

REBUILDING OUR WORLD¹

Nehemiah II, 17—"Then said I unto them, Ye see the distress that we are in . . . come, and let us build up again the wall of Jerusalem."

LESLIE STEPHEN, the English critic of a generation ago, once said that he knew nothing about the theological infallibility of the Bible, but that he did believe in the plenary literary inspiration of the narrative parts of the Old Testament. All of us share that belief. There never have been any stories to match those of the Hebrew Bible. They have passed into our thought and speech as the common coin by which we share our experiences. It is in this spirit that I give you for our baccalaureate sermon certain parables of life, drawn from this old story of the men of Nehemiah's day rebuilding the walls of their world.

I

The story is prefaced by a simple and gallant sentence: "The people had a mind to work." It would be an insult to those of you who are leaving here this year to ask you whether you have that mind. Presumably you are cherishing a hope and making plans for your work. The real question is, have you found work?

Those of us a generation ahead of you, who were able to strike roots into our business or profession twenty years ago, are fortunate. It is no virtue to us that we came on

¹ Baccalaureate sermon of the twentieth annual commencement of the Rice Institute, delivered by the Reverend Willard L. Sperry, D.D., Dean of the Harvard Divinity School, in the Court of the Chemistry Laboratories, at nine o'clock Sunday morning, June 2, 1935.

the scene when there were jobs for all. We have heard much in recent years of the wild morals and the wilder political theories of present-day college men and women of America. Before we criticize you we ought to try to put ourselves in your place. We have happily been spared the perplexity and the humiliation of standing idle in the market places of the world because no man has hired us. We have had our work and our livelihood. It is otherwise with you. Your college generation has not the same assurance that it will be granted the first of all human birthrights, the right to work. How can we expect you to take with complacency an age and a land where this right is so often denied you? If we were in your place we should understand better your just resentment at a society which somehow is not able to guarantee you your right to your job. The world has not been as kind to you as it was to us, and it ill becomes us to criticize you without first attempting to understand you.

Yet when one has said so much it still remains true that the mind to work is by no means a universal and constant fact. Wordsworth speaks somewhere of "that majestic indolence so dear to native man", and there is in us all a natural man who is always ready to be idle. Not only is this so, but the kind of work for which colleges and universities stand is the sternest of all work. There was a minor German poet at the beginning of the last century who was always saying to his friends: "If only thinking were not so hard." In that remark he betrayed why he remained a minor poet.

It is beside the mark to waste time discussing whether work is a curse or a blessing, a punishment or an opportunity. The Bible is not consistent on this point. At the beginning of the Old Testament it seems to be a penalty for sin. Toward the end of the New Testament it seems to become a chance to share the life of God. Men have never

agreed on the matter. At one moment we condemn men to hard labor for life, at another moment we call them, invite them, elect them to hard labor for life. But whatever it may be, work is a necessity. And no man will ever have tasted human life to the full until he knows the meaning of what the Russian novelists of the last century used to call "bread-labor." This labor cannot be always exciting and interesting. Charles Eliot is reported to have said, when he laid down the Presidency of Harvard, that nine-tenths of his work in that office had been sheer unrelieved drudgery. And thirty years ago I heard one of the greatest scholars in Oxford say that three-quarters of all the honest intellectual work of the world has to be nothing but hard mental drudgery.

There is not now, and apparently there never will be, any Utopia where men can escape from this elemental human discipline. We cannot live merely by taking in each other's light washing on Mondays. We cannot resign from a laboring world and live upon a dole. One of the disquieting facts in these difficult times is the fact that long and enforced idleness seems in the end to destroy the will to work. It is against this fatal paralysis that we have always to steel ourselves. Surely, having learned what that German poet meant when he said: "If only it were not so hard to think", we must go on to learn that other lesson from this older story: "The people had a mind to work."

II

The work that has to be done in the world today is very like the work on which those men of long ago were employed. "Come, let us build up again the wall." It is primarily a task of reconstruction.

To get our minds geared to such a task most of us Amer-

icans are having to be born again. For it is not in this way or in these terms that we have thought of our labor. America has been, until most recently, the country where men could do things for the first time. It has been this fact above all others which has made our country a land of romance and of opportunity. There are still among us old men who have done striking things for the first time: crossed mountains, gone down unknown rivers, cut virgin stands of timber, struck a plough into unturned prairie, tapped oil wells that have lain hidden for millennia. These men seem to us the authentic incarnations of the American spirit. We listen to their stories and read their biographies. Speaking of the type Kipling says that

A voice, as bad as Conscience, rang interminable changes
On one everlasting Whisper day and night repeated—so:
"Something hidden. Go and find it. Go and look behind the Ranges—
Something lost behind the Ranges. Lost and waiting for you. Go!"

But that voice no longer has anything to say. The ranges have been crossed and what was lost has been found. With every day the chance to do things for the first time in America recedes farther into the romantic past.

It is true that in the field of pure science and subsequently of applied science, there is no end to the chance for novelty. But this is a task for specialists. For the rank and file of us the American problem is far more that of remaking a country we already know than of discovering a country that we do not know. After the age of discovery came the age of reckless exploitation. We are the heirs of that age as of the one that preceded it. Much of our immediate task is to make good wanton ravages which never should have been committed. There is no stand of primeval timber to be butchered for a first time. There are instead scarred hillsides to be reforested. There is no virgin soil to be turned

up fresh. There are the dust-swept plains to be arrested and recovered after the rains. There are coal and oil to be conserved hereafter but no more exploited.

As for the human half of the picture. There will be no more millions of immigrants meaning cheap labor. There will be the present population to work with. And above all else there will always be ourselves. New names cannot make us over. As we were not remade by codes so we cannot be unmade by them. There is no conceivable revolution which can change us overnight into persons other than what we are. We understand with utter clarity what St. Augustine meant when he said: "Whither shall my heart flee from my heart? Whither shall I go from myself? Whither shall I not follow myself?" We bow to the wisdom of an old-time word of Goethe's: "Here or nowhere is my North America."

All this, of course, is a direct consequence of those stern four years from 1914-1918. I have never been able to forget a sentence which occurred in an editorial in the *London Nation* for the second week of August, 1914: "The society of hope and ideas lies in ruins. In the years or generations to come our enfeebled hands will have to collect its scattered stones and put them in place again." The metaphor is that of our text. "Let us build up again the wall of Jerusalem, that we be no more a reproach." And I can think of no more accurate description of the necessitated life work of men today than that prophetic sentence from the *London Nation* of over twenty years ago. We are trying to collect the scattered stones of the society of hope and ideas and put them in place again.

This is for us Americans a new kind of task. It seems to us beside the exciting business of pioneering with its chance to do things for the first time, a dull and thankless

task. But this is what every grown-up society has had to do and apparently must do. The pioneering stage of a nation's history belongs to its youth and to its youth alone. The mature life of nations, like the lives of grown-up men, is spent working within the limits of accepted facts. When, therefore, André Siegfried writes a book about us which he calls *America Comes of Age*, he concedes for us that our life has now become one of thoughtful consolidation rather than reckless adventure.

The ancient city of Jerusalem still lives in men's imagination as one of the symbols of Utopia. Yet from the days of David the King until the days of Allenby the General its history has been one long story of rebuilding. The stones in its walls and streets, its homes and churches and mosques, have not been fresh cut. They have been the old stones, cast down in the wars, which men have tried to put back in ever more certain shape. So, also, it is said that there is not a stone in St. Peter's in Rome which had not previously been used in some earlier pagan or Christian building in the Eternal City. Yet out of the cast down stones of a previous time Bramante built one of the enduring shrines of Christendom. The fact that you are called upon now to share in an age of reconstruction does not deny you work that is interesting or work that may not be more permanent and significant than that which was done by your predecessors in the days of our national pioneering. Perhaps you are fortunate to be living at the moment of America's "coming of age." It means for you a life more mature than that lived by those who went before you.

III

And, finally, these men of long ago worked, as the story runs, with a trowel in one hand and a sword in the other

hand. The conditions for their work were confessedly unideal. No modern efficiency engineer could hold out any hope that work done under such conditions could meet the requirements of the task. And yet, with divided attention and divided strength they persevered until the wall was built. It says much for their resourcefulness that working with these handicaps they finished the job which they began.

There are many of us today who have the mind to work, yet are at loggerheads with the conditions for our work. We are doubtful whether in the face of the difficulties against which we have to contend, good work can be done. There is the difficulty of getting work in the first instance. There is the feeling of insecurity about the job we succeed in getting. If we are in an established business or a settled profession there is the instability of the world around us. We do not know from day to day how the whole situation may change. The abolition of codes may mean sharper competition in some lines than ever before. Altogether we understand only too well what it is to have to work with a sword in one hand, and never to have two free hands for the task itself. We have to fight for the chance to work and then to defend the job itself once it has been taken on.

Men have always dreamed of Utopian conditions for their work. In the midst of our many difficulties we today dream this dream with an added vividness. But I wonder is it not today as it always has been merely a dream. For if you start a serious search for the men who did good work for the sole reason that they had ideal conditions for their work, you seem never to find them. Indeed, you come finally to doubt whether any such men existed. What you find instead is men who, in the face of what would seem to be

insuperable obstacles, have done much if not most of the enduring work of the world.

Goethe said that for the last seventy-five years of his life he never had a month of genuine comfort and that the mere business of living was a perpetual rolling of a stone which he had always to raise anew. Meanwhile his creative work was disturbed, limited, and hindered by external conditions. Neither Kant nor Carlyle ever knew in maturity a single healthy, carefree day. Robert Louis Stevenson's gallant optimism was affirmed against a backdrop of dark difficulties. The wizard mind of Steinmetz inhabited a body which must have made every motion a burden, and this great genius did his work under conditions which suggest the austerity of an almost mediaeval asceticism. Francis Thompson, who wrote the greatest lyrics in our language since the Elizabethans, sold matches for a penny a box on the streets of London and slept beneath the arches of the Thames bridges.

We should beware of leaping to the sentimental conclusion that poverty and hardship are guarantees of genius. But, on the other hand, we cannot evade the plain inference from the facts which tell us that much of the best work of the world has been done under the most unlikely conditions. One of the greatest geniuses of the last century insisted that if a man is to make his mark in the world he needs two things, a good head and a great inheritance. The latter of these, a great inheritance, he did not construe as birth into a secure and tranquil time of the world's history. He preferred rather the inheritance which comes to us from a troubled time and mentions the break-up of the Middle Ages and the later dislocation of Europe caused by the Napoleonic Wars. A man born into such a time, he says, inherits an opportunity which is denied men who fall upon the quiet

and stagnant periods of human history. His occasion is defined for him by the tasks of reconstruction which are always at hand in history's unsettled years.

There is, in the preface to a volume of Professor Stubbs' collected essays, a half apology for the contents of the book. These essays, which are perhaps his most brilliant work, were written, Stubbs says, under the most unlikely conditions. They were prepared as special lectures and addresses under pressure and in the midst of constant distractions. He never had proper time for any of them; they were fitted into hurried hours, interrupted by regular duties, and never properly revised. Stubbs goes on to say that he, too, had dreamed the universal human dream of ideal conditions for productive work. He had hoped for what had never come, uninterrupted leisure for research and long, quiet periods for writing.

The essays in question, he goes on to say, were all written "against the grain." They were written against the grain of his own inclination at the time and against the grain of an unpromising environment. Yet, he continues, as he looks back he discovers that most of what he takes to be his best work was done under precisely those conditions, and he finds himself wondering whether, if he had had the ideal setting of which he had dreamed, he would have done as well. He is driven to the conclusion that probably most of our best human work is "done against the grain."

You and I today are having to do our work against the grain. We cannot always pick and choose what we will do. We have to accept, either as a private necessity or as a public duty, the work which offers. And once we are at work we find ourselves dealing with a world which is tough and gnarled. The world lies on our work bench like a great timber of live oak. And it lies so that we cannot work with

its grain, but must work against its grain. We should be more than human if, at times, we did not quarrel with our tools, with the workshop, and with the stuff to be handled. Other men, we say, were able to work with the grain of a softer world. Why the cursed spite that we were born to set right so difficult a day?

If the testimony of hundreds of lives is to be trusted, if Professor Stubbs' reflections on his own history were accurate, it may well be that in the unideal conditions for our modern toil we have a great inheritance. By a paradox which we do not at first understand it may be that the conditions for our labor are more ideal than those of which we idly dream.

Eckermann records that in his conversations with Goethe he told the poet that he naturally sought natures and environments which coincided with his own inclinations. Goethe told him that he was wrong, that it was a great mistake to hope that men and the world will harmonize with us. "It is in the conflict of natures opposed to his own", said the poet, "that a man must collect his strength to fight his way through. Thus all our different sides are brought out and developed, so that we soon feel ourselves a match for every foe. . . . You must at all events plunge into the great world whether you like it or not."

A century or more ago, in a world radically unsettled by the Napoleonic Wars, a mystical English poet retold the old Hebrew story as a building of Jerusalem in England's fair and pleasant land. He stayed close to the original story and said that those who thus labored must carry a sword in one hand.

I will not cease from mental fight,
Nor shall my sword sleep in my hand,
Till we have built Jerusalem
In England's green and pleasant land.

How better can we welcome you, who are now leaving this institution, into the difficult work of the world than to say to you that you must at all events plunge into the great world, whether you like it or not; and then to charge you that your sword shall not sleep in your hand till you have built a better and more eternal city in this green and pleasant land.

WILLARD L. SPERRY.