

Sermon preached at Faith Presbyterian Church, Springfield, Virginia,  
on Sunday, June 21, 1992, by the Rev. W. Graham Smith, D.D.

**PSALM 55:6**

“Oh, that I had the wings of a dove!  
I would fly away and be at rest --”

**IS RELIGION AN ESCAPE FROM REALITY?**

This text always reminds me of something that happened once in a little church in Scotland. At the Wednesday evening prayer meeting each week there was a deacon who, in the course of his prayer, would always exclaim, somewhat piously and wearily, “Oh, that I had the wings of a dove! I would fly away and be at rest.” One evening another deacon, unable to stand this petition any longer, muttered in a stage whisper, “Stick another feather in him, Lord, and let him go!”

A news item in the New York Times some years ago told how a bus driver, sixteen years in the employment of the bus company, took the wheel of his vehicle one morning, and instead of piloting it back and forth in the Bronx, as he had done week in and week out for all those years, drove it right down to Florida!

We all feel like doing that kind of thing once in a while, don't we? “The Wish to Escape” is one that becomes almost overwhelming at times when we are frustrated and utterly exasperated by the daily rat race. We feel cribbed, cabined and confined, and then the river appears ready to burst its banks -- we want to get away from it all - the fretful baby, the ever-present sink full of dirty dishes, the continual deadlines to be met, the impossible boss, the job that is far below our ability and latent capacities — on and on it goes until we could scream! It is in an hour like that that we know what the Psalmist meant when he exclaimed, “Oh, that I had the wings of a dove! I would fly away and be at rest --“

Now of course there are those who would tell us that religion is a kind of drug, like crack cocaine, that lifts people for a time out of the harshness of the real world into a false dream world of illusion. When they hear Christians sing with Charles Wesley,

“Jesus, Lover of my soul,  
Let me to Thy bosom fly...”

they believe that that kind of sentiment is nothing more than a flight into a fairyland of fantasy and make-believe -- a tempting but discreditable escape from the stark cruel realities of life.

As one youth put it, “Religion is nothing but a chloroform mask into which the weak and

the unhappy stick their faces.”

Now from among those who say that Christianity is an escape from the unpleasant facts of life, I want to choose two representatives - a leftwing Socialist and a non-Christian psychologist - and consider what each of them has to say.

**1. Let us first of all speak to the leftwing Socialist.** He points out that the world is full of poverty which could be prevented. Money is power, he continues, and this power has been concentrated in the hands of a comparative few, the capitalists, and they use this weapon to keep the poor man down, and to make him poorer still. We therefore gaze upon a world where slums, unemployment, and undernourished men, women and children are the order of the day.

“And,” asks the Socialist, “what does the Church do about all this? It does worse than nothing,” he replies. It is a tool in the hands of the upper middle class and the rich. It tells the poor that if they get bread with very little butter on it here, they will get “pie in the sky when they die bye and bye,” and that, in the meantime, they should accept the injustices of earth with Christian resignation. That is why Karl Marx proclaimed that “religion is the opiate of the people.”

Now it must be frankly admitted that in the past the Church sometimes failed lamentably in the struggle against social and economic injustice. Too often the Church lost the working classes because it showed little practical sympathy toward those on whose ill-paid labor and squalid living conditions much wealth was built up.

But, and this is the point, whenever the Church has failed to take a courageous stand against injustice and oppression of every kind, she has been untrue to the Bible and to the God of the Bible. Karl Marx was the son of a Jew who had been converted to Christianity, but I suspect he never read the Old Testament prophets with their scorching denunciation of cruelty, graft and greed.

Listen to this from the prophet Amos: “You men who crush the humble, and oppose the poor, selling honest folk for money, trampling down the poor like dust -- God will judge you, you who sprawl on your couches, dining off fresh lamb and fatted veal, crooning to the music of the lute, lapping wine by the bowlful, with never a single thought for the bleeding wounds of the nation. As sure as I am God, the Eternal One swears — your day is coming!” (Amos 6, selected verses).

Is that “soft stuff” to make the poor resigned to their lot in life? I think not. Karl Marx’s father was a Christian. Had Marx never read in the New Testament of our Lord’s compassion for the poor, or His terrific denunciation of those who used power and privilege for unjust ends? Had he never read these words of Christ, “Beware of the Scribes. They like to get salutes in the marketplace, and the best seats at banquets. But they prey upon the property of widows, and offer long, unreal prayers” (Mark 12:38ff). Does that sound like dope, or an anesthetic mask? Or, where will you find social dynamite like this: “Do unto others as you would have others do to you” (Luke 6:31)?

Our Lord had a brother called James, and in that letter of his preserved in the New Testament, there is the same note of indignant protest. Listen: "Come now, you rich men, weep and shriek over your impending miseries: see, the wages of which you have defrauded the workmen, and the cries of the harvesters, rise up to God. You have reveled and fattened yourselves, but the day of God's judgment is coming!" (James 5:1ff).

That kind of protest runs right through the Bible. If it has been soft-pedalled in the Church, we say to the Socialist, "Then blame the Church for unfaithfulness, but don't blame Christianity." Certainly, there is a side to Christian faith represented in the lines of John Greenleaf Whittier's great hymn:

Drop Thy still dews of quietness,  
Till all our strivings cease;  
Take from our souls the strain and stress,  
And let our ordered lives confess  
The beauty of Thy peace.

Nevertheless, even Whittier's Christian faith is not half expressed in that hymn. Did you know that Whittier was first of all a social reformer? In his later years, when he was a famous poet, he wrote this: "I set a higher value on my name as appended to the Anti-Slavery Declaration of 1833 than on the title page of any book." Many people think of Whittier in mystical seclusion writing pious and consoling verse. But we should think of him also in Concord, New Hampshire, going to speak at an anti-slavery meeting, and facing a hostile crowd on the way that pelted him with rotten eggs until his black Quaker coat ran yellow with the stains. We should remember him bitterly hated and lampooned for years in the press of this country as a traitor, because he dared, in God's Name, to stand up and be counted, as one who hated slavery with a holy hatred.

You see, never have Christian people and the Christian Church been wholly unfaithful. Who are the men and women who stand out as the supreme defenders of the poor and the oppressed? By and large they have been Christian men and women whose passion for reform was inspired by their Christian faith. You have only to think of Abraham Lincoln and William Wilberforce; and General Booth, the founder of the Salvation Army; and Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth and Martin Luther King, Jr., to realize the truth of what I say.

In days gone by the white traders used to hate the Christian missionaries. Why? Because the missionaries always defended the natives from exploitation at the hands of unscrupulous traders. The missionary instilled within the native the conviction of his worth and dignity as a man, and as a potential child of God, that made the native rightly resent being used and exploited as a chattel.

Let us say it with assurance: Our Christian faith is not a drug or an anesthetic mask to dope the worker. It, and it alone, has given the common person a charter of freedom and dignity which Socialism ultimately denies him. What further proof do we need for the bankruptcy of Socialism than the humiliating downfall of the Soviet Empire after seventy years of barbaric totalitarianism?

**2. And now let us speak to the non-Christian psychologist.** I use the term “non-Christian psychologist” advisedly, because there are many Christian psychologists and psychiatrists, men and women dedicated to Christ and to a spiritual interpretation of life. But the non-Christian psychologist informs us that religion is just wishful thinking.

Here is a man, he says, who finds life hard and cruel, and he feels lonely and afraid in an inhospitable world. So he makes up a theory about a Father in Heaven Who cares for him and will answer his prayers.

Here is a woman who has lost her life partner, and what does she do? She pretends to herself that there is another life where they will meet again. The wish is father to the thought, we are told. You go to church, they tell us, to escape from things as they are, to be patted on the back and told that everything is for the best and will work out all right in the end!

But the truth is this: Real, vital Christianity has never been primarily pleasant and comfortable at all. Is it pleasant and comfortable to listen to a sermon or read the Bible and hear God speaking to you about your sins? Does it make you feel good when the Holy Spirit convicts you, and conscience condemns? Is it easy or pleasant to stand up for Christ and the truth when it invites unpopularity or criticism? Do you think it was easy or pleasant for Vice President Quayle to muster the intestinal fortitude to speak out boldly in support of traditional family values, knowing that by so doing he would be scorned and lampooned by the godless liberal press of this country? Is it pleasant when we want to go our own way, and control our own life, to hear Christ say, “If anyone will come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me” (Luke 9:23)? It can be a soul-shattering experience to take Christ seriously. Do remember that the symbol of our faith is not a cushion, or a couch -- it is a Cross.

No, the explanation of the humanistic psychologist doesn't wash -- it simply doesn't face up to the facts. The Christian faith does not hide the truth of things from me in a pleasant haze of illusion or wishful thinking. It lays bare the truth in a blazing light that can really hurt. But in hurting it heals.

And then, consider this point. According to our psychologist, faith in God is nothing but sheer delusion. Well, Jesus lived what is by common consent the noblest life this world has ever witnessed. And it was certainly faith in the heavenly Father that made Jesus the kind of human being He was. So, the psychologist is forced to the absurd conclusion that the finest life ever lived on this planet was based on a silly delusion!

You know what dope does to a person -- it wrecks his manhood; it weakens and ruins him in body, mind and spirit, until in thousands of cases suicide proves to be the only way out of madness, misery and despair. If Christianity is dope, then it ought to have that effect on a person. But does it? Does faith in the Lord Jesus Christ make a person less fit to face life? Does it tend to weaken and degrade and ruin him in body, mind and spirit? To ask such a question is surely to answer it.

Christian faith, when it really penetrates a person's heart and life does the very reverse of

these things. It makes him more fit for life. It gives him confidence and power, because the load of sin has been removed forever from his back. It is his Christian faith that builds him up in strength and inward peace. It stimulates his mind, it toughens his will, and it satisfies his heart. It is not dope and delusion; it is a tonic, because it is the truth.

Listen to the Apostle Paul as he exclaims triumphantly, "I can do all things through Christ Who strengthens me" (Philippians 4:13). Christ enables us to walk the hard road with courage and dignity, because He Himself walked the hardest road of all in triumph.

I think of Gethsemane, of the sleeping disciples, and the agonizing Lord. He sweat, as it were, great drops of blood. Do you know why? Because He was casting about for a way of escape. He didn't want to die any more than any other young man of thirty-three wants to die. "Oh My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from Me!" (Matthew 26:39). There, in a sentence, you have the cry of burdened humanity -- to flee from its Calvary and be at rest. But soon there came the steady, resolute words, "Nevertheless not My will but Thine be done." Our Lord faced the ordeal because He knew now that it was the way God meant Him to go. And so He is our great Pattern of courage and endurance.

"He makes the coward spirit brave,  
And nerves the feeble arm for fight."

Christian faith is not an escape from reality. We never truly experience reality until we know Christ. Never forget -- there is more than comfort in Christ. There is challenge too. There is a clear, insistent call from Him not to evade the hard, brutal facts of life, but to face them, struggle with them, and conquer them in His Name, and by the strength He supplies. Do remember, won't you, that our Lord came into the world not to make life easy, but to make us strong to face it. So —

Take up thy cross, and follow Christ,  
Nor think till death to lay it down;  
For only he who bears the cross  
May hope to wear the glorious crown.

**AMEN.**