

From The Pulpit

by Rev. Donald M. Clark

WHEN LIFE ACHIEVES GREATNESS

Text: "Jesus Knowing that the Father had Given All Things Into His Hands, and that He Was Come from God, and Went to God." John 13:3.

Most of us, it would seem, accept the assumption that one of the prize possessions any man can have is prestige. Not that we could define it very clearly, yet more than we know, it is an end we seek. Because everyone needs to feel that he is somebody, most of us work and plan and struggle to achieve our measure of prestige. It is one of the driving powers in our way of life.

This is one of the points at which Jesus had a disturbing way of turning things upside down, or should we say right side up? There was, for example, as John told the story, a time, intimate and poignant, when Jesus taught his disciples an unforgettable lesson. It hardly could have come at a more critical moment. In John's account, Jesus had come to that night when he gathered his disciples



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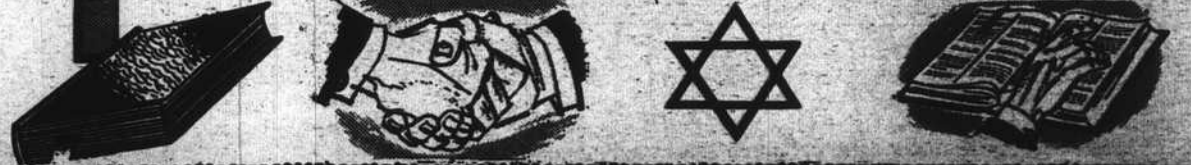
for the Last Supper together. He had sensed the opposition of his enemies. He knew what was coming. How he wanted these last moments with those he had known and loved best. They came into the room where the meal was to be served. Each found his place. If it had been in a home where there were slaves, at this point each guest would have been refreshed by having the slave wash from his feet the dust of the road. But since they had met together as equals, who would take this task, this humble task, this work of a servant? Then it was that Jesus arose. And the next words are exceedingly striking. John says, "Knowing that he was come from God, he took a towel and girded himself." What a turn there is in these words. What would you expect to follow in a sentence that starts out, "knowing that he was come from God?" Wouldn't you expect it to say, by our ordinary standards, "He expected all others to wait upon him" or "He insisted upon the best place at the table?" Not so! Here is the essence of a tremendous truth about Jesus Christ, and an insight into the Christian life itself. "Knowing that he was come from God, he took a towel and girded himself." In this simple act Christ gave us a timeless picture, and it helps us to understand one or two important insights into our faith.

HOW LIFE BECOMES GREAT. First, this is the way any life takes on real greatness. Like a theme in a symphony, this truth runs through so much of what Jesus taught and did. He had a new kind of aristocracy. Men had had almost every standard for determining their prestige. In the earliest societies it was probably an aristocracy of strength. Then, of course, there were aristocracies based upon family. Many times in history we have had an aristocracy of wealth and property. But look at this amazing way Jesus approached the matter. In washing their feet he was teaching his disciples by action what his words had professed. He wanted them to know that the real aristocracy of servants. "He that is greatest among you shall be the servant of all." A man comes to his real greatness when instead of taking from life, he gives. It is the ability to know one's divine gift, yet take a towel and come to the humblest needs of life with compassion and concern.

It was not that Jesus forgot himself in doing this. In fact, he fulfilled himself. It was the very fact that he had come from God that led him to take the towel and to teach the lesson. His service was born out of an awareness of what he was and of the gift God had entrusted to him.

That spirit needs so deeply to penetrate our present ways of thinking and working. The aristocracy is a basic invitation at which Christ

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touches so many lives. It speaks to the businessman who has been given an ability for organizing a business and carrying out a successful career. Having this, he can insist upon his right to use it for his own purposes and the accumulation of wealth. Or he can look upon it as a gift. Knowing that he has it and respecting the gift that is in him, he, too, can take a towel and minister to life. It speaks to the physician . . . It speaks to the minister . . .

The question is, you see, whether from possession you move to privilege or to responsibility. How we wish our young people could catch now for all the years of their lives the understanding that the more you have the more you owe, that the higher you go in your chosen field the more you need to keep in touch with our common life. Unless your life has both those dimensions, a recognition of the gift and a humanity in the use of it, you have yet to find fulfillment.

HOW GOD BECAME NEAR. This is the wonder of Jesus Christ. The majesty of Christ is in the way in which he could know that he came from God, yet walk in the humblest situations of life, not asking but giving, not demanding but offering, not seeking but serving. It is no wonder that they found it difficult to believe that God had especially come to them in Christ. Men had never understood God in quite these terms. They had understood his majesty. They could not understand his humility. If he had come in a way that had only majesty without humility, they would have understood that. If he had come insisting upon all of the outward show of power and prestige, they would have understood this, too. But to come as he did, born humbly, living for years in common ways and dying in seeming shame upon a cross--well, can you blame them for not understanding? Over and over they were faced with this strange truth that was unfolding before them. When Jesus spoke of himself as one sent of God to save them, they asked the inevitable question, "Is this not the carpenter's son?" or again "Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?" Here was a king that rode not in a chariot but on a donkey's back. Here was a Lord who made

himself a servant! Here was a Savior who took not a sword but a cross! Here was a victor who had no army but only a handful of men drawn from the ordinary walks of life! Small wonder that men did not understand him!

And yet this was the wonder of Christ! Men knew that he had come from God, yet, he could take a towel and touch the most menial tasks of life with dignity. Never was there a majesty so singular. Here was the glory of God touched with modesty. Here was divinity that had humility. This was the Son who became a servant. In short, this was the incarnation. Here God was in Christ.

But the wonder of it goes deeper. When you think of Christ taking a towel, you would suppose that God somehow thereby lowered himself. Quite to the contrary. In such a time it wasn't God lowering himself, it was his lifting us to him. As he worked in the carpenter's shop, it did not take away from the dignity of God; it only added dignity to the daily work. When he ate with sinners he did not cheapen himself, he only ennobled the sinner. So man, looking at this Christ who came from God and took a towel, were led to say not "See how low God has become," but rather "See how high he has lifted us by his coming." In Christ God stooped to conquer, and the wonder of it will never leave us. This, indeed, is the meaning of Christ.