

CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY

Meditation

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Laurentius Valla: Renaissance Critic and Biblical
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Homiletics

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INTRODUCTION

The series of sermons being presented by CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY during this church year is designed not only to give illustrations of new types of sermons but also to accent certain continuing concerns of the preacher. The dialog sermon in the November issue underlined the fact that every preacher is concerned about involving his hearers in the use of Word in worship. Educators continually remind us that the lecture-sermon is not the most adequate process for conveying knowledge. To this extent the preacher is at once concerned about the fact that the sermon is basically a monolog. He turns to the dialog sermon in some hope that by this process the necessary conversation between the pew and the pulpit will be stimulated in the minds of all who are hearing, even of those who cannot participate in the immediate dialog.

The preacher is aware at once, however, that there are other forces present in the typical monolog of the traditional sermon. Much of the force of a concerted presentation by one speaker who knows what he is doing is lost in a discussion situation in which many opinions by many somewhat less experienced and less prepared individuals are pooled. But he realizes that his monologic presentation must come through with at least as much dramatic impact as is achieved in forms such as the dialog and its brother, the drama. It is with this concern in mind that the preacher considers the whole matter of his presentation and delivery, seeking to build with both the impact on the emotions and sensitivity of the hearer. The dramatic sermon in the December issue was only one type of the many possibilities in this area. It pointed to an approach that would help make the *lessons* actually "heard" Word. So frequently this part of the service — the reading of the Scriptures — goes past the hearer with little impact. The proclaiming of the Word through the reading of the lesson is as much a part of the preacher's task as is the

exposition of the Word from the pulpit. He must be striving to achieve in the minds of his hearers a recognition of the seriousness, the solemnity, the sacredness, and the force of the Word of God as it reaches us through the Scriptures, read or expounded. And so he turns to dramatic elements in an attempt to make his reading effective.

If a sermon such as this dramatic sermon were to do no more than highlight the content of the day's lessons, it would already be engaged in a vital part of the task of the sermon. It may well be that the preacher is intent on accomplishing more than merely making the lessons come through with meaning and significance. Because of this he structures his sermons toward a point and bolsters the power of the Gospel behind that point. In this way the sermon goes beyond being merely an exposition of Scriptural material. His sermon is designed in the direction of moving his hearers to a goal of action. Rather than intending merely to lay before them in dramatic form a statement from the Scriptures, he will be interested in the elements that make the Word come to life and produce results in living.

At this point the sermon series presented by CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY takes up a midweek Lenten service. In this issue a sample sermon is presented entitled "We the Jury Hear the Witness, John," one of a series prepared by the Rev. Richard O. Hoyer of Chicago, Ill. (This sermon gives an adequate illustration of the approach of the total series. Those who are interested in other sermons in the series may write to this magazine requesting mimeographed copies.)

The sermon is a very useful illustration of a dramatic type of presentation. In this it stands by itself without any need for further comment. Its impact is apparent even upon a single reading. Delivered with care and skill in the situation of a parish service, with Christians and their nonconverted friends in attendance in the midst of a Lententide, its impact would be all the greater.

The final application to the hearer raises a number of questions that should be in the preacher's mind as he prepares to develop a series in Lent.

Instead of a series that adds up to prescriptions of what a good man should do and descriptions of what bad men once did to the world's one good Man, we might have services that apply the power of the risen Christ to raise up the new man in his level of love and life.

Should we not expect (and work for) a large number of non-Christian inquirers in the Lententide services? Ought it not be clear then that there will be a fundamental difference in the way we proclaim the Gospel if we are addressing a congregation of Christians, born again by the power of the resurrection, as contrasted to an audience that is simply asking the question, "Who is this Jesus Christ?" It is obvious, of course, that a Christian audience overlaps these two characterizations. The old man-new man nature of the Christian puts him, in a manner of speaking, in both these camps. But our conviction that we have received new life through the work of Jesus Christ and our baptism makes us aware of the fact that the Christian audience is really a totally different group. They are new creatures. They are new men in Christ. Even when the preacher addresses them in their failings, he addresses them as men accepted by God, forgiven by the heavenly Father. We need to make sure that we have a clear vision of our target audience.

A reconsideration of what we hope to be achieving in the midweek series might very well accent the possibility in our day of setting up a series of presentations directly aimed at the non-Christian, the inquirer, the curious, and even the antagonistic. But if we propose to reach this audience, should we not make a deliberate attempt to structure a service that would not involve them in participation in acts of faith in which they cannot with honesty cooperate? Ought not our services then be a radical departure from the traditional worship "service" that we usually envision?

A reconsideration of what we are attempt-

ing in the Lenten weeks would also require us to ask once more what the thrust of the Lententide should be. If we are speaking to our own Christian fellow congregation members, ought we not take the accents of the *Sundays* in Lent seriously even on Wednesdays? Their thrust is not on a consideration of the suffering and dying of Jesus Christ but on the life of the Christian who has accepted the benefits of that death and resurrection. Might it not be well for us to consider once more the possibility of a stress on sanctification, on holiness of life, during the weeks of the Lententide? This would leave the days of Holy Week free for the necessary and traditional accents on the significance of the suffering and death of our Lord. It would probably do much to heighten what we wish to achieve in the Holy Week-Easter sequence and make possible the avoidance of a thinning out of the importance of His death for us, which sometimes results from the long Lenten sequence.

GEORGE W. HOYER

LENTEN SERIES: "WE THE JURY"

"We the Jury Hear the Witness John"

A man is on trial for his life, and we are the jury. You can imagine what it must be like to serve on a jury when a man, if found guilty, will be executed. It would be frightening and awesome to know that you have a man's fate in your hands, to know that whether he lives or dies depends on your vote. But that frightening and awesome responsibility is yours now, and indeed every day of your life. You are the jury. Before you stands a man who is on trial for his life. His name is Jesus, from Nazareth in Israel.

Perhaps now you are thinking, "We all know perfectly well that Jesus was tried before the courts of Israel and Rome, that He was sentenced to death and executed by the horrible torture of crucifixion nearly 2,000 years ago. He is not really on trial now. That is just a gimmick for a sermon. But that is not true—or only partly true. Jesus *was* put on trial 2,000 years ago, and He was

crucified — but He is still on trial here and now. Jesus did not stay dead. He rose again. He is alive now and is still making the same claims He made then — claims of being the Son of God and the Savior of the world. If we believe Him, then He lives, and in freedom He takes His place as Savior and King on the throne in our hearts. If we don't believe Him, then He is taken out and crucified again. We kill Him by putting Him out of our hearts and out of our lives. So, He really is on trial before you now — and every day. Either He lives as your Savior and King, or He dies, cast out of your heart and life. The decision is yours. You are the jury.

During these midweek Lenten Vespers, we are calling various witnesses to the stand. We shall examine them and hear what they have to say. The prosecutor will show why he thinks we ought to condemn Jesus, and the defense attorney will speak in Jesus' behalf. But the verdict — shall He be Lord or shall He be crucified — is up to you. He is on trial before every heart, every day. And you are the jury.

(Pastor steps out of the pulpit)

Prosecutor: I call John Zebedee to the stand. State your name and address, please

John: John Zebedee, 314 Gamaliel Street, Capernaum, Galilee.

Prosecutor: Would you give your occupation, please?

John: I am a follower of a man named Jesus of the village of Nazareth in Galilee. He is my teacher, my Rabbi, and I followed Him wherever He went.

Prosecutor: You were one of the followers or disciples of Jesus. How many were there?

John: Well, many people followed Jesus from place to place, but in the inner circle of His closest disciples there were twelve of us.

Prosecutor: Twelve of you. And how long were the twelve of you together with this Jesus?

John: Nearly three years.

Prosecutor: How did the twelve of you get along? Did everything work out all right?

John: Yes, it did. As a matter of fact, it was beautiful, wonderful. Somehow the great love He had for us permeated our lives and we truly loved each other. Of course, there were times when there were squabbles and jealousy and rivalries, but for the most part the love and fellowship we enjoyed with my Master was unique. At supper that last night He was with us. He gave us a special sacrament as we dined, a sacrament that unites us all in one fellowship and makes us love one another as He loved us. I tell you, the love and brotherhood we had was really beautiful!

Prosecutor: It was? I wonder about that! Didn't Jesus have a particular nickname for you and your brother James?

John: Yes, He did.

Prosecutor: And what was that?

John: Boanerges. That means "Sons of Thunder." Why do you ask?

Prosecutor: I think you know why. Could you tell me why He called you and your brother the sons of thunder?

John: Well, I guess we were somewhat wild and vehement, loud and aggressive at times. I suppose that is why He called us that.

Prosecutor: Wasn't there also another time when you and your brother with your mother caused a certain amount of trouble in that group of disciples?

John: Yes.

Prosecutor: Didn't your mother and you and your brother ask for special positions of power with your Master?

John: Yes, we did, and it was a mistake. I know that now. But you know how mothers are. And it did cause a certain amount of friction among the Twelve. I am not denying that. Neither do I think you understand

the closeness of the joy and fellowship and love that we had.

Prosecutor: Oh, yes, yes. I am sure there was much of that. Now, a few minutes ago, Mr. Zebedee, you testified that there *were* twelve of you. How many of you are there now?

John: Eleven.

Prosecutor: Who was the other one? And what has happened to him?

John: You know perfectly well what happened to him! This is a most unpleasant subject and I don't want to talk about it.

Prosecutor: I must insist that you do, Mr. Zebedee. His name was Judas, is not that correct?

John: Yes, it was Judas.

Prosecutor: Tell us what happened.

John: He betrayed our Lord, that's what he did. He went to the priests and told them he would lead them to Him at a time when the crowd wasn't around so that they could arrest Him and do what they wanted with Him. He sold out! Thirty pieces of silver he took to betray Him. But He always was a thief and a rascal, and I never could stand him. Finally he killed himself.

Prosecutor: Take it easy, take it easy. So your fellowship was full of love and close concern for one another.

John: Well, as I said, there were some exceptions.

Prosecutor: Yes, there were, weren't there? I would like to call your attention, Mr. Zebedee, to something that occurred the night before your Master was crucified. It is something that you yourself recorded in your book about Jesus that I have here. In the 13th chapter, beginning with the 21st verse, you wrote:

When Jesus had thus spoken, He was troubled in spirit and testified, "Truly, truly, I say to you, one of you will betray Me." The disciples looked at one another, uncertain of whom He spoke. One of His

disciples, whom Jesus loved, was lying close to the breast of Jesus; so Simon Peter beckoned to him and said, "Tell us who it is of whom He speaks." So lying thus, close to the breast of Jesus, he said to Him, "Lord, who is it?" Jesus answered, "It is he to whom I shall give this morsel when I have dipped it." So when He had dipped the morsel, He gave it to Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot. Then after the morsel, Satan entered into him. Jesus said to him, "What you are going to do, do quickly." Now no one at the table knew why He said this to him. Some thought that, because Judas had the money box, Jesus was telling him, "Buy what we need for the feast"; or, that he should give something to the poor. So, after receiving the morsel, he immediately went out; and it was night. (John 13:21-26)

Would you still say, Mr. Zebedee, that these words were true?

John: Yes, of course they are. Every word is exactly true. What of it?

Prosecutor: So you are testifying that on that night, the last night your Master was with you, you were gathered together in the close fellowship of love in that upper room, celebrating the Passover. Is that right?

John: Yes, that is correct.

Prosecutor: During the course of this meal, your Master revealed to all of you that one of your group was going to betray Him. Correct?

John: Yes.

Prosecutor: And of all those disciples gathered together there not one knew who this was. Is that right?

John: Yes. No one, that is, except me.

Prosecutor: But you did know.

John: Yes, the Master Himself told me.

Prosecutor: Why?

John: Why? I don't know why. I asked Him, that's why.

Prosecutor: Didn't everybody else ask Him, too? I think we have a statement here from

one of your other brothers, I think his name was Matthew, who says everybody was saying, "Is it I? Is it I?" How come He told only you?

John: I don't know why He told me.

Prosecutor: You don't know, huh? You don't know. Tell me, how did Jesus feel about Judas and about the betrayal he was about to perpetrate?

John: I don't know. I guess He felt pretty terrible about it. In fact, yes, I know He felt pretty badly about it. I know that in those last few days He had been especially kind to Judas, and went out of His way to speak to him and be of help to him. And I know, too, that Jesus was very depressed those last days, and I am sure that it was because He knew that Judas was going to betray Him.

Prosecutor: But Jesus didn't do anything more about it, is that right?

John: No, He didn't. Maybe He could have, but He didn't. He did not want Judas to betray Him. He loved the man somehow. I don't know how He could, but He did. He always wanted us to reach our own decisions. He did not always tell us what to do. He expected us to make up our own minds. I am sure that idea guided His actions toward Judas too.

Prosecutor: Weren't you one of those who were closest to your Master?

John: Yes, I suppose that is true. My brother James and Peter and I—I guess we were the closest.

Prosecutor: Well, you are being a little modest here, John. Don't you call yourself in your book the "disciple whom Jesus loved?"

John: Yes, I do.

Prosecutor: I see. Well, this being true, don't you suppose this gives some indication why Jesus told you and you alone that Judas was going to be the one to betray Him? Why do you suppose He did that, John?

John: I don't know.

Prosecutor: I put it to you that you do know. You have been standing here and boasting about the closeness and love and fellowship of that group of disciples and now you stand here and say that you don't know why Jesus told you and no one else about Judas. Don't you think it was because He wanted you to do something about that love and fellowship you were so proud of? I put it to you that He told you about Judas because He wanted you to put yourself out to help your brother and to prevent him from doing this terrible deed. If you knew Judas was about to betray Jesus, why didn't you do something about it?

John: Why didn't I do something about it? What could I have done about it?

Prosecutor: You could have gone out with him and spoken to him and admonished him and tried to help him see the sinfulness of what he was about to do, get him to repent and give up this foul plot. You might have saved his life. You and you alone could have helped Judas, but what did you do about it? What did you do that night, John?

John: I did . . . nothing. After all, we were celebrating the Passover together.

Prosecutor: So you stayed and enjoyed the meal. You did nothing to help your brother Judas. You were feeling so comfortable in this loving little fellowship of disciples, you were enjoying yourself so much, that you would not put yourself out to help your brother, is that it?

John: (Silence)

Prosecutor: Well, speak up. Is there not some truth in what I am saying to you?

John: I guess, maybe, you are right.

Prosecutor: And you accuse Judas of being a betrayer and a rascal and a thief. Do you think you are any better, you who, when your Lord asked you to do something special for Him, to help your brother, did absolutely nothing about it?

John: (Silence)

Prosecutor: Well, speak up. What have you got to say?

John: I don't like what you are saying. I don't want it to be true, and yet, maybe, perhaps, you are right. I failed Him.

Prosecutor: You claim He is the Messiah. You are going around saying He is the Son of God, the Savior of the world, and the One whom God sent to bring peace and love and brotherhood. What kind of nonsense is that? You were one of His closest disciples, you are the one "whom Jesus loved," and yet you yourself failed Him in the hour of His need. Do you still want to claim that He is the Messiah?

John: Yes! Yes, He is. He is the Son of God. God Himself made man. He came into this world to suffer and die for sinners like me, came to bring peace and brotherhood on earth, to give us love so we are able to live with one another and to help one another in His name. He is all that. My failure does not change what He is.

Prosecutor: You claim that He is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that He came to bring forgiveness of sins and to teach people to love one another. I put it to you that this is all one big fraud. If it is true, why did you not help your brother? Why did you let Judas die?

John: You don't understand. Yes, perhaps it is true that I let my brother down, but that doesn't change . . .

Prosecutor: No more questions. You may step down.

Ladies and gentlemen of the jury: It was obvious from this witness that this Jesus is a fraud! So are all those who claim to be His followers. The church is full of hypocrites — you know that perfectly well. Even this John, "the disciple whom Jesus loved," wouldn't help his brother Judas. Didn't lift a finger to help him. You know how people are in churches today — sanctimonious frauds. Why, they bicker and fight and gos-

sip and criticize and speak evil of each other — it's terrible. Besides that, they sit in their churches and have meetings galore and suppers and fellowship groups, and they don't really give a hang about anybody outside of their own little clique. They are selfish and full of prejudices against other races and Christian denominations other than their own — it's all really quite ridiculous to hear them talk about loving their brother.

You and I know better! This is a loveless, dog-eat-dog world, and if you want to survive, you can't afford to love or be kind. No "brother" is going to put himself out for you, you can be sure of that. So don't be a fool and put yourself out for your brother. A very wise man once asked, "Am I my brother's keeper?" He wasn't, and he knew it, and he said so. That's life! That's the way you have to live! As for this Jesus, He is obviously a fraud. If you listen to Him, you will end up on the short end of the stick every time. Love your brother? That's for fools! Get rid of Jesus! I demand that you find Him guilty! Take Him out and crucify Him!

(Pastor returns to pulpit)

My brethren —

What, then, shall we do with this man? He comes to us claiming to be a man sent from God — indeed, more than that. He claims to be the very Son of God, God-made-man. He claims to be the very means by which God is reestablishing His reign on earth, in which kingdom God will enable man to love his brother once again, in which men shall beat their swords into plows and their spears into pruning hooks, where the lion will lie down with the lamb, and there shall be no more war. He tells us to love one another as He has loved us. What are we going to do with Him? So this witness, John, failed Jesus and didn't love his brother Judas and didn't do anything about helping him — though you must admit the prosecutor was rather grossly unfair to John, and

the idea that Jesus told John about Judas in order to get John to help Judas is just sheer speculation. But even admitting that we fail to help our brother and our neighbor as we know we ought—even admitting all that, does that make Jesus wrong? Does that make Him a fraud as the prosecutor claimed? It shows us to be sinners, but it proves nothing about Him.

If He were a fraud, why wouldn't He have made sure He didn't end up in this mess? Would He have deliberately done what He did? Would He have steadfastly set His face to go to Jerusalem when He knew His enemies were plotting to kill Him? Would He have deliberately provoked the leaders, walked right into the betrayer's trap, refused to defend Himself at the trials, answered that one damning question with "Yes, I am the Son of God"? If He were a fraud, He would have done none of that! He went to that cross because He practiced what He preached. He went willingly to that cross and died offering up an atoning sacrifice because He loved John who failed Him, because He loved Judas who betrayed Him, because He loves you and me. He is no fraud. We may be, but He isn't! He loves us in spite of what we are and what we have done.

Brethren, we are our brother's keepers.

Jesus has made us that. We can love our brother and put ourselves out to be of service to him. The love Jesus has for us gives us the power to do that! We can love our brother because He has loved us.

I ask you to find this man Jesus not guilty. I ask you to set Him free to become your Lord and Master. I ask you not to crucify Him, but to let Him love you. It will cost you plenty if you do let Him love you, I will admit that. It will mean that you will have to love your brother here in the church and love every neighbor you have in the world. It will mean sacrificing yourself for your brother and your neighbor, being concerned for them, putting them first. It will mean the cross for you too. But it will also mean real joy and real fulfillment of life! To be able to love is to be able to live! When men live together in real love, there is the beginning of heaven on earth. How can this world survive unless men find, finally, the power to love one another?

Look at Him. Do you know the love He has for you? How can you throw Him out of your life? I ask that you find Him not guilty; that you set Him free to love you—so that you also can love your brother.

You are the jury. The verdict is yours.

Chicago, Illinois RICHARD HOYER