

RETREAT - NOVEMBER 10TH

The Pharisees and Sadducees came and asked if Jesus would show them a sign from heaven. He replied: "In the evening you say: 'There's a red sky; it will be fine;' and in the morning: 'Stormy weather today - the sky is red and overcast.' You know how to read the face of the heavens, so how is it that you cannot see the signs of the times?"

Our Lord tells us in the Gospel that we should be alert to the signs of the times - he actually reproaches us for our inattention. There's a particular 'sign of the times' that has been concerning me for some years. Yesterday I spoke of the wearisome multiplication of facts waiting to be known, and how our mind buckles under the impact of this revolution. The effect of it is to make *bewilderment* a fairly general state of mind. *People no longer hope to understand the world.*

It was never on the cards that religion should escape something which afflicts a whole civilisation. It has slowly dawned on the religious sense of our times - to the point almost of becoming a slogan - that in the last analysis we can only live and let live, and it doesn't matter much whether or not many people are going down wrong paths, provided it is their own decision. Multiplication of ideas, collapsing institutions, disposable relationships, commitments that are soluble in plain household water, and the adoption of formerly unthinkable solutions to our problems lead people into a kind of permanent confusion of ideas. Good people find themselves carried along by the latest trend of thought. Everything is good, providing it does not attack one's own right to privacy and self-determination. In such a climate, people may allow God to enter their lives: but it is in a weak, vague, sentimental way that permits them, as need arises, to justify every weakness and distortion of conscience.

In such a fog, where is the word of God? What is God's notion of freedom? What does God make of it all?

My belief is that we must return to the Word of God, and rediscover its freshness and power. The more the confusion, the greater our need for God's light. We need, in our life in the University, a special form of that contact with the Word which is called *catechesis* - the speaking of the Word to direct human beings on their journey to faith, to bring their baptismal life to its fulness. If people are fragmented,
lacking in spiritual motivation,
parked on a featureless plateau,
haunted by fears,
jealously guarding their little store of things to be enjoyed -
they have clear need of this gift of the Church, and the Church must find the way to give it. In two weeks' time we shall arrive at Advent, and begin the nineteen-hundred and ninety-seventh year of the Christian era. People are starving for a gift which has lain hidden from them for all that time, and that gift is in our hands today. We have an agenda for our faith. We have an agenda for our Chaplaincy, for the Church in the University. We are the ones who have to do it - in the Office, in the lecture-theatres, in the laboratories, in the bars and dining-rooms, in our own rooms and among our friends. Even where people seem not to raise their eyes beyond

earthly desires, we need to hear that Advent voice, prophetic voice, that cries:
"All flesh shall see the salvation of God!"

How on earth can we set about doing this?

First of all, we must become educated, and educate one another, in the hearing of the Word. We must learn how to hear it ourselves. We must let it into the brainbox, let it echo in our own world of ideas, give it the intellectual stage, so that it can persuade, judge, inform, and build up our understanding. We must let it enter the world of our feelings, and let it rest in our hearts, where we can turn to it for strength and consolation, for encouragement and warmth. Take a new look at the Gospels, and see how the missionary style of Jesus comes across. He has such a gift for momentary contacts that leave an indelible mark. He's deeply involved, he is interested in what's going on, and he has an attitude to everything. His own readiness for what happens is the key to his being listened-to; people seem to turn to him naturally, wondering what *he* has to say, what *he* will do. There are many moments in a day when a casual, momentary contact could be the place where something said or done cracks the code, and the Gospel can be spoken and heard. The key is in the preparedness of a Christian; if the Gospel is undigested, not incarnate, not appropriated by the one who speaks it, it comes across almost offensively.

Secondly, we should aim at giving the Gospel the best we have. We should say nothing in expressing our faith which does not speak of a Church open to the world, honest and loving. It is God the Father we want to proclaim - the Father who loves all and is searching out all. This surely means getting down to some real study - getting in touch with the faith we've inherited, and getting to know how its systems work. We want to have a genuine grasp of why it is that so many people prefer this fog in the heart and mind to a living, shining faith. I am quite sure that there is a desperate thirst for faith in our world, and that this is the sign of the times we most need to read. Don't accept into your faith what is boring, dreary, and uninspired. Keep the place from which you pray alive with your life. The people around us haven't changed. They still long for something that isn't polluted, infected, limited to earthly transience. How can we not offer them what they long for?