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In the Train of His Triumph

by T. Austin-Sparks

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"...and by me sends forth the knowledge of Him, a stream of fragrant incense, throughout the world. For Christ's is the fragrance which I offer up to God, whether among those in the way of salvation, or among those in the way of perdition; but to these it is an odour of death, to those of life." (2 Corinthians 2:14-16, Conybeare's translation).

The Minister and His Ministry

The Apostle Paul is setting forth one of his conceptions of what the ministry of Christ is, and then what is the effect of the ministry. He is thinking here of the ministry of Christ as an incense-bearer. The picture in the background of these verses is one with which we are well acquainted.

Verse 14 brings into view the triumphal procession of a victorious war-lord, as he moves from place to place with his captives behind him, celebrating at many points his victory, and using them to provide the evidence of his conquests. But also in the procession there are those who carry vessels of incense, and the incense being diffused everywhere speaks in two ways, to two different classes of people.

There are some who are going to celebrate this day of victory by being slain. It was a custom to hold certain notorious or distinguished captives in bondage until the day of the great celebration of the victory, and then that day was marked by their execution. On the other hand, there were those who were appointed to be released as a distinguishing mark of the day. To the one the incense brought death near, and made them know that their hour had come. To the other the same incense made known that the hour of emancipation, of liberation, was drawing near. The same incense proclaimed

death and life, life and death.

In the second part of the picture the Apostle sees himself in a different role. In the first, he has been viewing himself as one of those prisoners, led in the triumphal procession as an object of public exhibition, celebrating the triumph of the great Warrior. He has seen himself as in the train of the triumph of the Lord, being on full view as a demonstration of the greatness of that victory. Now he transfers himself into the second part, and takes the place of an incense-bearer in the procession. He says that he passes on through the world bearing incense, and that that incense is saying two things, having two effects, speaking to two different classes of people. It relates to life and death.

But the Apostle does not think of himself as merely *carrying* a censer of incense. He regards himself as *being* the vessel, and even - in a strange, deep, inward way, so as to become a very part of his own being - as the incense itself. He thinks of himself, not only as being the giver forth of the sweet savour, but as being the sweet savour itself; he sees himself as the means by which this effect is registered upon these two different classes of people.

In that presentation of the servant of the Lord, there is a deep, strong and solemn word for all of us who stand in the position of being the Lord's servants. The thing which should be going forth from us, the thing which should be the effect of our lives, according to these words, is the knowledge of Christ. Everywhere, not just as by us, but because of us, men should be coming to a knowledge of Christ. The very object of our being is that Christ should be known because of us. The Divinely appointed way by which men are to come to know Christ is simply through our being here and moving amongst them.

The Vital Element in Ministry

That is simple, and perhaps we recognise and accept it. But the extra point which has to be noticed is this, that it is something more than our giving out knowledge *concerning* Christ - it is that we are *to be* to men the knowledge of Christ. There is a very big difference between the giving out of truth concerning the Lord Jesus - even in large measure, in a great fulness, truth which cannot be denied because it is the truth - and that strange, deep, indispensable element of *ourselves being* that truth: so that the truth itself takes its power, its strength from the fact that here are those who are the living expression of it; who have gone through the depths, have been tested, tried, taken from place to place, subjected to experiences of intense severity, and in the fires have learned Christ, and are therefore themselves the embodiment of the knowledge of Him. Wherever we go, it is not that they have truth to give - it is that men and women learn Christ because of them. Of them it can be said: It is not what they say only; there is something coming from them. There is an indescribable 'something' which is an extra element to what they say. That thing has its reality in their being, and you feel that it is not only the words but the very virtue that comes out when they speak, or by reason of their presence.

It is that of which the Apostle is speaking. That is the real value of any knowledge of Christ which we can give, which others may come to possess by us. It is not that they come through us to know more about Christ, but that there is a ministration of Christ Himself. That is the thing for which we should seek the Lord very earnestly.

The Costliness of True Ministry

We should recognize that this represents the costliness of ministry.

Ministry of this kind is an intensely costly thing. It is so different from being a preacher, as such. There may be a glamour about preaching, a fascination about gripping a congregation, and all that sort of thing, which is not costly but is gratifying to the flesh. The snare of the limelight, the snare of publicity, the snare of the satisfaction of feeling power over other people, has robbed preaching of that essential blood, and passion, and anguish. Paul was not a preacher of that kind. It is all very well to talk about Paul as the great preacher and orator, and to try to be another Paul along that line. But to be a Paul is a desperately costly thing, and to minister Christ is a thing into which our very blood will be poured.

This kind of ministry can bring no satisfaction to the flesh. This kind of ministry is not something for which to reach out for ourselves. This kind of ministry is something from which we should plead to be delivered, unless our life and heart passion is that Christ Himself - not ourselves, but Christ Himself - should be known.

That is the true value of ministry. It is indeed a costly thing, it is a thing of suffering, but it is the thing which goes beyond words, far beyond clever thinking and clever expressing, far beyond that acute needle-like brain that grasps truth and then begins to give it out. It is something which is an extra factor, without which the very best equipment in nature will fail to reach the Divine end. It is, in a word, *Christ ministered*: not Christ ministered about, but Christ ministered. Paul saw that there was no doubt about it - this ministry was effective, although effective in two directions. Not always did it result in people leaping into life, but it always resulted in something. If it plunged some people more deeply into death it was a proof that it was effective. If it brought death home to some consciences, that proved its power. To have real spiritual effect demands that we shall be ministers after this sort.