

**A BELOVED
PATRIOT PASTOR**

IN MEMORY OF

Chaplain **VICTOR W. SIMONS**

A MEMORIAL SERMON
PREACHED BY THE REV. M. V. OGGEL
IN THE COMMUNITY CHURCH OF GLEN ROCK, N. J.
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Of the exactingness of the responsibility which is mine this morning I am deeply sensible. I never met Mr. Simons until he came back from the Pacific, yet it is my duty and privilege now to interpret his life and his passing to you who knew and loved him so well. His personality and ministry had so many facets as to defy summary, let alone analysis, in a few minutes, yet the strain imposed on you by your sorrow is such that it would be cruel to prolong this service unduly. To offset these handicaps, however, I have two advantages. First, in the course of my pastoral calling hundreds upon hundreds of people have told me something of what Mr. Simons meant to them. Second, of the five ministers I have followed in my thirty-one years in the ministry, Mr. Simons ranks an easy first in my esteem.

Mr. Simons—and I shall so refer to him this morning, for it was as Mr. Simons, or even as “Vic”, rather than as Chaplain Simons, that you knew him—Mr. Simons was a great pastor. The office of pastor is peculiar to the Christian Church. The equivalent of it is not to be found in other religions. The word, pastor, means shepherd. Again and again the great spokesmen of the Bible speak of the priest and the prophet as shepherds. The designation is rendered the more significant by the circumstance that hardly any of these spokesmen were themselves shepherds. Why, then, the designation? I suppose because they conceived of God as a Shepherd, having in mind His aspect of Redeemer. God gives Himself in devotion and succor to His people as a shepherd gives himself to his flock, wherefore God’s servants must give themselves to a ministry of redemption. Three times the Master asked Peter, “Lovest thou me?” and each time He followed up the question with the injunction that Peter be a pastor.

Now, I have never heard of a minister who was so superlative a pastor as Mr. Simons. When I have told veteran pastors of my acquaint-

ance of some of his prodigies of shepherdhood and when I have asked them whether they had ever known of anything so extraordinary, they have unanimously agreed that they have not. I can name a man whom Mr. Simons was with at least once a day for seven straight months, sometimes long after midnight. The man was undergoing a great trial, and Mr. Simons walked with him through that valley of the shadow. I can name another man who has a comparable tale to tell. Occasionally a check still comes to the Church from someone who used to live here and now takes this means of expressing his appreciation of what Mr. Simons meant to him when life caved in for him. Mr. Simons was no social caller. He might not get to your house for months or even years. But the minute there was trouble he took over and gave himself to your need without stint or limit.

It was not only that he went. It was also that it was he who went—he with his wealth of charm, his contagious gayety, his tireless energy, his perfect naturalness. His voice and manner were innocent of professional ministerial affectations. And nothing was too much for him to do for you. If a long drive over an icy road were indicated, or a shave for a convalescent farmer—whatever was indicated, this dominie neither stood on his professional dignity nor consulted his convenience. He acted—not for effect, nor because he was paid for it, nor from any other ulterior motive, but out of the simple goodness of his heart.

Never was a pastor better loved by children and young people. There were parents who sent their children to our Sunday School because of what Mr. Simons meant to them. He addressed each of three assembly periods every Sunday and often taught a class in addition, although the worship service began fifteen minutes after Sunday School dismissed. Largely owing to his efforts, the roll of this Sunday School is today the second largest in a Particular Synod comprising 167 Churches, and the quality of the Sunday School is, on the whole, the best I have ever seen. Of late years he had engaged in special study of educational methods and was well along toward an advanced degree. I have met two distinguished professors of New York University who had taught him; they spoke of him in glowing terms. Yet his ministry to childhood and youth was never spoiled by a too academic touch. He remained first of all a practitioner. With him scholarship was subordinate to a thing that is far rarer than book knowledge—the urge and the “know-how” to serve the living needs of growing souls.

Nor was this beautiful and telling ministry limited by the bounds of his parish. His pastor heart knew no horizons. How many ministers of forty would take Cub-Scouts on hikes on Saturdays! And when he functioned in his inimitable way at a Vacation School circus or an Independence Day celebration, you knew that here was a preacher who belonged to the whole community. Someone has told me that Mr. Simons once appeared before a police court in a nearby city on behalf of a local Negro, and he spoke with so great feeling and force that an irritated police court officer demanded to know whether Mr. Simons had Negro blood in his veins! It was a natural question for a limited intelligence to put, for Mr. Simons had pled as though for his own. Of course, he had pled as though for his own! To this shepherd of Christ all humans in need were in very fact his own. And that is one reason why, now that he must stand before his Judge, he will hear Him speak the blessed words, "I was in prison, and ye came unto me . . . Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these, my brethren, ye have done it unto me."

Here, then, was a man in the full tide of the world's life, a man who revelled in life, liked the violent athletic contest, a swim in a rough sea, the gusty comradeship of men and youngsters. Yet he never forgot the old, the shut-ins, nor the sick. His ministry in the nearby hospitals—and, whenever occasion arose, in distant ones—was "a thing of beauty and a joy forever." How those who have been on the shelf, so to speak, will miss that cheery voice, that ready smile, and all the thoughtful remembrances of that unfailing devotion! Maybe if you and I will try harder to remember these whom one after a while forgets, we can atone a little for his absence, and that might be the best memorial we could erect in his honor.

You can imagine what an inspiration and challenge this man was to his fellow ministers. Possibly no one was a more universal favorite. A wire from an old preacher friend of his which I received yesterday reads in part: "We loved him as a son. A great Christian servant and friend. One of God's noblemen. He gave his life for country and God." And especially was he idolized by the student ministers who labored here of summers under his guidance. In this laboratory of Christ they learned things they could never have learned in the seminary class room. Here they saw the living demonstration. Here was the grace of Christ in action.

Well, it was this man, now forty years of age, to whom the call came to be a naval chaplain during the greatest and most terrible of wars. His lines were cast in pleasant places. He could plausibly plead that the chaplaincy is for younger men. But he couldn't get the boys in the service off his mind, the millions of boys, just like his former Cubs and Scouts, who were doing their stern duty in far off places. If he could minister to them in their loneliness and temptations, what right did he have to stay at home in comfort? Finally, he couldn't sleep a night through in peace. Years before the call had come to the ministry of Christ, and he had answered, "Here am I. Send me." He must say it again.

There followed the gruelling training required of a naval chaplain, and then the long, long absence from home and family and friends and Church in far off waters and on "the islands God forgot"—the whole stark, brutal business of war, where civilized boys and men, now transformed into skillful, relentless killers, stalk their prey through steaming jungles like animals, storm a lethal beach in a suicide charge, exist under unnatural conditions during the boring weeks between battles. To be sure, many have endured all this without breaking. But how many of them had the shepherd's heart he had, super-sensitive to men's hurts? With a man like this it is not so much one's own deprivations that lacerate one's sensibilities as the hell others go through. He sees boys who an hour before enjoyed the fresh bloom of health brought back broken. One time 300 casualties were fetched to his ship in two hours, and on these occasions he had to help the doctors in addition to performing his own draining and demanding spiritual ministry. He must lift the morale of the stricken, write the pitiful letters home, say the last rites over the remains of the fallen. At last, after repeated postponements, he gets home, and, after a brief month's leave, crowded with speaking engagements, he has to deal, in his new post in Baltimore, with returning casualties, that tragic aftermath of war that tears at the heartstrings, and particularly at the heartstrings of one who can never encounter suffering without sharing it.

A member of our Classis who was a chaplain in the first world war and has taught psychology in a leading theological seminary for years said to me Friday afternoon: "Remember that everyone goes to the chaplain with his troubles, but he can go to no one, at least with his deeper troubles. The other officers send their men who are in trouble

to him. If the men go to an officer with their troubles on their own initiative, it is likely to be to the chaplain. But who can grasp his doubts and harrassments of spirit whose calling and training and ministry have been concerned with a Gospel of love and who must now serve in a context of indescribable brutality?

"Remember, too", he said, "that, while the other officers have recourse to other weapons, his only weapon is his mind. Every dereliction and doubt and fear and wound and death in Mr. Simons' ship was likely to impinge sooner or later on one mind—his mind. If he had not been a good chaplain, it would not have been so. In that case men would not have gone to him as they did, and his burden might have been cut by half or more. Being the born shepherd he was, his burden grew and grew until at last it was too heavy to be borne. Moreover, being the shephard he was, he could not spare himself even after he suspected that the burden was too much for him."

The other day General Patton walked through the Walter Reed Hospital in Washington, cheering the casualties as he went. When he left, he said, "This tears the hell out of me." He was there two hours. Victor Simons was up against that sort of thing for two years. And most of the time he was tied down to a ship where in no waking minute could he escape his crushing load. In an article in the current issue of the American Magazine Surgeon General Kirk of the U. S. Army writes, "Every man has his breaking point."

There are three cardinal facts that account for the manner of Mr. Simons' passing. First, he was so Christ-like that he was impelled to descend into hell—the hell of war. Second, finding himself in that hell, he was so Christ-like that he could never spare himself when it came to bearing men's griefs and carrying men's sorrows. Third, he was so Christ-like that, even after he had premonitions that he had passed the danger point, he could not get his consent to get out from under. Now, God values Christ-likeness more than any quality: therefore, the exodus that from our partial human viewpoint may seem unrelieved tragedy must, from His viewpoint, be a translation to the life triumphant. A Christ-like motivation and Christ-like deeds can only lead to eternal felicity.

Perhaps the essential difficulty which an incident like this poses for our faith lies in the fact that some remnants of a primitive theology cling

to our mental reactions. When most of the Psalms were written, it was thought that the good man is always rewarded with long life, material plenty, and abundant progeny. But the time came when a great prophet could picture the ideal Man as "a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief" who was "despised" and "bruised" and at last "made his grave with the wicked." Zaharoff, the armaments king, was possibly the most evil man of his day; he died full of honors, the friend of the great of earth; his end was peace. Whereas, under the Nazi terror, thousands of the best persons in Europe were pauperized, starved, tortured, killed, driven to suicide. Goodness is no guarantee that you will not be broken in body or mind or both. If it were, we should be good for prudential reasons—in other words, we should not be good. If anything, goodness is a guarantee that, in situations which call for the incessant outgoing of Christian compassion, the good man has an excellent chance of being broken in body or mind or both. The physical character of a man's earthly end tells us nothing about his moral worth. Otherwise we should have to equate the spiritual caliber of the Nazi gangster who acts to escape the just punishment of his crimes with that of one of the sweetest, most gracious souls that ever lived.

The profoundest sympathy of the whole community goes out to the family—the very able and devoted and courageous wife, the lovely daughter, the vital, appealing little son, the grandparents on both sides, faithful to the testimony of Jesus, full of good works. As to why this harrowing should come to persons like them, perhaps the richest insight is to be found in a simple Scripture, "Whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth." The ungodly are only embittered by sufferings; the Son of God "was made perfect by sufferings," and so are His own.

Finally, this bereavement, so far as some of us are concerned, brings into more vivid and poignant focus than ever the awful price there is to pay for liberty. The next time we are inclined to moan about this shortage or that, or about our income tax, we might think of the price this family has had to pay. What can we do in the way of buying war bonds or working overtime that can dimly compare with their sacrifice! And if ever we are tempted to idealize war, or to be silent when war-mongers try to jockey our country into a fresh war, as with our great ally, Russia, let us recall what happened here the other morning. And you will always cherish as the proudest memory of this Church the dear privilege of having had for your friend the gallant shepherd to whom, as to his Master, the supreme tribute could be paid, "He saved others: himself he could not save."