

- There is a temptation which afflicts the visiting preacher who for one small time has the opportunity of saying what is in his heart. He may think as he thumbs over his various sermons, however large or meager the repertoire may be, that he ought to choose some particularly explosive theme and leave some reverberating notes of challenge on some great issue. He will be the more courageous because he has no fear of repercussions. He will have disappeared long before any retaliatory reaction can be taken, nevertheless, resisting that temptation for its own sake. I believe that it is necessary and right that we should seek vast and profound themes for our discussions about Christianity and for our nourishment in the faith today because it is at the heart of Christianity that the confrontation now appears, and it is about the central truth of the Christian faith that we are most in perturbation. Therefore, I will accept the valedictory advice given by Dr. Oman to the theological students at the better of the two great English universities, Cambridge University. When they were about to embark upon the ministry, he said to them, "Take large texts, gentlemen. "And when they persecute you in one city, "flee into the next. "I'm going back to New York fairly soon." I want to try in a little while to say something about three, though not exclusively, three of the paramount issues with which as Christian people, old and young, beginners and veterans, we now have to do business. And the first and perhaps the most declamatory is the general pervasive nature of doubt, for there are many of you in this congregation this morning who do not believe so completely and simply in the dogmatic assertions of the Christian faith as once you did. You might be unprepared to discuss this others, and you might feel almost the sense of shame that such things have happened to you. I think that shame would be unnecessary. We live in an age in which there is so much more with which we have to come to terms. The world is so much more complex, and at a superficial level at least, we know so much more about it that a neat and tidy dogmatic face is hard to come by and harder still to maintain. For the last 40 years, I have stood every Wednesday at an open air pitch called Tower Hill in London, and I've tried to talk about religion and I've been compelled to listen. For it is a church service, we like to think of it in that denomination in which the liturgy is very generously shared by the congregation. They heckle. They disagree. They are concerned, many of them. And over those 40 years, I have noticed one change, there may be many others, and that change is where once upon a time, the communist was quite certain about his dialectical materialism, and the denominationalist of the Christian persuasion was quite certain about his particular faith, and the atheist was quite sure about his atheism, and the agnostic was quite sure about his lack of sureness. That has changed, and there is now a pervasive mood of questioning. It is a little difficult to believe in a neat and tidy faith in the presence of such a booming, buzzing confusion, which I think it was Henry James once described as the multiverse in which he thought he lived. What are we to do about it? Well, we shall not save our souls, and we shall not edify our generation if we persuade ourselves that we ought to return to a kind of dogmatic totalitarianism and tell people that they must accept the Bible from cover to cover. We shall not save our souls by embarking upon evangelical jam bere in which we invite a great many adults to get back into the spiritual cradle where it's much more comfortable and there are a few questions which are asked. We shall only meet this challenge when we find out more clearly what is the Christian faith and what, essentially, it has to say. Now, a second change. I delight when I can to quote Bertrand Russell for his variously wise and occasionally unwise, and perhaps it's impertinent for me to even

say that for I have the greatest of respect for him. One of the things that Bertrand Russell said was that up to the 18th century in Europe, it may have been otherwise here, all thinking was about death. That's a strange and perhaps an oversimplified statement but ponder it a moment. Most people died before they were 30 years of age. Most babies died before they were a year old. About 40% of mothers bearing their children died in childbirth. Nearly every soldier who was wounded died of his wounds. In the Crimean War, 92% of those who were wounded died of their wounds. In your Civil War, by which, as an English historian, I find it necessary to cross the Atlantic to find some indubitable facts, it is recorded that nearly all the soldiers who were wounded in Richmond died of their wounds. Those who fell ill died of their injuries and their illnesses. Death was cheek by jowl. We love to sing in England, though I think we sing them far often nowadays, some of the Negro spirituals with their deceptively simple words and their lilting tunes. One of our favorites, I dare say it is one that you've heard ad nauseam here, "I got shoes, you've got shoes. "All God's children got shoes. "When I get to heaven, gonna put on the shoes. "I'm going to walk all over God's heaven." That was first sung not in America but in the West Indies. I went to the place where many of these Negro slaves first made these delightful Negro spirituals, Kingston, Jamaica. And I saw some of the hobbles still bearing testimony to the pestiferous nature of the slave trade. What had a Negro who was a slave to hope for in this life? Nothing. Shoes were a spiritual promise postponed to another world. Any pie was pie in the sky when you die. Any clothes that were worth wearing were clothes for which you had to wait until you were clad in heavenly garb. Is it any wonder that the preoccupation of religion for the Negro and for a great many other people living in an age when death was cheek by jowl with us all, the preoccupation was with another world? Of course not. This was why John Wesley was able to persuade people to flee from the wrath to come because they were already aware that death was near. It's very difficult to preach about the wrath to come now because if you bid them flee, very few congregations are even prepared to break into a trot. We know that this world offers, by the many factions of science, as well as by its infamous perversions, the realization of hopes of shoes here, of clothes here, of health. I don't know how long you expect to live, but as an Englishman, I have the lively anticipation with my fellows of living to an age of 63. In fact, I'm already living on borrowed time. If you happen to be a woman, it's 65. I have no doubt that it's longer over here. The prospects are, and I have no warrant for saying this except the evidence of their who know so much more about it than I do, but in perhaps 200 years, the expectation of life may well be 150. You may regard that as a melancholy thought, and you may take comfort from the fact that you won't live to see it, but I shouldn't be a bit surprised if it happens. Therefore, when the Christian talks of the heaven beyond the skies, it is not surprising that most people are more or less indifferent to what he has to say. And when the evangelists invites us to sing hymns which contain words like these, you've heard them, I dare say, if you've ever been to the Billy Graham rally, watching and waiting, looking above. Now, there's a other really inadequate occupation for healthy young people. One of the outstanding troubles that afflict the preaching of the word today is that there is so much more to be offered in this life. And therefore, people are not particularly interested in the hereafter. I believe the answer here also is to be found in the true nature of the Christian faith. Now, one other characteristic, if I may. It is the characteristic of mass violence. I make no bones about it, and I don't apologize for it. I'm a pacifist. I'm thoroughly in favor of the total and complete demobilization of all the forces of all the nations beginning, shall be say, with the British. Now, you may regard that as cloud cuckoo land. You may regard that as perverse. And it is not my business to abuse your hospitality by preaching a pacifist sermon. I testify to it. You will not, however, be unprepared, surely, to accept that the outstanding characteristic of this world as it would be seen from some visitor from another planet or from

another universe, and for all I know, they may be here already. I only hope they're friendly. I cannot believe that they are further advanced than we are, and therefore, we have much to gain from any contact with them. What would some visitor from another universe, what would he say on return in making his report, if we can, with any reality, anticipate such a report? Surely, he would say that the most extraordinary fact about this human Earth is that we are mobilized in nation states with the capacity totally to annihilate each other. In fact, the nation state is the most predatory, violent institution that man has ever put his hand to. And you needn't accept that because Lenin said it. You can prove it by asking yourself, how did nations qualify in the old days of the League of Nations? What was the determination of a nation? What was the criteria of a nation state? And the only answer with which they could all agree was this, that a nation state is any community of people possessing its own armed forces. We are mobilized in terms of mass violence. We are upon the edge of mass destruction. And the pertinent cynicism, nuclear energy is here to stay. The important question is, are we. I know, and thank God for it, that there are many evidences in the world in which I live and in which you live of the impregnation of Christian principles. I live in a country where the welfare state is the most Christian thing that's happened in my lifetime. I rejoice in the campaign for nuclear disarmament in which I took apart some years ago, standing up, and walking around, and sitting down, and getting arrested. And when I was all prepared with a martyr's crown of going to prison, they let me out. Most embarrassing. (crowd laughs) There is no doubt at all that the man in the street in England believes that you cannot carry a gun in one hand and the Christian gospel in the other. But be that as it may, the outstanding characteristic of the world is violence. The ultimate arbitrament is violence. And for reasons good and bad, and it would be impertinent for me to make over judgments, very often much more in sorrow than in anger and much more in ineptitude than in immorality, the nations of the Earth commit themselves to unlimited slaughter. This is the beginning of a new term in a university, and there are many who will be asking themselves, am I a Christian? Ought I to go under that title? I believe that before you can answer that question, you will have to face at least these three characteristics, doubt, the viability of the kingdom of God on Earth rather than postponed for life hereafter, and mass violence. For whatever else Christianity may say to this generation, if it fails to say something about these matters, it will be regarded as completely irrelevant. And men will pass it by. and they will say to themselves, "If Christians like to make pious noises in peculiar places, "it's nobody's business but their own," but, in the countrymen's terms, it doesn't butter any parsnips. In order to make Christianity relevant, it must meet doubt, and it must meet the challenge of this life, and it must meet the challenge of violence. I believe it does. And in a very few words, I would try to offer to you, if I may, how I have found this answer. Once upon a time, when I was a very young minister, I imagined that the business of a Christian minister was to answer all the questions that anybody could ask. I have learned how stupid that is and how even more stupid it is to give the impression that Christianity provides all the answers. It does nothing of the sort. What it does do is it provides enough of the answers to enable us to live with the rest of them unanswered. And it transfers the emphasis away from academic and metaphysical thought and puts it fairly and squarely in another place, and that place is the kingdom of God. This is the answer to the problem raised by the life lust of our present age. This is the answer provided for the mass violence of our generation. Christianity is not believing a number of things for the good of your soul, which, as a matter of fact, can be demonstrated to be untrue. It contains beliefs. Christianity is not the experience of life here, though it explains it, and it makes it real. Christianity is ultimately the search and the discovery of the kingdom of God. And when we transfer our emphasis away from preoccupation with academic thought, or preoccupation with the next world, or preoccupation with violence, when we begin to

look for the kingdom of God, we shall find the answers. I have already begun to find them. I offer them to you. First of all, let me say it quite clearly, that they are the answers which Jesus gives. Jesus did not tell people to find their individual way to heaven. Jesus did not tell people to be preoccupied with the saving of their silly little souls. What Jesus said was, "Seek ye first the kingdom of God and its righteousness. And all these things will be added to you." That's in the Sermon on the Mount. Some years ago, it may well have been, after I was here last time, I went to Montreal and was involved in a television program in which I was to be quizzed on a topic. And they asked me what topic I would like to be questioned about, and I said the Sermon on the Mount. And those who were to interrogate me were the two leading criminal lawyers in French-speaking Canada. I took the precaution of finding out that it was not only for that particular program that they'd enlisted criminal lawyers, but there they were. They were lapsed Roman Catholics, and they gave me a very rough ride until halfway through the program, with immaculate television brilliance, though unconscious, one of them turned away from the microphones and said to me, "I think I ought to say that I hadn't read the Sermon on the Mount till last night." Well, I said, "I think you might read it again because I'm sure you won't have got everything out of it at first reading," and he said he would. And prompted by his candor, bless my soul, the other fellow said that he hadn't read the Sermon on the Mount till the night before either. By the way, have you? Don't tell me you have if you haven't. You've probably heard snippets from it. You've probably heard lessons read from it. But when did you last sit down at the place in St. Matthew's gospel where it says, "And seeing the multitudes," and read straight through to the place where it says, "And not as the scribes." Well, between those two parcels of words is the Sermon on the Mount. And in that television program, I had the extraordinary opportunity of talking to two sophisticated, elegant 20th century men, versed in all the affairs of this world, who had suddenly come upon the Sermon on the Mount. I asked them what they thought of it. Their first reply was a little devastating. They wanted to know why we Christians didn't believe it. And then they said this, "The Sermon on the Mount is not what we expected it to be. The Sermon on the Mount is not about getting individual souls to heaven. The Sermon on the Mount is about the kingdom of God and its righteousness." How right they were. The answer to our doubt is to take them and the little flicker of faith we have and set out to make the Christian church and the world in which we live the workshop of the kingdom of God, for in that workshop, we shall find the answers which are necessary, and we shall be prepared to leave the others in the heart and mind of our heavenly Father. It is in the search for the kingdom of God that we shall learn that Jesus did not invite people to look for a spiritual world. Only when he was asked where the kingdom of God was, he said, "It's within you." Or if you're a stickler for the Greek, "It's amongst you." And when they said to him, "What about eternal life," Jesus said, "He that believeth on me hath everlasting life." The Christian gospel is largely an essay in the present tense. And we are only recovering the apostolic authority when we look for that kingdom here in peace and justice, and feeding the hungry, and caring for those who are uneducated, and spreading abroad the family spirit and setting up the family table. There is so much of that kingdom that can be realized here and now. We have the machinery. We have the raw material. But if we fuss ourselves by inquiring as to the furniture of heaven, and there are not a few people who seem to be much better informed about the next world than they are about the affairs of their neighbors in this. We shall find that the Christian gospel is the open door to peace on Earth and goodwill among men. As the heavenly host sang, "When Jesus was born and the Earth lay quiet, to hear the song of the angels." And what, finally, about violence? There is only one answer of violence, and that is to expel it by a greater and deeper affection. I know very well how impracticable sounds the program of the cross, but I know that Jesus Christ would have passed into history

as just another more or less insignificant resistance leader to the Roman empire had he chosen the way of violence. He chose the way of the cross. You heard read today one of the greatest passages, at least in my experience, in the whole of the New Testament. It is the threefold question that Jesus asked of Peter, "Peter, do you love me? "If you love me, then you will be able to do the things "that I charge you to do, "and you will be able to take up your cross." Well, that's the meaning of that other passage immediately following in which you remember the remark he's made about Peter being nailed to a cross. There is only one answer of violence. It is not to how convenient it would be or how opportune it would be, how existential it would be if we got rid of our arms. It is to expel the whole concept of violence by the inoculation, first of all, and then the incorporation of an entirely new spirit. And we are not ready for it, and we are not Christian enough to believe it. And I preach these were to myself as much as to you. We are not worthy to be called Christians unless we are prepared to love as Jesus loved and to take up our cross. What does taking up a cross mean? Oh, there is a dear lady in my church whose cross is lumbago, she says. Now, I've had lumbago, and I'm not inclined to laugh at it, but do you think that Jesus, when he said take up a cross was thinking of some minor or even major human ailment, a thorn in the flesh? Not a bit of it. We know very well what taking up a cross meant, and so did those who heard our Lord say these words, "When a man was condemned to be crucified, by Roman law, "he was required to take up the cross or part of it "on which later he was to be done cruelly to death "and carry it, carry it to the place "where he was to be killed." A man who took up his cross was a man who was going to the end of the road, and the taking up of his cross was his last free action. Nothing more could be required of him. To use a modern phrase, if it is still a modern phrase, he had gone to the limit. And I think of violence and the prudential reasons which are offered alike for armaments and disarmaments. When I testify to my pacifism as I do, I know that the only effective answer to violence is the love which belongs to the kingdom of God and the carrying of the cross, which is the only fit and adequate burden of those who would be called by the name of Jesus. I pray that those who live and work in this university will not spurn the Christian faith because they can't answer questions about is God dead, a frivolous question if ever I heard one. I hope that they will not be unduly disturbed because politics is the way things happen, and there are so few persons who seem to know the points of the compass about the political situation. I hope they will not be cynical because they see a world which is still prostituted to violence. I hope that they will see in Jesus Christ and his kingdom first, the vision, and then the power to take up his cross and make their way to his kingdom, for if they begin that Via Dolorosa, if they begin to lift that cross, if they begin to perceive that kingdom and to desire it, the promise of God is this, that they will be sustained, and his grace will be sufficient for them, for the city of God remaineth and the kingdom will come. May it come quickly. Let us pray. Oh, God, our heavenly Father, we pray that we may hear the gospel as Jesus proclaims it to us, that we may resolve our doubts and see his kingdom and learn to love him. And in that service to receive his grace and together with others, to move into that realm of peace and justice and goodwill, which is the anti past of his kingdom and which he has promised, so give to us strength and faith. And from this time forward, accept us as thy soldiers and servants. We humbly pray thee through Jesus Christ, our Lord. You stand. Now, may the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in the knowledge and love of God and of his son, Jesus Christ, our Lord. And the blessing of God Almighty, the father, the son, and the holy spirit, be amongst you and remain with you always.