

“All the trumpets sounded for him on the other side”

—PILGRIM’S PROGRESS

The Pilgrim

O. P. Kretzmann

Miscellany

November, 1966

A young man stopped by a few moments ago to discuss a broken love affair. They had agreed to break it off, he reported. “We were all washed up.” Somehow, though, there was something wrong. There were loose threads and frayed edges. “I can’t quite forget her,” he said, “perhaps I made a mistake.”

Nothing unusual in that. In my notes for future columns there has been a jotting’-for six months: “Write a column on ‘The Sense of Incompleteness.’” “Only when we are very young, it seems to me, do we think in terms of finality and of completion. I have never heard a wise man to whom the years meant anything more than the accumulated ticking of the clock and turning of the calendar say: “This is the end, the ultimate. This is final.” We are always a little of what we have been and a little short of what we have yet to become. The past lingers, either like a ghost or like a melody. In fact, only one thing in the thread of history has been complete; only one thing had no loose ends or unfinished parts. It was conceived in eternity and happened on the Cross and its results will be fully revealed only in eternity. Completion, finality, perfection — these are of the essence of eternity, and of nothing else.

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I have had a great deal of contact with young people lately. It is good for the soul. Refreshing, too. The young men and women of our time have their faults and weaknesses, but they are not old faults, hardened and fossilized by years of excuse and hypocrisy. Perhaps I should say again that in all our dealings with young people we should set our standards high. They are not about to chisel heartlessly at the truths of faith and reduce them to a few sickly rules for comfortable living and contemptible security. They are still eager to hear of standards that are constant and absolute. They

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are willing to fight for an absolute truth which cannot tolerate hypocrisy, an absolute love which cannot tolerate self-seeking, an absolute goodness which will not tolerate mediocrity and compromise. If a few of them can keep that kind of integrity despite the battering of time and the erosion of circumstances they may yet lead us out of our darkness of mind and heart into a new age of gentleness, grace, peace, and the love of God.

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Last month I met three Pharisees. There I was, quietly wandering through life and suddenly there they were, in the middle of the road just a little ahead. They rose out of the pages of the Gospel according to Saint Matthew as though it had been written yesterday. I sat with them by the side of the road for a few moments and listened to the tinkling of their bells, heard the mumbling of their prayers, and saw the thin veneer of their holiness. Two were personal Pharisees, proud of themselves. One was a corporation Pharisee, proud of his particular religious denomination. Sometimes the latter are more obnoxious than the former.

Strange people, these Pharisees. Beyond their obvious immorality — the evil reduction of the flame of faith to the ashes of form — their most distinctive mark is a curious lack of sensitiveness and absence of awareness. They are perfectly insulated against everything and everybody but themselves. They are surrounded by mental and spiritual walls through which other people may look in but through which they themselves can not look out. If it is true — and the longer I live the surer I am that it is — that the highest strength in life comes from awareness of and exposure to suffering and sorrow, the Pharisee is of all men the weakest and most helpless. Sooner or later, reality will toss them aside. Meanwhile they huddle in the corners of life (or in the front pews of churches) while the fires of the spirit move to the high places where the clean winds of heaven blow sharp and clear.

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A question: “What did people do before the telephone and the telegraph were invented?” When all is said and done, it seems to me that the end result of these marvelous inventions is merely that we live simultaneously with

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people hundreds of miles away, while our ancestors were always two or three weeks behind schedule. Apparently that harmed no one. It continued like that until the moment of death. One died in ignorance of the last two or three weeks of world history before the moment of his death. Thus, if you had died on June 18, 1815, you would not have known that Napoleon had lost the battle of Waterloo. If there had been telephone or telegraph, you would have known. But, in the circumstances, would it have mattered?

