

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

—PILGRIM’S PROGRESS

The Pilgrim

O. P. Kretzmann

Little Man, What Now?

May, 1970

I was one of those thoughtful citizens who welcomed the year 1970 by sleeping into it, somewhat fitfully, through to the small hours of January first... This approach had been carefully considered... I knew that my horn at midnight would sound an uncertain tone and my whistle would end in a wild shriek... Pulling the covers over my ears I decided to ignore the coming of 1970 and all its gloomy portents... Let my mind and soul (I could do nothing about my body) forget the change of two digits in the measuring of our years and the slow passing of the century...

But I had forgotten the coming of another birthday, the beginning of my own personal new year in May... There was no sensible, logical way of pulling the covers over my head... My dimming eyes, the passing of friends on the way sounded louder than all possible horns and whistles... I had to face the first day of the rest of my life...

And this is never easy... The situation is too many-sided and complex... There is gratitude for the past and regret over the same past— thankfulness for what you were able to do and sorrow over what you failed to do... There is joy over the length of the way already given and sadness over the few remaining miles... All birthdays are bitter-sweet but those in the sixties of life have an autumn flavor all their own...

And so—like it or not—I had to stop, look, and listen... The day was far spent and the gathering mists had the touch and taste of permanence; they could be removed only by a Power greater than my own...

As I looked back over the years I began to see both their greatness and their tragedy... There was a permanent note: “Change”... In my lifetime just about everything visible and audible had changed, more than my fathers had ever known... I had seen the coming of the space age, the atomic age, the shrinking of our wayside planet, the knowledge explosion (with its marks like the tower of Babel), the cult of irrationality, hedonism, the roar of activist atheism, the centripetal forces within Christendom, Vatican II, the population

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explosion, minority thinking, the new Freedom (pronounced “license”), the need for occidentation among our youth, (the *hic et nunc* generation), the new grammar of dissent, the pathological concern with the dark underside of life, the whole rising, swelling, surging tide of a new and strange world which was apparently being made ready, negatively and positively, for the last great exploration into God... In all these years, how often have I thought of the old Chinese proverb: “The trees of the forest want to be still but the wind will not stop”...

And Man himself?... In my time modern man, the child of the Renaissance and Marx, had become something else... What this is we cannot tell clearly now... Dusk and dawn have the same blurring effect on human eyes... Postmodern man?... The man who reflects the mood and mystery of a day that is done... Who knows that he is a child of the afterglow, a *t* faintly gleaming reflection of the principle of historic exhaustion... The funeral choirs are singing again, not for a God who is dead but for a man who is dying from causes that were always known but are now seen more sharply...

All this I remember as another birthday comes over the horizon... I know that I have not been a shaker and mover but only a spectator (another example of the wise and kind permissiveness of God)... There is a small pebble somewhere in His massive altars, still standing and strong— a pebble which I polished and brought all these decades...

And so— another birthday! I shall watch it come with quiet eyes because I know that they will begin to see the new coming of a twenty-first century man... I have seen his first appearing among some of my students who have taken off the glittering, dirty garments of the twentieth century and now see with new and clean eyes the centrality of the Holy Thing, the coming of Jesus Christ into history, yesterday, today and tomorrow, and our only direct touch with the Eternal... The modern man never learned how to receive Him; the postmodern man, please God, will do better...

We stand now at the mysterious intersection of all that is past and all that is future... If, by the mercy and miracle of God, we can make that a great mark of a small birthday, we can move into another year with the free gaiety of the living God...

