

The Royal Poinciana Chapel

Sermon By

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"TIL THE MOSS GROWS BACK AGAIN . . ."

Text: "Thus says the Lord of Hosts: Consider how you have fared. Go up to the hills and bring wood and take care of my house, that I may take pleasure in it." -- Haggai 1:7

Back when I was a student at the University of St. Andrews in Scotland, I occasionally went down to England to do research with Professor W. H. Thorpe at Cambridge, or to attend conferences at Oxford or London. Great visits. The scholar is still widely respected in England. I enjoyed those years, as I worked on my Ph.D. degree in Theology. My thesis, by the way, was on "Some Non-Rational Origins of Human Behaviour and Their Implications for the Study of Christian Ethics."

On each trip, we tried to save some time to visit interesting spots along the way, one of which was the Cotswold District. The Cotswolds are the charming hills and towns running to the west and north of Oxford. "Charming" is not enough of a word to describe them.

Shakespeare's home is near Stratford, where, on the banks of the Avon the soul of an age was born. Coventry is over the other way, where the bombed-out ruins of the ancient Cathedral are overshadowed by a new and modern structure, which cantilevers its one wing out over the naked altar on which stand a cross of nails. The Cotswolds are also near my favorite Warwick Castle, and to the streets where Lady Godiva rode with only her long, long hair to cover her, in behalf of the poor.

Down the slopes and sheltered valleys and the wolds (A wold is simply an open upland) are tiny towns like Snowhill (Snozill), Lower Slaughter, and Upper Swell; like Burton-on-the-Water, Stow-

on-the-Wold, and the original Broadway. The Roman ghosts are there, and lush green meadows, and red-cheeked little children in home-knit pullovers. The Evenlode and Windrush rivers wind their lazy way along, and Chipping Campden, the flower of all the Cotswolds, offers its original Williamsburg, not yet in need of restoration.

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I was traveling that way one day in the 1960s to a conference on "The Origin of Human Behavior." En route, we stopped for gas, or petrol as the British say, at the little town of Whitney. I struck up a conversation with the attendant, who was ready for his Yankee visitor. He had scores of homey, local stories which he saved for such occasions. He told us time honored legends of the area. We talked about the little church I had noticed down the road. For several hundred years it had been the local village parish church. Through good times and poor, it stood and watched and waited, while the turning generations took new ventures at trying to improve the world, and trying to improve the little church. A stone church of simple arches, with a small square tower, perfectly proportioned and, true to its British countryside, of brown stone with slate roof, looking slightly Romanesque, like the Chapel by the Sea in St. Monance.

"It is a lovely church," I said. "I envy those who worship there." He said, "It's lovely alright, but you wouldn't want to worship there now, least not

when it's raining. The roof leaks up and down the place. Those smart Vestrymen," he continued (The Chapel Board of Directors for your ears and mine), ". . . for generations the roof was covered by the finest growth of green moss you ever saw. Then one day the chairman got the idea to strip away the moss, so we could see the slate. Everybody warned him . . . ever since, the roof's been leaking like a sieve. When it rains on Sunday, it's quite a sight."

Thinking of the people at the services, to say nothing of the local clergyman, I asked, "Well, why don't they fix the roof?" Back came his dour reply: "Oh, they wouldna' do that. It would cost a lot of money, and be a lot of bother; and since it does not always rain on Sundays, it will do. And, anyway, if we wait a while, the moss will all grow back again." I smiled all the way home: *If we wait a while, the moss will all grow back again.*

I liked that man. I liked his attitude. I knew in an instant I had a veritable gold mine of a sermon. It calls for patience and trust that the future will be good, that things have a way of working out, if you don't force them. Great message: if we could only learn to wait a while, just learn to wait until the world around us goes through its gyrations and the planet spins on and on; to wait while our children learn to grow up; if the roof leaks now, it won't leak later on, when the moss grows back again.

"'Til the moss grows back again . . . (I suppose you have heard the Irish story of the day when lightning struck a hole in the roof of the parish church, and the priest went out to solicit contributions for the repairs. With minimal success, he went round and round. Finally he came to Patrick's house. The Father said: "Ah, Pat my boy, lightning's struck the church and there is a round hole right in the middle of the roof. Can you do anything to help us out?" . . . Pat thought a while and then he said, "Aye, Father, if it rains on Sunday, I'll sit in the hole.")

Well . . . I was saying that patience can be a virtue. We all could use a healthy dose of it in waiting for the Lord to work His wonders in our world. The

all-too-human tendency to fidget and fuss and worry is what I am speaking of. Like the little prayer says: "Lord, give me patience, but I want it right now!" But . . .

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Most of us are past masters at the art of sitting back and waiting for things to change. We are ardent believers that we can best fix the hole in the roof, or the home, or the marriage, or our social structure, or mend the breaches of injustice, just by waiting, or by some temporary stop-gap measure. The trouble with the young, we say, or with the minorities, or with the refugees, or the gays, or women's liberation, is that they want too much, too fast, too soon. At those time we preach that patience is next to Godliness. Just wait, the moss will grow back again.

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But, patience can also be a curse. It can be a way of avoiding the problems that perplex us in our homes, in the world, and in our churches. Like "One of these days I'll get around to it." Let me give you some examples of what I mean, as you think about the topic:

First, I think of a family I used to know where there was trouble in the home. There was a kind of identifiable problem that might well have been solved if somebody had addressed it. But they didn't. It was not acceptable for this family to have problems, so they never got around to it. They were hoping the moss would grow back again, but it didn't.

I knew a man who had started his own company. Money flowed in like water over a dam. Then he got so busy enjoying it, he forgot what it was that got him there. He began to compromise. Everyone around him told him he had better correct his behavior and the direction of the company. He was so confident for a long time, he put up a good front. But then, "the roof began to leak." His shelter had been stripped away and the moss never

grew back again.

It can also be a problem for a Church. Christians have a tendency to do what I call "creative foot-dragging" -- skillfully digging in so that change, even in small things, is nearly impossible. In addition to a strong centrality of worship and good music and good fellowship, the people of God have to be involved in reaching out. "God so loved 'the world,' He gave His only Son . . .", the whole world, not just His Church. Throughout the Scripture God is constantly after His people to expand their vision, and to show their love. "Where there is no vision," it says, "the people perish."

The vision does not cover the pastor alone. We are in this together. I shall never forget the crusty old Elder at the second church I served. Faced with the possibility that I might upset his apple cart by introducing new programs, he ventured the following: "Young man (I was young then), this church was here long before you came . . . and it will be here long after you are gone." (And he did not say it with a smile.) I smiled and said, "True, but I believe the same is true with you. . . ." He didn't laugh then either.

The vision we seek is the vision of God's will and way. I ask you to share with me what you feel The Royal Poinciana Chapel should be doing. I would welcome your conversation or your letters, or soon, in discussions with me. I would welcome your counsel and your guidance. There are some things we need to change. Progress comes when we address tomorrow's world. Not yesterday's.

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I often ponder what the Lord thinks when He looks down upon the earth. One generation continues after another. Progress is made here, but not over there. We go forward here, backward there. People get excited in accordance with the needs of the current venue. My old professor cautioned his class: "Be careful that you do not wed yourself to the ideas of this generation or you will be lonely,

lost, and on your own when the next one comes." God is out in front, calling us across the Jordan, waiting for us to catch up.

Before you know it we will be entering the 21st Century. That itself is astounding. If we adopted a five-year plan of what the Chapel should be doing in that next millennium, the five years will not have expired until 2002. I hope you are reading between the lines. Our question should be not what you want or I want, but "What does God require of us in the time ahead?" A great past is great, but you can't live on it. I think a change of pastorates is good for a church. I think it is good for a pastor, too. That's one reason God called me to leave Fort Lauderdale. It is a time to reappraise where we are and where we ought to be.

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In the Scripture lesson I chose for our sermon, a far more dramatic change had taken place. The people of Israel had been in captivity for a couple of generations. While they were away, Jerusalem had fallen into complete disrepair. It was awful when they returned from the exile in Babylon. There was no Temple to worship in; there was no wall around the city to protect them; there were no houses for them to live in. Ezra, Nehemiah, Haggai, and Zachariah describe the situation in great detail.

There were three priorities: One: the House of God. Ezra tells how they managed to build a new Temple, but it took a long, long time. Second was The Wall, necessary because it was their first line of defense in those days. A wall seems kind of paltry now, to keep the enemy out, but they worked on it, and finally rebuilt it. Third, a house.

I have always thought the prophet Haggai was a little hard on the people. So emotional was he about the need to build a temple and the wall, at one point he thundered: "Is it fair for you to dwell in your paneled homes while the Temple lies in ruins?" He meant: While you worry about your property and blessings, the world is going to ruin. Our text says, "Consider how you have fared. Go

up to the hills and bring wood and take care of my house, that I may take pleasure in it." . . . Take care of my Church . . . and, take care of my world.

I am of the opinion that God takes great pleasure in The Royal Poinciana Chapel. It is a place of rare, simple beauty, unrivaled by almost any other Church or Chapel that I know of. Truly the Lord is in this place. I hope you know how wonderfully unique we are having maintained our strong identity for over a century. Having made the transition from a seasonal Chapel to a year-round Church. I praise those who accomplished that. All along the East Coast, up through New England and in Arizona and California and Canada, anywhere a high influx of visitors comes for a season, Chapels have not been so fortunate, not most of them.

I hope to publish a book one day on seasonal churches. I served a Chapel in the summer in Bay Head, New Jersey for 30 years. I know dozens more. The seasonal Church is a part of God's story which should be told. We have much to be proud of. There are, however, many things that we need to do to keep it that way, and more to prepare for the future. In addition to the buildings and the gardens, there are programs of a spiritual nature for people of all ages we need to address.

I knew a Church -- I almost have to whisper it, for Churches so often have this problem -- this was a beautiful building in a fine part of town up in Pittsburgh. I used to go there as a boy. They had a nice endowment, and a few wealthy parishioners who supported the budget. Fancy people came in chauffeur driven limousines on Sunday mornings. They were enjoying their music and their sanguine sermons. But the neighborhood began to change. The younger people began to stay away. The wealthy donors began to die off or move away. Changing times were stripping away their moss. It was sad to watch a church die.

One day a couple of decades later, I was driving by that way on a Sunday morning, and a wrecking ball was tearing down the Church. Soon a fast food restaurant sprang up on the spot, and . . . there

was no church roof on which the moss could have grown back again, had it wanted to.

I see this sermon as a call to our membership and friends to engage with the Pastor to determine what the Lord is saying to us. The Lord has been good to us, each and all. He has surely been good to me. I want Him to look down with pleasure upon everything we do so that we will find the only praise we ever really seek: to be called His good and faithful servants . . . "Enter now into thy peace . . ." for now and evermore. Amen.

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