

THE TIME BEING*

Do not be deceived; God is not mocked, for whatever a man sows, that will he also reap. For he who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption; but he who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life. And let us not grow weary in well-doing, for in due season we shall reap, if we do not lose heart (Galatians 6:7-9).

THE traditional office of the baccalaureate sermon is to appraise the future in the light of the past—and of the Christian inheritance—and this by an elder of the tribe for the benefit of a group of neophytes. Thus his hindsight is proffered as the raw material for their foresight. This could be justified on the assumption that the pattern of the elder's past experience could be reasonably projected as a pattern for the neophyte's future experience.

Nowadays there is no use for the wisest elder among us to pretend that he knows very much about the shape of things to come—or that his memories can serve the use of prophecy. In an unprecedented degree we are living in an interim epoch in which the past has become alien and the future palpably obscure. In summer, at the North Cape, I have seen a dusk followed by a dawn, with only a crepuscular twilight intervening. This seems to me something of a parable of our own time. Modern men stand in the dusk of the epoch of the Enlightenment, in the confused twilight of our present turmoils, and in the dawn of a new age which may be either the most wonderful or the most terrible which mankind has ever seen. The passionate confidence of the nineteenth century has been shattered and purged from most of us. We know how bright the future *could* be, but this is no assurance that it will be so. I have no doubt that any

* The Baccalaureate Sermon delivered at the Rice Institute, May 29, 1958.

graduate from this institution is ready for the scientific and technological problems which confront us in the new age of automation and missiles and space travel. But I have an uneasy feeling that you are really no more ready than your elders for the risks and ambiguities of an age of wonder and terror. And your unreadiness is due, at least in part, to the fact that you do not know and cannot know what the future holds for you. Nowadays even the best education begins to be obsolescent at the moment when you start settling that mortarboard on your head. How, then, are we to live and work in this twilight between the dusk and the dawn in this "time being"?

I have a few sage comments to offer in this connection. But they amount to more of a "Bon Voyage" or "Happy Blast-Off" than they pretend to be a Baedeker for tomorrow's world. I feel toward the graduating classes this year like some of the old sea-captains at Cadiz must have felt toward Christopher and his crews: "Go with God, and may His blessings go with you; for, by the Holy Faith, you're going to need them!"

Most of you doubtless know the verse-play of W. H. Auden's that he calls *A Christmas Oratorio*. You remember how the action of the play keeps shuttling back and forth between the first Christmas and our own crises—between the first and twentieth centuries. In the closing comments of the narrator we get an insight that seems to me more poignant and valid now than when I first saw and heard the play.

Well, so that is that. Now we must dismantle the tree, Putting the decorations back into their cardboard boxes—Some have got broken—and carrying them up to the attic. The holly and the mistletoe must be taken down and burnt. And the children got ready for school. There are enough Left-overs to do, warmed-up, for the rest of the week—Not that we have much appetite, having drunk such a lot,

Stayed up so late, attempted—quite unsuccessfully—
 To love all of our relatives, and in general
 Grossly overestimated our powers. Once again
 As in previous years we have seen the actual Vision and failed
 To do more than entertain it as an agreeable
 Possibility, once again we have sent Him away,
 Begging though to remain His disobedient servant,
 The promising child who cannot keep His word for long.
 The Christmas Feast is already a fading memory,
 And already the mind begins to be vaguely aware
 Of an unpleasant whiff of apprehension at the thought
 Of Lent and Good Friday which cannot, after all, now
 Be very far off. But, for the time being, here we all are,
 Back in the moderate Aristotelian city
 Of darning and the Eight-Fifteen, where Euclid's geometry
 And Newton's mechanics would account for our experience,
 And the kitchen table exists because I scrub it.
 It seems to have shrunk during the holidays. The streets
 Are much narrower than we remembered; we had forgotten
 The office was as depressing as this. To those who have seen
 The Child, however dimly, however incredulously,
The Time Being is, in a sense, the most trying time of all!

The Time Being is the interim after we have seen an ennobling vision and before we have been able to enter in to its promise. It is indeed, the most trying time of all! It is the time of "no longer and not yet"—between the dusk of yesterday and the apocalypse of tomorrow. The Time Being is the time when we must get ready for a future that we cannot descry but which is bound to be either wonderfully hopeful or dreadfully dangerous.

In such a Time Being we are apt to become weary in well-doing, since even the most determined brinkmanship doesn't resolve the options before us into clear-cut and easily grasped disjunctions: between black and white, between the angels and the devils, between truth and falsehood, between choices that really decide. "The Time Being, in a real sense, *is* the most trying time of all."

More than any other generation in recent history, yours

is bound to discover how trying the Time Being really is. For the choreography of your lives, daily and personal, public and climactic—will be shaped, on the one hand, by visions that have faltered, and, on the other, by prospects that waver between astounding promise and unspeakable dread.

It's hard for us to realize how long and strong the hope has been that if men could fully and finally domesticate nature—and pass from an economy of scarcity and competition to an economy of abundance and welfare—this human life would bloom and fruit in happiness and peace. The best way to comprehend this is to see the same vivid, unquestioning, imperious faith in technology in the underdeveloped countries, among people who have just begun to believe that dearth is not a natural condition of human life. Every time I talk to an educated man from Asia or Africa, I am baffled by his scorn of American materialism and his passion for something that looks suspiciously like it for his own country. And I am baffled to know how best to react, for it will do no good to discourage his faith in technology, even though it seems plain that this faith is going to betray him sooner or later, even as ours has betrayed us. For we've come to the Jordan's bank of the Promised Land of technology—and with it has come a profound disillusionment in our faith that things can make life good. The triumph of technology has been no apocalypse of the good life for modern man. Yet technology will go on, must go on. The problem is how are we, in this Time Being, to find the good life in this strange new world? Again, we live in a Time Being between the soaring hope that the democratic way of life would rid the world of tyranny and the mounting fear that the last worst tyranny of them all may yet do us in. The older ones among us have had the excitement of a dramatic sequence of tri-

umphs by the free world over a series of upheavals of barbarism and tyranny. The First World War was a great heroic action—whose greatness is now almost totally obscured because it failed of any final triumph. Then another World War, another epic victory, and another shattering demoralization, and then Korea and Indo-China and Suez; then Algiers and Lebanon—and God only knows what next. Is it to be peace or catastrophe—or a further stretching out of “the neither and both”? How are we to live and work and conduct our affairs in such a Time Being after an epoch that promised us a world safe for democracy and before another which could very well be the end of civilization?

Still a third illustration of our situation. We stand between the vast changes wrought by the First Industrial Revolution and the vaster changes which are in prospect from the Second Industrial Revolution. Oh, brave new world—yet how disquieting? We are on the threshold of the age of super-technology: of the peaceful atom, of fusion power, of the genetic control and direction of life, of the banishment of the fears and privations which have stultified the good life for men in earlier generations. But the hydrogen that can be fused slowly enough for peaceful power can also be imploded in a lethal *Boooom!* The rocket that put a ton-and-a-half satellite into orbit can throw a bomb that size across an ocean. And it's no comfort to be told that the guidance systems in those things aren't yet really precise and accurate!

If something like this is the context of our existence, is there any wisdom and faith which could shape our ventures into the unknown and so help to redeem the Time Being from insignificance? I have already said that I can not begin to imagine the actual crises through which you will have to struggle, the battles you may win or lose, the frustrations you

may suffer or avoid. But unless the basic experience of the wisest of our kind is to go for naught (and all else worth having go with it, too), then there are some bed-rock truths which will still be fruitful even in an age that outmodes our present models of knowledge and technology.

One of these truths is that although a crisis is a moment of decision, the options which actually are open to us in the crisis itself are largely put there by what we have done or left undone in the preceding Time Being. The Russians blast off a Sputnik, a government calls out the troops at Little Rock, the Caracas mob breaks loose, France falls into convulsion—and the crisis bursts about our ears. *Now*, what is possible? Only what has been made possible by what was done in the Time Being before the crisis. We Americans have often had the good fortune to be able to mobilize our resources for a crisis after it had come upon us. Increasingly now, we are being denied the luxury of any such time lag. There is, for example, a hurry-up call for more and better scientists and engineers—as if we could make up for the deficiencies of the past two decades in a single college generation.

It is almost a definition of “crisis” to say that it is a time when what a man has been doing is put to the test, with no chance to get more ready. If this is so, then what we do to redeem the Time Being from insignificance will go far to redeem the future crises from disaster.

For a second basic truth, we know that spasmodic efforts—such as a college education!—are partially wasted unless they are followed up, in continued learning and in constantly transvalued experience. The biblical virtue of patience is not at all equivalent to passivity or dull endurance. It means persistence in well-doing—even when the flail of urgency is off your back. In every sequence of events there is a plastic

and viable "moment" when significant results are achieved quickly, or with relative ease. One cannot readily hasten or postpone such a moment, but what we can do is to live so intensely, so rigorously, so devotedly in the interim that when the right time comes, we are ready: the right men at the right place at the right time with the right training. This is the only kind of real "luck" there ever is.

The Time Being, even more than the time of crisis, is the time when the truly educated person comes into his own—for he has as much incentive for well-doing in the time being as in a more dramatic and irresistible situation. Let me describe an educated person, as briefly as I can. He is a man who has come to love the truth and to live by it, who has learned how to learn and has acquired a real appetite for disciplined inquiry; he is a man whose learning has bound him to the common good and has loosed him from his natural bad habits of pre-judgment and borrowed judgment. He is a man whose courage lifts him above conformity to the crowd and compels him to a creative maladjustment in any "normal" society, and whose intelligence is the instrument of his love. He belongs to a family, a race, a class, a land, a nation—but he loves all these within a higher loyalty to God and the greatest good. He is a man whose morality springs from a source higher than his super-ego and flows up from a deep love of the right beyond mere calculation. This is what our schools are for: to furnish the nation and the nations with the men and women of this spirit and this mind. This is what our churches are for: to call men of reason to the life of faith and to "unite the pair so long disjoined, knowledge and vital piety." The most important question before you now is whether your school and your church have prepared you for the Time Being and the crisis at its further end.

These are difficult days for sensitive and thoughtful people. For as long as we can foresee, we shall be confronted with the stark dilemma of a world where most of our problems are moral and spiritual—where we may have peace and plenty or else the demoralizing choice between incineration and irradiation. In the Time Being, we have got to learn to live daily and to do our daily tasks, without lapsing into a mindless routine or flying off into the flapdoodles of hysteria. We can do this, with a certain serenity and confidence, with a certain zest and ironic good humor, with fairly steady nerves and upborne courage—only if our lives are in God's hands, by our own commitment, and if we are willing that our death and destiny shall also be within His providence and grace.

Who trusts in God, a strong abode
In earth and heaven possesses.

Our lives *are* in God's hands. The test for us is if we are really willing to have it so. The genius of the Christian faith is not that life is made easier or more exempt from the toils and anxieties of the Time Being. Rather, it is the persuasion strong enough to secure our firm reliance that

. . . neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8:38-39).

If we are sure of this—or if we come to be sure of this—then we can live even in this Time Being (which is all the time we've got at *our* disposal) with as high a heart and as steady a hand as any generation ever did, knowing that our well-doing is not in vain, in the Lord!

ALBERT C. OUTLER