of fevered imaginations. There is an increasing amount of private enterprise in Communist countries, while even the rankest capitalist rides over state-owned roads, many send their children to public schools, puts up with many socialistic practises. The problem of the future is to discover what can best be done by the state and what is best left to private enterprise.

The more serious threat of Communism of course is political. To those who have little, it promises much - it fires hopes, - even though the world has seen relatively few instances of their willingness or ability to make good on such promises. As a nation we are called upon to live up to our profession of "liberty and justice for all". If we set right the inequalities and erase the dark blots on our life, we have nothing to fear for ourselves. As for the rest of the world - it is admittedly difficult to devise ways of exporting democracy.

The years ahead will be painful. Customs which seem an essential part of life may have to be given up. Opinions we have held tenaciously may be proven false. Physical and emotional landmarks may be swept aside. We may be compelled to think new thoughts and walk in new paths. Emerging young men and women who will gradually take over must have more understanding than we have had. Necessity will compel them to rise to greater heights than we have known. The future looks terrible; but with guidance from God (as in every strategic juncture of history) He will infuse the essential factor into the equation - something we could never suspect as a possibility - to make the future glorious.

Cotesworth P. Lewis