

6-30-1958

## Lenten Sermon 3: The Sign of Understanding: Luke 22:61-62, 1958

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### Recommended Citation

Kretzmann, O.P., "Lenten Sermon 3: The Sign of Understanding: Luke 22:61-62, 1958" (1958). *O.P. Kretzmann Collection*. 110.  
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Certainly this is a strange scene. It is surely worth our time to examine it more closely. Just what happened there? I believe that the scene would not be clear unless we understand that its meaning is far and deep and holy. Here at dawn, in one man looking at another, we catch a glimpse, revealing, terrifying and healing, of the true meaning of the Christian faith.

Surely every thoughtful man or woman has at times asked the question: Just what is this religion which has held the world for almost two thousand years and to which most of us give some form of allegiance? There is a picture of it here in the courtyard at dawn. In the long history of Christianity some men have said that the Christian religion is essentially a system of doctrine to be believed. If you know the doctrines and believe them, you are a Christian. This is, of course, partially true; but this alone would not explain the look which our Lord gave Peter or the resulting, sudden tears.

There are others who have said Christianity is really a way of life. Until recent years this has been the great modern heresy, particularly in our own country. This, of course, is also partially true. Christianity is in one sense a way of life. But this definition, too, is far from complete. No, this scene, as few others in the sacred record, shows again that Christianity is basically and essentially a living relation to a living Person. It is always and forever the relationship of a redeemed human soul to the redeeming Person of Jesus Christ, in faith, in love, in trust, in obedience, in all the ways in which one person is bound to another. This is really Christianity--nothing more and nothing less.

Now we can begin to understand what happened in the palace courtyard at dawn. As Peter was standing by the fire, lying for the sake of safety,

swearing for a moment of warmth from the world's cold hate, he had broken that relationship to his Lord. He had thrown it away. He had turned against his Friend, his Savior, and his King. When his Savior turned and looked at Peter, he suddenly realized what he had done. He saw what he had thrown away and what he had forgotten. There was nothing to do but to stumble out into the dark, blinded by burning tears, afraid and alone, until another dawn a few weeks later when he would hear the voice of his Savior again compelling, healing, and warm, at dawn by the lake: "Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me?"

It is now time for us to bring this story down to the twentieth century as quickly as possible. Certainly all of us, if we are honest with ourselves and with God, will have to say: "I have done the same sort of thing. Perhaps I have not done it quite so obviously nor so publicly, but there have been hours when I have forgotten. I have broken the bond between Jesus Christ and my soul. I, too, have stood by the sputtering, little fires of my lusts, my greed, my hate, my tongue, my envy, my malice. I have acted as if I had never heard of Jesus Christ.

It is perfectly clear that a pattern for denial of Christ was set that night. Briefly, a denial always has four parts. (1) It begins with a bad situation. Peter should never have been standing by the fire. So also we, if we let ourselves in for situations which are made for a crackup. (2) There comes the moment of forgetfulness. We want to be accepted by our environment. We want to be part of the crowd, no matter how bad and how evil it may be. (3) The break always comes. In our time and in our lives it is usually a denial by deed rather than by word. We do something which in its very

nature is a denial of our Lord. (4) We can thank God that there is always the sign of understanding, the look of our Lord. Sometimes it is long in coming in the life of the individual. There may be years of seemingly getting by. But it is necessary that we mark it down: The look of our Lord always comes. He always turns around. Sometimes He looks at us in the still, small voice of our conscience, telling us that we did wrong. Sometimes He looks at nations in war and judgment. Sometimes He sees us in the voice of our pastor, the warning of a true friend, or a word from the Bible which suddenly strikes our mind and soul. He always turns around! He turns around to look at us and to tell us that we are playing with life and with fire and dragging the sorrow of the ages across His soul, that we are breaking His heart and our own. If that realization leads to tears of regret and shame and repentance, then we, too, as Peter, are on the road to a new dawn, a voice tender remembering and forgiving: "My child, my child, lovest thou me?"

It is vitally important for us to understand fully what His look can do. For this reason we ought to examine it very closely. What was there in the look of our Lord which brought Peter's world crashing about his ears and sent him out into the night in tears? Anger? No man who has merely been scolded has ever gone out into the night as Peter did. Reproach? Some, perhaps, but that was not all. The great, crushing power in that look, the elemental force which drove Peter into the night with heaven crying in his heart, the one thing that would remain with him in all the long and lonely years of wandering around the Mediterranean world, the one great power which would lift him, keep him, and drive him, was understanding love. This, then, is

the sign of understanding and of love. It was only a glance, but in that glance were all the golden memories of blessed companionship and all the infinite and gentle tenderness of the Immortal Shepherd for one sheep that had lost the way home. "And Peter went out and wept bitterly!" In heaven the recording angel wrote his name, indelibly and forever, among those whom love had been brought home again. This is the Christian Gospel. This is the sign of understanding and forgiveness. This is all of it. In it is the greatness of our faith, and the power of it! This is the gospel of another chance. This is the haunting, eternal voice of our Savior: "I have loved thee with an everlasting love."

There is an old tradition in the Christian Church that this story has a very happy ending. It may be true, or it may be completely legendary, but it is singularly significant, with a certain justice and poetic fitness. It reports that on July 19, in the year of our Lord 64, thirty years after this night, a fire broke out in Rome. Half the city was destroyed. The Emperor Nero needed a scapegoat, and the Christians were at hand. According to the legend hundreds died by fire and the sword. Among them, according to the legend, was also Peter. At his own request he was crucified head downward because he did not consider himself worthy of dying in the same manner as his Lord had died. Here, then, the story ends. On a hot July morning an old man is hanging upside down in a Roman arena. If he opened his eyes, he saw the bloody red sand from which the Church would grow in the years to come. But if he closed them, as I am sure he did--if he closed them in the moment of awareness and remembering of all the years that always come to dying men--he saw something else. He saw many things in his own life, but surely above

all, the dawn when he had looked into some eyes that understood him and loved him forever. He remembered the power that drove him out into the night to come at long last to this ridiculous position with the world upside down and tears of pain in his eyes once again. But now there was something else! He was waiting now for the moment when His Lord would come again to tell him that he had done well since that night, so well indeed that now the angels were waiting for him. He had kept the faith. And he knew, as he knew also on Maundy Thursday, that now there would be no more night and no more tears. He was, I am sure, very content and very happy.