

## LISTENING TO GOD<sup>1</sup>

*Mark VI, 31*—"And Jesus said unto them, Come ye yourselves apart into a desert place, and rest a while: for there were many coming and going, and they had no leisure so much as to eat."

**T**HERE is such a thing as a seasonable religion, for the moods of life are sensitive to the changes of the year. The crisp winter stimulates thought, but summer depletes our energy and tempts us to seek cool and restful atmospheres. This must justify my choice of theme for this commencement occasion.

An Hebrew prophet brooding upon some of the qualities of the coming Messiah makes him say: "The Lord God hath given me the tongue of a learner, that I should know how to speak a word in season to him that is weary." That is what our world is waiting for—the man who knows how to utter the seasonable word. But the source of this power is more important still:—"He wakeneth morning by morning, he wakeneth mine ear to hear as a learner." The power of seasonable speech comes from the ability to listen to God. Heraclitus used to say that nature had a voice, and if man could learn how to listen, he would hear and understand it: "but eyes and ears make bad witnesses for such as have barbarian souls." George Gissing has remarked that "most of the great deeds that have benefited mankind have been

<sup>1</sup>Baccalaureate sermon of the sixteenth annual commencement of the Rice Institute, delivered by the Reverend Harris Elliott Kirk, D.D., LL.D., Minister of the Franklin Street Presbyterian Church of Baltimore, Maryland, in the academic court, at nine o'clock Sunday morning, June 7, 1931.

done by those who had learned how to lead a life of thoughtful stillness.”

It is this that draws me to these words of Jesus, because they remind us of one of nature's controlling laws—the periodicity of life; and inasmuch as this teaching accords well with our present understanding of nature, we may turn to it in search of an illustration of the principle.

### I.

It was a wise teaching of Plato that visible things are symbols of invisible realities. Thus, the laws of nature suggest the more subtle laws of mental and spiritual experience. Now one of nature's most conspicuous habits is the law of periodicity. The coming and going of the seasons, the orderly procession of nights and days indicate this. All things are subject to this law. At first nature seems entirely interested in energy and activity, but a closer view shows that every energetic manifestation is conditioned by periods of rest and quiet. Every stream has its eddy; the tides of the ocean have their ebb and flow. The swiftest moving particles at the heart of the atom are conditioned by this law. Eddington reminds us of one of the primary laws of radiation which states that, “the absorbing power of substances is proportional to the emitting power, so that the best absorbers are the best emitters.”

The potency of this law however appears in the domain of life, for here periodicity is measured according to the quality and refinement of an organism. And what is even more important in the domain of bird and animal life, some demand is made upon intelligence for obedience to this law. Dr. Peabody of Harvard tells an interesting story of a Cambridge naturalist who took a pigeon that had been born and brought up in captivity and threw it into the air. To his

surprise the bird's flight was perfect, but when it tried to alight on the ground it came down on its head. This proved that the ability to fly was instinctive, while the capacity to stop can only be learned from experience. Ability to get back safely on the ground is, I am told, the most difficult aspect of the science of aviation.

It is however in the domain of human life that this law of periodicity plays the most important part. Here wisdom and experience rather than instinct must govern absolutely. It is natural for man to express himself in energy, but the ability to stop, the capacity for rest and recreation must be acquired from reflection and experience. Disregard of this elemental law leads to definite and deplorable results.

Oriental philosophers, puzzled by the complexities of western civilization, are fond of telling us that we know how to work, but do not know how to play. We express life in energy, but ignore its contemplative aspect, on which account we are absorbed in the particulars and are indifferent to the ends of existence. This is probably an overstatement, still it contains a profound warning for the western man.

A disturbing feature of American life is the presence at all levels of a certain kind of fatigue. Physical and mental fatigue are temporary phases and pass from the mind without leaving any trace of depression. But it is otherwise with a type of emotional fatigue so common in our country at the present moment. This type of weariness is not due to overwork, but rises from depletion of emotional reserves; it closes the channels of expression and is confined within congested areas, where it produces all kinds of worries and anxieties which do not easily yield to treatment. Science has traced the evil to its primary source. It is found neither in the muscular nor nervous system, but in the mind itself.

It is a definite type of mental sickness, develops a peculiar kind of morbid sensitiveness and expresses itself in disorders, frequently of abnormal character. But a sick mind will eventually make the body sick, and set up various functional disturbances in an otherwise healthy organism. There is a proverb to the effect that "a man can carry his infirmities, but a wounded spirit, who can bear?" This type of fatigue attacks the morale of the mind, and wounds the spirit in ways that make it incapable of facing the normal demands of life.

This type of psychological sickness can be directly attributed to the tendency to identify life with energy and ceaseless activity. It is the penalty of violating the law of periodicity. Unless we can recover the balance between work and rest, between energetic striving and quiet modes of living; unless the modern man can find in the atmospheres of culture and faith a fresh quickening of vitality, the outlook upon the immediate future is not as encouraging as it might be, if judged only in terms of our material progress.

## II.

This is *the* problem awaiting the younger generation. For the test of an educated man is ability to meet emergencies, to stand up to the pressure of life under the conditions that prevail. All round us people are asking for a seasonable word, to give solace to a weary spirit, but where is the man who knows what that word is? Who has the right word in philosophy, economics, science, government, and social order? To what type of man can society look to give reasonable answers to the profoundly disturbing problems of the modern world? No generation ever had finer tools. The resources of the material universe are almost wholly at the service of the man that knows how to use them, but our

ability to develop balanced personalities is not keeping pace with our power to control the energies of nature. The uncertainty of control, doubt as to how man will use these powers, tempts many to lose confidence in the tools for efficient living, and increases the desire to come into communion with something more in accord with the subtle and refined aspects of human nature. It is not enough to be a trained intelligence, capable of performing efficient service in a specialized direction, we must aspire to become disciplined personalities; for character as Emerson has well said "is not talent, but the power to get your talent trusted." Thus amid life's crowding duties comes again the old great word: "Come ye apart into a desert place and rest awhile."

This lesson is taught in a little known book, Cato's *Roman Farm Management*, which contains some of the best principles for the cultivation of the soil. The author sums them up in these—*deep plowing and fallowing*. These principles go further than agriculture, and suggest rules for self-development. Look for a moment at the intellectual output of intelligent American minds at the present moment. With all its admitted excellences, much of it represents a hasty skimming over the surface, and how little seems the fruit of leisurely intellectual incubation. The strident, bitter, and cynical spirit that vitiates so much of the popular type of writing and thinking can only increase the strain upon minds already close to the breaking point. Apart from the profounder aspects of scientific research, the intellectual product of the present betrays little of that deep plowing which alone can bring the mind into communion with the profounder aspects of truth. Haste and waste, superficiality and shallowness in respect to guiding principles are far too common aspects of much that passes for knowledge. The younger generation must develop a profounder and more

leisurely dealing with the fundamental problems of life, if it is to command the respect of the modern world.

For even a casual scrutiny of our thought processes reveals an indifference to Cato's second principle—the law of following. The modern mind often resembles nothing so much as a hard driven field, wherein through continuous cultivation every particle of its vitality has been expended in immediate production. That is why so much that passes for wisdom is harsh, declamatory, and cynically critical. For noise anywhere is waste energy. The destructive forces are noisy, the building forces are quiet and deliberate. Hastiness means insecurity at the center; a declamatory style is an unailing sign of lack of assurance. There is an Arab story to this effect: "Who is he that shouts loudest about his fish in the market place? He who knows that his fish are good, or he who suspects that his fish are bad?" Many are telling us that our world is in a state of meaningless flux, that life is a sorry business, and that the universe is turning out to be a thing of shreds and patches. There are those who say that no good can come from our social order, and that western civilization is on the decline. These depressing impressions suggest a thinness of soil, a rootlessness of life that can have no value for all who take the world seriously. Such minds have exhausted their slender capacities in a passion for immediate production and lost the vision of the ends of life. Our time needs a different type entirely; a culture which while sympathetic to vocational education, is capable of passing beyond the conception of usefulness to fix itself firmly in the fertilities of an intensive philosophy of wholes. To such a mind, the present world, although manifesting many aspects of change, will suggest more hopeful things—the rise of a spiritual philosophy upon the mature results of science, an evolution of a wider international

hospitality among the peoples of the world, the appearance of broader concepts of social unification out of the seeming chaos of the time. These encouraging visions are open to all who know how to live a life of thoughtful stillness, who have learned how to keep the independence of solitude in the midst of the crowd.

### III.

The principle suggested by the words of Jesus is that the spiritual aspect of life is fundamental to all the rest; that while it is manifested in public acts, it is nourished chiefly in private relations. Returning from a successful work, the disciples are invited to go apart into a desert place and rest awhile. That was not an invitation to idleness, but an intimation that until they had brought their work into communion with the all-embracing whole of life, it was not complete. It was not finished until it could be interpreted and rightly related to the ends of existence. The Bible is full of such intimations. "Be still, and know that I am God." "In returning and rest shall ye be saved; in quietness and in confidence shall be your strength." "He that believeth shall not make haste." The universe is full of voices, and none of them without significance, but only a sensitive mind is fitted to discern among them, that one voice which alone can guide it to the center of spiritual reality. That is why Professor Hocking has said that religion as such has no utility whatsoever. Its function is that of "perpetual parentage," the prime source of all usefulness. Only when culture is centered in the spiritual aspect of life does it become an energy, which enables a man to sustain his independence and authority amid the welter of life's teeming turmoil, without loss of courage or confidence in his cause. That too was the prophet's meaning in speaking of the Messiah. The ability to

to speak a word in season to a weary heart comes directly from the capacity for listening to God. "Morning by morning, thou wakenest mine ear to hear as a learner"—that is the secret of an enduring influence. Properly to appreciate it at this stage of your life will open the way to two great experiences:—

1. It brings the whole nature of man in touch with the whole nature of God. We become conscious of our undreamed of capacities, our unsuspected affinities for high and holy things, and as the sense of mystery within ourselves adds dignity to life, we become aware of the greater mystery which encompasses us. By these means man gains a foothold in time, because he has discovered a foothold beyond time. From the heart of the Hebrew Psalter we hear voices like these: "When thou saidest, seek ye my face, my heart said unto thee, Thy face, Lord, will I seek." . . . "My flesh and my heart faileth, but God is the strength of my heart, and my portion forever." Such spirits were able to stand firm in face of the hard facts of experience, because they were conscious of a vital communion with the living God.

2. It enables us to hold our faith in our fellowman, and our time, in face of the depressing aspects of the world. We have all passed through Dante's dark wood in the last ten years. We have savored the post-war disenchantments; we have denied too much, cast aside too much, and become so involved in tumult and stridency as to become almost stone deaf to the finer voices of the age. The need for a return to deliberate methods of thinking is paramount, if we are to clear the way for enduring and constructive solutions of our problems. But man has never been willing for long to accept a negative conception as a final register of human meanings. He will not forever be content with im-



pressionistic denials. The time comes when the human spirit must affirm itself, when people look about for those strong, quiet, well balanced minds who know the pathway to peace. The past is eloquent with the truth that the spiritual man alone has had the seasonable word, and that he gained it through listening to God. The present is slowly putting aside its negations. There is a new seriousness abroad, a disposition to reconsider religion as the final solution of the world's needs. If you are willing in the opening of your professional careers to take this word of Jesus seriously, you will go far towards giving the time the leadership that it needs. This type of leadership has well been described by C. M. Doughty, the Arabian traveller :

"The future belongs to those Communities in which the qualities are dominant, which swell and sanctify the souls of her best sons; that thrust them on and with them impell the body of the people as a Tide towards the best that human nature can attain to."

Unto which then among the many significant voices should we give heed? What word shall most clearly enable us to understand the mind of God? One of the truly great passages in ancient literature is in the *Phaedo* of Plato. Socrates had affirmed with splendid certitude his faith in immortality. But Simmias found it impossible to share it, but went on to say that in face of a belief so desirable, the right course to pursue would be to take the best thoughts of the best minds in the world and make a raft of them which might carry a man through the floods of life, unless he could find somewhere a word of God in which he could confide.

This was a wise conclusion and my closing word shall be in harmony with it. Listen then to the best minds of all ages, but remember that among them all is the Voice of Jesus Christ—the Word made flesh—speaking from the cen-

ter of human history, such words as man has never heard before or since. Here in my judgment is the Word more strong than any raft composed of the best thoughts of the best minds, and we may well be content to confide in it, for by listening to Jesus we shall develop the persuasion that we are listening to God, and in the quiet places of the soul we shall find the pathway that leadeth unto life eternal.

HARRIS ELLIOTT KIRK.