

TAKEN BY SURPRISE

(Scripture lesson: Mark 14:17-31)

A Communion Meditation

Delivered in the Duke University Chapel

by

The Reverend Professor James L. Price, Jr.

Chairman of the Department of Religion
in the Undergraduate Colleges

January 17, 1960

Religious Activities Committee
Duke University YMCA

TAKEN BY SURPRISE

Long familiarity with the celebration of the Holy Communion obscures from us the element of surprise. From the time of our first communion, we have been taught to think on the meaning of what we do here. We have been encouraged to prepare ourselves whenever we have come to the Table of Our Lord. It is possible that traditional beliefs and states of mind leave us unprepared for the unexpected. If so, then our situation is not unlike that of the first disciples. As they were at the table, eating, Jesus said, "Truly, I say to you, one of you will betray me; one who is eating with me." The gospels report that Jesus had shocked His disciples when He had first said that He would suffer many things, ^{and} be put to death. They could not reconcile this tragic consequence with their belief that He was the Messiah, the conquering hero. But imagine how startling this latest announcement must have been. Jesus' death would result from a betrayal by one of the Twelve. Mark tells us that, for the moment at least, the security of all of the disciples was shaken. One after another, they began to say to Jesus, "Is it I? Is it I?" In that awkward interval of silence after Jesus had spoken, their self-confidence collapsed.

Did they hear the ominous words of Jesus which follow in Mark's account? Like the chorus in a Greek tragedy: "For the Son of man goes as it is written of him, but woe to that man by whom the Son of man is betrayed! It would have been better for him if he had never been born."

One might suppose that the finger of suspicion already pointed at Judas; yet there is little warrant for this assumption. As the gaze of Jesus was fixed on his intimate associates, a terrible question caught at their throats: "Is it I? Could it be that I am this betrayer?" It is easy for us to point to the differences between ourselves and the Twelve, as we approach the Table of the Lord. These men were in a position, as we are not, to be loyal or disloyal to Jesus in the hour of His death. For us, the cross is an event in the long, long ago. But let no security be taken in this thought. The New Testament teaches that Christians can crucify the Son of God on their own account, and hold Him up to contempt. For such persons the fate of Judas impends; unless, we may believe, self-concern, or perhaps remorse towards men, turns into a genuine repentance unto God.

Nor can we forget that Paul solemnly warns, "Let a man examine himself, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup; for anyone who eats and drinks without discernment, without recognition of the magnitude of Christ's sacrifice, eats and drinks judgement unto himself."

The first disciples were taken by surprise that they should

be forced to consider seriously their part in the death of Jesus. They were not allowed to shoulder the responsibility of guilt upon Jesus' enemies; nor to divide the burden upon Jewish officials or Roman officials; they were brought by Jesus to face the inescapable question: "Is it I?"

"Were you there when they crucified my Lord?" Out of Negro folk tradition comes this haunting spiritual. The question may affect people differently; but asked in the presence of the Lord's Table, does it take us by surprise? Were you there when they crucified my Lord?

The second occasion for surprise for Jesus' disciples was when He passed them bread and the cup. It is not clear after intensive research whether this loaf and this wine held any religious significance. It may be that on that evening Jesus celebrated the Passover with His disciples, as Mark believed. But the identifying features of the Jewish paschal meal are absent from the early accounts of the Last Supper. It is possible that when Jesus took into His hands the bread and the cup His disciples saw nothing out of the ordinary; only the characteristic gesture of their friend at meal table. Uncertainty must remain as to the meaning of Jesus' action for the disciples, but of this we may be sure: His words took them by surprise. "Take, this is my body;" or again, "This is my blood of the Covenant, which is poured out for many." It's a mistake to assume that the disciples were prepared for these words. The Gospels report that Jesus had repeatedly spoken of His conviction that death would fulfill His mission. Tomorrow's events would hold no surprises for Him. "The Son of man came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many." But the same Gospels insist that the disciples had never understood that Jesus' death was necessary, that God willed it. By the time of the Last Supper they had hardly begun to understand it. And their reaction on the following day makes this quite clear: not for them was that day Good Friday.

Why, may we ask, were the disciples so ill-prepared? Why were they so slow of heart to believe what Jesus was teaching them? The Gospels report that the blindness of the Twelve was due in part to a certain predisposition of their minds, and their wills, against such a thing. You see, they thought they knew what their basic problems were. They knew the kind of spiritual leadership they wanted; the kinds of things they wished the Christ to bring them. They looked to Jesus to fulfill their dreams, to satisfy their personal expectations. And as a result, they were deaf to what He offered them, to what He taught must be done for their salvation. They were not willing to hear what He must demand of them for their own good; and as a consequence, so inadequate for their discipleship. What happened to the first disciples may very well happen to us, though not exactly in the same ways, of course. We have accepted the gospel of the crucified Christ; we have made of His cross a symbol of our faith. But are we any better prepared than these men for the shattering of our

hopes, hopes which we too place in Jesus? What is the ground of our trust in God? What are the needs that we ask him to fulfill? What are the terms of our discipleship to Jesus?

How easy it is for us to hide from ourselves that we often look to Christ to further our personal plans; to bring to pass our dreams. And as a result, how unprepared we are for the unexpected, how unready to accept what He has to offer us, how insensitive to the mystery of the Cross as it relates to our lives; how inadequate in moments of peril and disappointment, when life takes us by surprise. Like the disciples, who had come with Jesus to the critical moment in their lives as well as in His, we may become disheartened and afraid when we see glaring discrepancies between what we think should be the will of God for us, and what actually happens to us. It threatens the security we set for ourselves.

Still another surprise was in store for the disciples; it didn't dawn upon them all at once, but when it overtook them, it was the greatest surprise of their lives. Jesus said to them, "You will all fall away." Now wasn't it enough that one of the Twelve should betray Him? Surely the rest of these men would stand by Him in His hour of need. Peter's pride was the first to be offended. "Even though they all fall away," he says, "I will not." And Jesus said to him, "Truly I say to you, this very night you will deny me three times." Peter said vehemently, "If I must die with you, I will not deny you." And they all said the same. Why do you suppose the disciples were so blind to their moral weakness? I suspect that something more than defense mechanisms prompted their bold assertion of loyalty. Hadn't Jesus chosen them? Were they not the foundation of the community of the Messiah? The faithful remnant of Israel, men who must stand firm in the midst of apostasy? Had not Jesus just spoken of a covenant which God was making with them? If they were to fall away, then all indeed would be lost. Whatever the basis of their self-confidence, it was to collapse, utterly collapse. And sad indeed are the words which are recorded in the Passion narrative: "And they all forsook Him, and fled." Yet withal, the disciples were held fast in their relationship with the Lord. In the dark moment of dereliction, of separation from the Man from whom they had fled, these remorseful, miserable cowards were taken by the greatest surprise of their life. He came to them, in pity, but more in love than in pity. It was for such persons as themselves that He had died. This is what He had meant when He said, "Take; this is my body, broken for you," knowing all the while that they would desert Him and flee.

This was the Good News that Jesus had proclaimed all during His life, and at the time of His death: God loves the undeserving. Jesus had died, the truly righteous man, for unrighteous men, that He might bring them to God. But this surprise was not for the disciples alone. The Church of Christ, in its first proclamation, offered forgiveness to those who had killed Jesus Christ, and a

share of life in the New Israel to those who had rejected Him. God continued to be the great doer of the unexpected.

Are we prepared today to accept this truth about ourselves? Not by our virtue, nor by reason of our faithfulness, do we come to this Table. Does this offend our pride? Do we begin to think that there must be something in us, something we can offer Christ which He needs from us; something, something, surely. Do we begin to say, even though all should forsake, yet not I? Or will our foolish pride give place, and will we listen once again to Him Who comes to us in incomparable mercy, fully aware of our moral cowardice and of our disloyalty? "Take, eat; this is my body, broken for you. . . . This cup is the new covenant in my blood." God shows his love for us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. Is there anything, anything as amazing as this?

Let us pray:

O thou great Doer of the unexpected, if we have come to this place taking for granted a right relationship to thee and to our fellows, make us aware of the insecurity of our loyalties. If we have too lightly measured the seriousness of our sin and the cost of our redemption, startle us by the truth that men just like ourselves made necessary the cross of Christ. If we are given a glimpse of our moral weakness, or the cowardice of our discipleship, surprise us by thy mercy, O God; that we discover afresh the only basis for security in thee, and take this sacrament to our comfort. Amen.