

HIS TOUCH HAS STILL ITS ANCIENT POWER

by

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CHAPTER THREE

THE PLACE WAS SHAKEN

"And when they had prayed, the place was shaken" (Acts 4:31)

"I'M AFRAID the numbers may be rather small to-night": the speaker was apologetic but resigned.

"We've advertised, and distributed invitations, but you know what people are nowadays. They won't come to meetings."

My friend, in whose church I was to conduct a series of evangelistic meetings, continued gloomily, "Those that do come, arrive late and sit right at the back, and before the last hymn is over they are away home."

Have you ever noticed the striking contrast there is between the problems that faced our Lord in His ministry and those that preachers of to-day have to contend with?

Then: **"The people came early in the morning... for to hear Him.."**

Now: "Those who do come, arrive late."

Then: **"An innumerable multitude of people."**

Now: "They won't come to meetings."

Then: **"The people pressed upon Him to hear the Word of GOD."**

Now: "They sit right at the back."

Then: **"The multitude... continue with me now three days, and have nothing to eat."**

Now: "Before the last hymn is over they are away home."

There are many ways of accounting for these sharp contrasts, but perhaps one of the most obvious is that the preaching was so different. It was different in conviction. The twentieth century's anemic, "I venture to suggest," is a poor substitute for His authoritative, **"Verily, verily, I say unto you."**

Tolerance is sometimes another word for indifference. The "man in the street" says: "If you have

any convictions, give me the benefit of them, but keep your doubts to yourself, I have enough of my own."

Then again, it was different in its simplicity. The learned discourse on "The Psychology of Crisis" may be very scholarly, but we doubt if it is as effective as "The Parable of the Sower." As the preacher concluded his sermon one member of the congregation murmured to another, "Very deep, very deep." "No," whispered the second, "not deep - muddy!" Not for one moment are we belittling the intellectual, rather the reverse; but true cleverness lies in explaining the profound with simplicity. Where we aim at being clever, He aimed at being clear.

It was also different in its directness. For fear of driving away the faithful few, the preacher of to-day speaks kindly of "the great human family" and "GOD, the FATHER of all men." Such phrases neither offend nor please. But the multitudes who gathered to hear JESUS of Nazareth were left in no doubt by parable and plain word, that mankind was divided into two distinct classes - children of the Kingdom and children of the Wicked One. Wherever He preached He brought not peace but a sword. **"There was a division among the people because of Him."**

No man was ever so loved or so hated as He. We have been warned: **"If the world hate you, ye know that it hated me before it hated you"** (John 15:18). And, **"Ye are the salt of the earth"** - not the sugar.

But perhaps His preaching differed most from ours in its power. There is no one more conscious of his need of power than the writer. Therefore, I speak not as a critic, but as a fellow worker. Yes, **"The common people heard Him gladly,"** because **"He taught them as one that had authority (power), and not as the scribes"** (Mark 1:22). His preaching was powerful, not professional. **"The power of the Lord was present to heal them"** (Luke 5:17).

It is cold comfort for us to be told that "results don't count," because in our hearts we know that results do count. Moreover, the Son of GOD said that results are the final test for any preacher. **"By their fruits ye shall know them."** How often when we preach little or nothing happens - but what a fruitful ministry was His! Not only were men's bodies healed and the dead raised to life; there were the **"greater works,"**

- the prostitute became a soul winner (John 4),
- the covetous man became a philanthropist (Luke 19),
- the hardened publican became a supplicant (Luke 18),
- the son of Thunder became the beloved disciple (Mark 3:17; I John 3:18).

Beyond a doubt, His preaching was vitally different from ours. If we would discover the secret of His power we must follow Him when, in the morning, **"rising up a great while before day, He went out, and departed into a solitary place, and there prayed"** (Mark 1:35), and again, when **"He went out into a mountain to pray, and continued all night in prayer to God"** (Luke 6:12). How easy it is to write and talk about prayer, but how difficult it is to pray, yet how essential.

Prayer, and the lack of it, played a great part in a mission conducted in Anford. I had conducted another united mission in a neighbouring town, which the Lord blessed mightily. I realized that

the fact that the Christians of Anford knew this, was anything but a help. To the nearby town I had gone as an unknown evangelist, and the local workers had felt that unless the Lord helped, how could "this man save us," so they called upon the Name of the Lord, and the blessing poured down.

But at Anford it was different. There, I was "Mr. Rees who had been so successful at P-, so it's sure to be the same here."

How helpless one feels in the face of this! Yet I tried to tell them that I was powerless to do anything unless they prayed.

At the welcome meeting I decided to suggest early morning prayer meetings, but when I said, "May I announce a 7 a.m. prayer meeting each day during the mission?" the prayer secretary immediately jumped up and said in a very final tone, "I am afraid that wouldn't work here, Mr. Rees. You see, so many have to be at work early, and there are many other reasons, so I am afraid they can't be arranged." That was that.

There was no other time during the day for a prayer meeting, so we started the mission without daily united prayer.

Some years ago I heard a man say: "Just preach the Gospel and souls will be blessed." At that time I believed this, but since then I have learned that such a statement is not true.

GOD has given the Christian Church two offensive weapons, and if we are to drive the enemy back from men's lives, we must use them both. They are the Gospel and Prayer. After naming the Christian's five defensive pieces of armour in Ephesians, chapter six, the Apostle Paul exhorts us to lay hold upon our two offensive weapons. "**Take... the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God,**" - the source of the message; "**Praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit**" - the source of the power.

The prophet Ezekiel tells (Ezekiel 37) how the Lord set him in the midst of a valley which was full of dry bones and told him to preach to those bones (not a very inspiring congregation!), and I challenge you to find a more orthodox sermon than the one he preached. "**O ye dry bones, hear the Word of the Lord. Thus saith the Lord God unto these bones.**" But although Ezekiel's sermon was sound, he tells us that the only effect it had upon his congregation was that "**there was a noise,... and the bones came together, bone to his bone... and the skin covered them above.**" "**But,**" says the disheartened preacher, "**there was no breath in them.**"

You see, he had used only one weapon - done no more than preach. But his story does not end there, for GOD commands him yet again: "**Say to the wind, thus saith the Lord God: come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live.**" And having prophesied as he was commanded (used the second weapon), "**the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood up upon their feet, an exceeding great army.**"

To the preachers of His day, the MASTER said: "**Ye do err, not knowing the Scriptures, nor the power of God**" (Matthew 22.29). But to many of us who preach to-day, I fear the MASTER would say: "*Ye do err, knowing the Scriptures, but not the power of God.*"

Bishop J. C. Ryle, in his *"Expository Thoughts on the Gospels,"* says that when we preach without praying aright, not only do we do no good, we do positive harm, *"for rather than softening men's hearts and drawing them to the SAVIOUR, we harden them and drive them away."*

If we would prevail with men for GOD, we must first prevail with GOD for men. Oh, that GOD could say to every preacher of the Cross, **"As a prince, hast thou power with GOD and with men, and hast prevailed."**

But to return to Anford, the very thought of that first week makes me shudder. We started with the hall reasonably full, but night by night the numbers dwindled, until by the Friday night there was a mere handful of people present.

I called a meeting for professing Christians on the Saturday night. The majority of ministers and Christians leaders in the town attended, and once again in unmistakable language I emphasized the vital need for complete abandonment to the Will of GOD, and earnest Spirit-taught prayer, if GOD was to work in our midst.

Then we turned to prayer and became wonderfully conscious of the presence of the Risen SAVIOUR. At the close of the meeting the prayer-secretary said, "I have a confession to make. The reason I opposed the early morning prayer meeting is that I am too fond of my bed, and I knew that as prayer-secretary I should have to attend. I want to suggest that we start the prayer meeting at seven to-morrow morning."

We did, and day by day more people turned out for sacrificial prayer. No wonder the Lord worked. In a few nights the hall would not hold the crowds, and we had to move to the largest building in the town, which in its turn soon proved all too small. By the end of the mission the original hall was packed out for the early morning prayer meeting.

I well remember my last walk through that town. I was passing a shoe shop. "Mr. Rees," shouted the manager, "come in a minute. This is my assistant. He was converted last night, and this lad too." I wished them godspeed and went my way only to be stopped at the next shop. "Meet my son, Mr. Rees, converted last week." And so it continued; all the way down that main street I was introduced to new converts. It was prayer that had changed things, the believing prayer of Christian people.

Many of those converts are to-day leading Christian workers in the various churches of that town.

I have found on questioning converts that one can nearly always trace conversion to a praying friend or relative. It is persistent, earnest prayer that counts. So many will pray - and then faint. Recently I had the joy of leading a man to CHRIST whose wife had prayed for him for thirty-five years.

I was taking a mission in a parish church in South London, when a lady, a complete stranger, stepped up to me and said, "Do you know why I came to church to-night?"

"I can't imagine: why was it?"

"I came to see an answer to prayer!"

Rather mystified, I asked her to explain.

"Some years ago," she said, "my boy Jim went to a camp where your brother, Richard Rees, was the commandant. One night your brother asked Jim to join him and several friends who had covenanted together to pray daily for your conversion until prayer was answered. On returning home Jim told me of his promise. and I, too, joined this praying band. We prayed for some years, then one day we heard the good news of your conversion. Imagine my joyous surprise when passing this church I saw the announcement that Mr. Tom Rees was the preacher. I made inquiries and found that this Tom Rees was the very one for whom I had never ceased to pray. So now I can see the answer to my prayers."

~ end of chapter 3 ~
