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ENGLISH TRIAL SEVEN.

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THEME: CHRIST, THE MAKER OF MEN.

English Trial Sermon.

Scripture: St. Matthew 4: 17 - 25.

Text: St. Mat hew 4: 19. And He saith unto them: Follow Me
and I will make you fishers of men.

Theme: Christ, the Maker of Men.

For the past twenty-five years and more Christians have stood by and watched many Christian standards of truth and justice and mercy and sincerity being abandoned by men and by nations all over the world. Slowly, almost imperceptibly at first, Christian ~~gyarithel~~ and spiritual and moral values were being overthrown by men and women who did not and could not believe any longer that new moral and spiritual power to solve the problems of mankind could only come through Christ.

Only of late, however, have these people begun to realise that, in doing away with religion, they have created an impossible situation, because instead of creating an atmosphere of peace and comradeship and security, they are now living in a world of injustice and hatred, a world where nations fear and distrust one another, a world where Christian mercy and truth and love find almost no place.

Simultaneously, Christianity has come to realise that the cause of all this misery and distrust and hatred must be sought in ourselves, in the lives of Christians of all nations. Somewhere and somehow something has gone wrong - totally wrong. Slowly we have begun to realise that the main reason why we have

failed was because of our own selfishness, because we have striven to do things according to our own wills and plans, thinking of nothing else but our own interests, our own honour, our own position, our own prestige. We have become self-made men instead of Christ-made men. And to-day we are reaping the result: Chaos, of which this present war is but one proof.

But in spite of all this, there has been little or no concerted action on the part of Christians to change this state of affairs, to change the lives of men. With a certain fatalistic attitude, which bordered on despair, many Christians have accepted this situation in ourselves and the world as part of our lives, as something inevitable and unavoidable, something which we simply had to accept, whether we liked to do so or not. Many Christians took up this attitude: We admit that Christianity has lost and is still losing its foothold. But all our attempts at a change for the better have failed: we are at a loss to know what to do.

Thus it was that we lost all hope and courage, and thus it was that the world lost all hope in us and turned to others to find courage there.

Of late, however, we have begun to realise that there is a solution, that there is a possibility that we may again find the way back to truth and justice and peace and freedom namely by trying to find our way back to Christ, by trying to understand and to discover how He made men to whom truth and justice and peace and freedom were no idle words but a burning reality in their own lives.

Therefore, we would like to draw your attention to the following words in Matthew 4: 19 - Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men. These words form the basis for discussing the theme:

CHRIST, THE MAKER OF MEN.

I. THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF THE TASK.

In the first place we would like to point out the impossibility of the task of Christ. Humanly speaking the task of Christ in remaking these men He had chosen as His disciples, was an impossible one. Let us leave the disciples for a moment and just think of the hopeless conditions under which Christ had to fulfill this task. Spiritually and morally the Jewish nation as a whole was bankrupt. Everywhere amongst themselves and also in the countries outside Palestine there was strife and discord, jealousy and hatred. In all the countries the people were divided into different groups, each group fighting for its own interests and position. Everywhere, groups and nations were opposing and fighting one another. And of all these countries, Palestine had to bear the brunt of the burden. In such a country and under such conditions Christ had to fulfill His task of remaking men.

But if that were all it would have been nothing. Christ's real difficulty did not lie with conditions outside, but inside the circle of followers He had chosen. If He could only unite this group of men, so opposite to one another, into a bond of fellowship and unity! But how could He succeed? In this group of twelve there were men : (a) of opposing natures; (b) of opposing convictions; (c) with opposing interests.

(a) Men of opposing Natures: Just try and imagine these men in the same company under the same leader: on the one hand a man like Peter with his impetuosity, his impulsiveness, his inconstancy, his pride and self-righteousness. On the other hand a man like John with his sensitive soul, his humility, the constancy of his love for Christ, despising every revelation of pride and self-righteousness in anybody else! How would Christ succeed in uniting natures so opposite?

(b) Men of opposing Convictions: But in this group of twelve there were not only men of opposing natures, but also men of opposing convictions. On the one hand Matthew, supporting the Roman Empire as collector of customs for the Roman government, despised because of this calling by all true Jewish patriots - a social outcast. On the other hand Simon the Zealot, a fanatical Jewish patriot, despising and hating all Jews like Matthew who had sold their souls to the hated Roman government for the sake of money. Each had his own convictions, right or wrong, and these opinions clashed on every point. Under ordinary circumstances Simon would have spat on the ground when passing this publican, this traitor to the Jewish race: Matthew. How could Christ succeed in uniting conviction so opposite?

(c) Men with opposing Interests: In this group of twelve, however, there were not only men of opposing natures and opposing convictions but also men with opposing interests. There is e.g. the incident of the sons of Zebedee who enquired of Christ what place they would be allotted to them in the kingdom which Christ was going to establish.

There are many other incidents - and all of them go to prove that all the disciples at heart only strove for one thing: their own interests, their position, increasing their own prestige in the eyes of the world. It was inevitable, therefore, that these interests had to clash sometime. On the face of it, it seemed as if this fellowship could not last: it had to split some time.

And yet- it held. Christ succeeded in doing the seemingly impossible: He succeeded in uniting these men into a band of followers who, a few years hence, were going to change the destiny of men and nations!

II. THE REASON FOR HIS SUCCESS.

And that leads us to the second point we wish to accentuate: The Reason for His Success.

Of all the mysteries of life, this mystery of the success of Christ will remain with us throughout our lives because we will never be able to fathom this wonder, to understand why Christ came to earth. On the one hand God has made this clear to us that Christ was His Only Son, sent by the Father to die for the sins of the world so that men might be able to receive true Life in Him. On the other hand we can explain it more fully by trying to approach this matter from the disciples' point of view: How did they view this Man, Christ? And how did Christ succeed in getting into their lives and changing their lives? Why did they obey His command: "Follow Me" ?

(a) He was Life - and gave Life: Perhaps it will become clearer to us if we express it this way: Up till this moment all the religious leaders of their own nation, the Scribes and the Pharisees,

had given them certain definite rules and standards to live by. "Do This", they said, "and you will have Life". Now Christ comes along and says: "Follow Me because I am Life". By and by they all discover that Christ has everything in Himself which He promises to give: Life, Truth, Mercy, Justice. They discover, too, through His dealings with them, that He has that Something which conquers their inborn weaknesses: their personal hatreds and fears and prejudices and strife; they discover that He has that Something which fulfills their deepest needs and longings: namely, their desire for fellowship and justice and freedom and happiness and peace. That is why they obeyed His command: Follow Me willingly and gladly: Because

He was Life- and gave Life.

(b) He was Love - and gave Love: There is another reason for Christ's success. In the course of the three years contact with Christ they began to notice that Christ had a way of dealing with men which they did not possess. They noticed the way He dealt with Matthew, the tax collector, with Mary Magdalene, the unchaste woman, with the Samaritan woman, with the Greeks - and they were dumbfounded! How was it possible that He could deal with all kinds and types of people of all nations and give everyone what he or she desired most, and unite them into a bond of fellowship and understanding?

Then, slowly, it dawned upon them that this Man, Christ, was giving these people what they needed most: LOVE AND UNDERSTANDING. And this became clearer to them after the Crucifixion that Christ had died because He had so loved mankind that He had to give His life as a ransom for many.

That is the reason why they obeyed His command: Follow Me willingly and gladly: Because

He was Love -and gave Love.

(c) He was Power- and gave Power: But the main reason why Christ succeeded in uniting these men into follow Him, was, as the disciples themselves discovered later, because through Him they received Power to live and love, power and strength to overcome their own shortcomings and failings, power and strength to live victoriously and love to the utmost!

As their friendship with Him grew and deepened they discovered that He was giving them power to do what He had commanded them to do: thus Peter became steadfast and reliable, John's love was consecrated, Matthew pooled all his resources - financial and otherwise- for Christ, and Simon's patriotism was purified in the service of his nation. That is why Christ succeeded and why the disciples obeyed Him willingly and implicitly; Because

He was Power- and gave Power to Live Victoriously and to Love to the Utmost!

III. THE RESULTS HE ACHIEVED.

We have discussed in the first place: The Impossibility of the Task of Christ in Remaking Men; also in the second place: The Reason why He Succeeded. Let us now consider: The Results He Achieved.

"Follow Me and I will make you fishers of Men". Fishers of Men: that was the result Christ achieved with these men. He solved all their problems- He took away their fears and hatreds and jealousies and gave them Peace and Joy and Happiness, with the result that they could not prevent themselves from becoming Fishers

of Men - catching netsfull instead handsfull. In practical terms we can express this transformation in the following manner:

(a) Christ made the disciples One: Peter, John, Matthew, Simon the Zealot, Andrew, Thomas - Christ took them and made them one- in Him. In Him, the great Reality, all petty differences fell away and thereby they became united "having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind". In Christ, who is the Only Truth and Justice and Peace, they found truth and justice and peace for their own lives and for the lives of their fellowmen.

Please do not mistake the essence of this unity: this was no outer unity, no unwilling obedience to a leader who dominated them; it was an inner unity based on their willingness to co-operate with Christ in being remade and through in Remaking the World.

Neither does this unity mean that they were all remade according the same pattern: each disciple retained his own individuality, but through Christ each one willingly consecrated all his powers of mind and spirit to the service of Christ.

(b) Christ made the Apostles: Having made them one He made them apostles, He entrusted to them the superhuman task of going out into the world to change the lives of men and nations. Impossible! How could these fishermen, illiterate and uneducated, ever succeed in doing this? And yet- they did succeed! Within 50 years after the death of Christ they had evangelized the world they knew. Impossible! Yes, that is just what Christ wanted to prove to them: that they themselves would never be able to achieve this, but in Him they would succeed in breaking down all barriers of defence between man and man, between nation and nation in order to co-operate with Christ in building this new world order:

THE KINGDOM OF GOD.

Conclusion: These times of crisis in which we are living are very similar to the times in which Christ lived. It would seem that everywhere around us Christian influence is waning as a result of the abandonment by men and nations of Christian spiritual and moral values.

Everywhere among Christians the seeming impossibility of the task of Remaking Men and Nations is being felt. "Just look at the hopeless conditions in the world to-day" they say; "strife and dissent, a lack of truth and and mercy in the hearts of nations. Think of all the groups and nations opposing one another! Think of people individually with their opposing natures, opposing convictions and opposing interests! How can we succeed in uniting them?"

That is just the trouble: We cannot unite people permanently. Only Christ can do that. We cannot remake men- but Christ can. Just as He made his apostles even so can He make us if we are willing to obey His command: Follow Me. Through Him we will be able to Live- and Live Victoriously; to Love- and Love to the Utmost; because He gives us Power - to Live and Love.

In His opposing nations, opposing natures, opposing convictions, opposing interests are united into a bond of fellowship and understanding.

But this ideal can only be realized if we are willing to follow Christ, to sacrifice our own impure desires and as irations and reorganize our lives in a new harmony with God. This task will not be an easy one: it will entail sacrifice, hardship, but it will also mean victory and happiness and peace.

The Christians in warfarng countries are suffering because of the folly of mankind. In this dark hour of their lives they see no light. If there is one prayer which they are praying in these times it is this:

I ask no dream, no prophet-ecstasies
 No sudden rending of the veil of clay,
 No angel-visitant, no opening skies;
 But take the dimness of my soul away.

Christ, the giver of Light, has done that for all of us. Let us Christians therefore assist our fellow-Christians by accepting our responsibility towards our fellow-men in South Africa namely: by giving Christ the opportunity in our own lives to make and remake us day by day in order that through us He can remake the world.

Let us all, in these times of war and tribulation and uncertainty, when we are very prone to lose courage and hope in the future, think of the way in which Christ remade men and gave them new hope and courage. Then let us enlist our lives in the service of Christ who needs every one of us in building a new world order:

THE KINGDOM OF GOD.

Amen.