

“Christ and the City of Indianapolis”

Sermon by Frank Kik

Palm Sunday – April 12, 1992

In the some six months that we have served as your pastor, the question that I have often received is what is my vision for the ministry of this church and to this community? And this morning I would like to present that vision to you.

Father, may the meditations of my mind, the words of my lips, might be well pleasing in your sight. For we ask it in your son's name. Amen.

Under all the skies today, the festival of the palms holds sway. The cry of Palm Sunday everywhere is “blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.” Even in the muzzled church of China, the palms affirm a faith that an atheistic state can't kill. Even in the segregated areas of massacre and bloodshed in the union of South Africa, the palms cry out that God will triumph.

Palm Sunday is the proclamation that vanished truth isn't vanquished truth. It declares that truth crushed to the earth shall rise again, and error will die among its own interpreters.

He was standing on the Mount of Olives with the city at his feet. Its turrets and its palaces lay glorious in the evening light. Its vast extent unfolded like a panorama before his eyes. And the view of Jerusalem from the view of that ridge of the mountain was the fairest picture that an artist ever gazed upon.

If you have ever looked down upon Indianapolis from an airplane in the warm glow of a summer evening, when its pinnacles and its spires were bathed in the mystical splendor of sunset, and its streets shone like the golden streets of apocalypse, you can faintly conjecture the beauty which was spread before the Savior's eyes that evening. The beauty was part of the pathos of the scene. Surely you can understand those tears. For as you have looked down upon this city you have thought, per chance, of all the sin and the guilt and the sorrow and wretched broken lives and heartache and unrest which every great city hides under its magnificence and its pride.

And tears perhaps have sprung unbidden to the eyes which a moment before were gleaming with the artist's rapture. And so it was with our Lord. Save that He felt the sadness more than any mortal could, it's strange that He whose sensitiveness to all natural beauty was so delicate and prompt; to whom wheat and golden corn fields and running waters and faces of children such as we have seen this morning suggested thoughts of unspeakable delight.

He was never moved to admiration by the magnificence of human works, by the splendor of architecture and the glorious romance of wealth. He forgot Simon's banquet in the penitent woman's tears. He thought more of the widows to mites than of the stones of the temple and the glory of Jerusalem, its material magnificence, its century old shrines and palaces. That diadem set upon the forehead of the nation which every patriotic Jew regarded as the peculiar jewel of the Almighty never elicited from Him one word of rapturous approval.

To Him all this melted away like the pageantry of a dream. It was but the pomp and the vain glory and the circus mask of a city of sin. For what were marble and gold and princely homes and gardens and palaces and treasure-laden temples compared with the vast millions of proud or weary hearts which were grouped together in that awful comedy and tragedy of life.

Men made the city, not its stones. And the men here in this city's hearts were hardened, and their vision was sealed. They were blind to the things which made for their peace. And tomorrow they would crucify their messiah. You see religion in the city was but the whited grave of Phariseeism. Synagogues were the enclosures of the elect. Wealth thought of luxury as the end of life and ignored its responsibilities. Dives feasted while Lazarus lay rotted at his doors. Rabbis and priests courted and flattered rich men's sons and had no message for the poor. Squalor and filth and beggary set up their polluted order beside the golden gates of the temple. And no man cared. The crowd was ignorant and savage ready to hail any Barabbas king and to yell until hoarse, "crucify the good."

It was a city in which wealth and culture and religion reveled in their elect privileges and forgot the simplest obligations of humanity in which the few fared sumptuously every day and the rest were a mass of miserable heartbreaking, uneducated, despairing life, rotting in its sores, seething with discontent. Fighting for existence in the midst of plenty and losing all faith in God because of the inequalities of the human lot.

This was the city that the Savior saw and seeing it thus, He knew it was condemned, where the carcasses, there will the vultures be gathered together, He said. No wonder that He forgot the splendor in the walls that it covered. No wonder that He, who had never wept over His own burdens, even the cross broke down here. As He approached Jerusalem and saw the city, He wept over it.

I would like for us in the light of the chaos of our cities to honestly evaluate city life and the relationship of Christ and his people to the city. And first of all, you know that there is always something heart-moving in the sight of a multitude of men and women. The Persian Xerxes shed tears as he watched the endless ranks march past him on the way to Greece. The iron Napoleon once melted as he reviewed the vast army that followed him to the Russian front.

And when the proudest and sternest and most unfeeling hearts have shown emotion, what should we expect from the son of God? Whenever He saw the multitude and especially the city, He was moved with compassion. It was the sadness of the city which affected Him. To every profoundly religious and moral person, the sadness of city life is more impressive than its splendor.

No tenderhearted man or woman who has seen the hidden darkness of city life can again for some time fling himself or herself careless and heedless into its joys.

Put yourself in this great city of Indianapolis, walk its fine streets. Visit its parks and museums and watch the happy multitudes. And then let Nancy Russell, a visiting nurse, someone who is connected with the Wheeler Rescue Mission, let them take you for one hour to the city they know so well. To scenes that you would hardly dare visit alone. Where poverty and crime unite to create wretchedness. To the outpatient departments. To tenements where little children are sick or dying in our city. And drunkenness lies in ruin.

Breathe the polluted air. Take in the corruption, the vice, the utter misery. Get one glimpse of this life, folks, and the happy multitudes are forgotten in the deeper impression. Ah, it was the sadder picture that the Savior

saw in his yearning look over Jerusalem. And He could think of no other. As he approached Jerusalem and saw the city, He wept over it.

Secondly, the pathos of city life is in enormous contrasts of human sorts and conditions which it presents. In the countryside, the contrasts aren't so sharp and startling. Their wealth is always near enough to poverty to be reminded of its duties. The mansion and the shack are in closer touch. And kindly nature, with its gardens and flowers and clean air breathes some alleviation into the dreariest lives and gives health and brightness to the children's faces and saves humanity from its deepest degradations.

But in cities and towns, just in proportion to their size and their density of their population, are the extremes – the extremes of opulence and destitution. Of splendor and of squalor, of love and of hatred. The pomp of wealth drags always behind it a long slimy trail of sickening degradation. The millionaire and the bundles of loathsome rags and sores which hardly retain the human form are inevitable company.

In the midst of the civilization which proclaims man's noblest triumphs, there are sights at every step which turn the heart to sickness and disgust. The drunkard, in his rags and loathsomeness, lies besotted on the steps of the great cathedral where man has embodied his most splendid thoughts. The harlot goes leering past the statues of the honored heroes. Luxurious feasts which could feed a thousand poor families are observed within a thrown stone of gutters from which children greedily pick up garbage to save themselves from starvation.

Ah, the brilliance of our great cities is fringed by a darkness too horrible for the imagination to pierce. The spires of our churches look down on crowds to whom no thought of God in heaven ever comes in that fierce fight for bread and whiskey. Amid all the culture and the splendor of our prospering age, there are women in rags wearing their very flesh to the bone and children who have rarely or never seen green fields and growing flowers.

And men, gnawing their souls away with the biting of a hungry discontent. And nightly by the river on which float the great ships of commerce, desperate thieves walk, ready to fling themselves to the cold burn of self-forgetfulness. Anything, anything, just get me out of this world.

And is it not surprising? That when these appalling contrasts are ever in view, if not in the flesh, on the medium of television or in the press that the lack-all should curse the have-all.

Is it surprising that fierce discontention growl in sullen murmur and wish that it had the power to strike back?

Is it surprising that there's a blind and malicious hatred of prosperity and its fortunate possessors? An unreasoning frenzy which is always doing mad and self-destructive things? Is it surprising that gross ignorance, conscious of nothing but its own keen hunger and sorrow should resolve on impossible remedies and clamor for robbery in the name of justice? And offer burnt offerings on the altar of violence and crime? Is it surprising?

All these things are deplorable. Many of them reprehensible. Not to be permitted lest they lead to anarchy. But is it surprising in the 20th century? Who can wonder that our cities harbor every kind of religious unbelief? That atheism, which can find no home in the countryside, is welcomed in the dreary and crowded ghettos of the poor.

Is it surprising that, there men have ceased to believe in the providential love of God because it lost faith in the kindly justice of their fellow men?

Ah, it's easy for you and me to believe in God. God has been very good to us and destiny not unkind. From youth upward, we have been reminded of the eternal love and of a heaven to come. Ah, but if we had been without these things. What then?

Should we not be very patient and long-suffering with the guilty errors and the religious blindness of the suffering crowd? Should we not pity more than condemn? And hasten to help rather than to reprove? Isn't it true that the atmosphere of our age has made their mind jaundiced and their body feeble? The heavy chains of ignorance have weighed and crippled all their better energies.

Their sin is the disease of the miserable rather than the guilt of the responsible. Shouldn't our wrath at their wrongdoing melt away in a great compassion for their sorrows and their darkness? They are sheep without a shepherd. Father, forgive them for they know not what they do. When He saw the city, He wept.

Thirdly, our national life is becoming more and more city life. From all sides they're crowding, from the hamlet to the village, from the village to the town, from the town to the city. From the quiet country house to the whirl of the city with its excitements and its sins. With its palaces in the suburbs and its sleeping tenements in the slums. With its tremendous possibilities and its actualities of shame.

Ah, the stream of country life today is ever flowing city-ward to join some river of God or be lost in the sewers. But the city, I'm convinced, can be the place where the Christian church can do its holiest and grandest works. City life, my friends, can prove the power of Jesus Christ and the faith of his devoted servants more effectively than any other life can. But it also shows all the degradation and the ultimate possibilities of ruin, of which human nature is capable. The answer, I am convinced, depends not on governments, but on the church of Jesus Christ. Not on socialistic systems. Not on swiftly acting political panaceas. But on Christian men and women. The old problem of degenerating city life has to be solved again. It has to be solved! But this time, happily, in the presence of the church and Christian men and women.

And if we do our simple duty, the solution of the problem is full of hope. It can't be said that that duty had been faithfully done in the past, save by a few. For if that work had been done, my friend, we shouldn't have so large a scum of city life, with no reverence and no respect for anything but its own stomach and its brutal passions.

Dives has sat at his banquet or driven in his limousine to the sanctuary without any regard for Lazarus. And suburban churches have sometimes utterly ignored the crowd that lay morally rotting and perishing within a couple miles of their doors.

And we must find out what St. Paul said so long ago that no member can suffer without the injury of the whole body. That so long as the poor are frenzied and desperate in their discontent, no policeman, no law can prevent their wrongs and their complaints from stealing in at our doors and disturbing our rest.

We are demanding of Dives some recognition of Lazarus. And Christian friends, unless the gospel becomes so widespread and powerful, as to make every one of us ashamed of ourselves indulged in our forgetfulness, instead of pointing the finger at those dirty people down there; unless from every pulpit, the prophet's voice is brave enough to remind us of our obligations to all men; unless Bible-believing churches see not only Africa, but also Mapleton-Fall Creek; not only India, but also the east side; not only Latin America, but also the west side; our cities will be a ruin! And our splendid civilization our corruption.

And I won't allow myself to think of that possibility. A few hours after the palms, Pilate appealed to a power that seemed to be final: the might of the empire. But Jesus stood before him proclaiming by his regal silence the

hollowness of pomp, the pretense of pride, the ashes of ambition, the vanity of material power, the disillusionment of fame and the deception of wealth. And Pilate could appeal to a power which seemed to be final: the power of the state.

Jesus could only appeal to a power which seemed to be no power at all: the power of the spirit. What does history say? That is the history of the immediate hours. Pilate triumphed. That's what always happens when Pilate encounters Jesus Christ. In any given 24 hours, the sword always conquers the spirit. Truth and light are no match for centurions and battalions.

Do you remember when Lenin was asked about the power of the Pope? He replied with a question. How many divisions has he? But I guess with the fall of communism, Lenin now knows. However, over the tomb of Napoleon one sees hanging on the wall an uplifted form of the crucified. One can well remember the quotation of the Roman emperor. "Thou has conquered, oh Galilean." And one can also remember the words of Napoleon spoken on St. Elena. "Charlemagne, Alexander and I built great empires, but they were founded on force and have crumbled away. But Jesus of Nazareth founded his kingdom on love and there are millions today who would die for it."

I beg of you, look beyond Pilate today and see the crucified Jesus. And realize that with his naked pierced hand, he lifted the gates of empires off their hinges! And he turned the streams of the sentries into new channels and has governed the years with the power of his love.

Ah, but make no mistake about it. Discipleship with Jesus on Palm Sunday has always been costly. It takes courage to begin it and strength to continue it. It may be that in our personal lives we must go on past Pilate to a Calvary. It may be that we must mount our cross without knowing whether it will bring us shame or fame.

But I stand here today in your pulpit to proclaim that Palm Sunday says that he who is against God carries his own death sentence!

And remember that our love begins at home. If a man loves not his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God or anyone else whom he has not seen?

Face cheerfully then the problems which confront the church and our modern civilization, doing what we can to solve it here where it meets us in your city and in my city. Show that the Christ in whom we believe holds in his hands and in the hearts of his people the one solution of this and every problem. Let Indianapolis be a city where the affluent help the poor. And the poor love the rich. A city where love and charity and peace rule supreme as they will do in the city whose builder and maker is God.

I believe, you who were here at Tabernacle Church seventeen or so years ago made the right decision. To stay in the inner city and minister with this community. You are a people of courage and conviction. And you are rare in Christendom, do you know that? Most have fled to the suburbs. I salute you. I am proud of you. Today, however, I look to what is before us. And I am anxious that we now take a major step into the future.

You have asked me to be your shepherd to your leader under Jesus Christ. And I fully intend to fulfill that role, God give me the wisdom and the strength. Therefore, I would be so bold this morning as to suggest a new vision to mobilize our city for Jesus Christ. It's going to be costly. Do you have the faith? Do you have the faith to move now or do you want to dilly-dally for another year or two?

In addition to our fine ministries such as the food pantry, and the soup kitchen, and our tutoring program, and our excellent recreation ministry, and our individual counseling and family assistance, and our Christmas and Thanksgiving outreach and our new back to school program, I propose the following: Within the next 30 days, the Session instruct the Trustees to begin negotiating to purchase the former dentist office at the corner of 34th and New Jersey. To borrow the money from our endowment fund. If that's not possible, then go to the bank and get a mortgage.

Ah, I know what you're thinking. Now he's stepped off the deep edge. Now we'll really get angry at him. But I want to not only include that building, but I want our nursery remodeling also included in that sum of money.

I want to remind you of something. In 1921, if the members of Tabernacle church had not been willing to get a mortgage, you would not be sitting where you are today. It's that simple. They had a vision. They had a vision for you. And whether they knew it or not, this community was going to need this church more than any suburb would ever need it.

Who knows, Christian? Who knows, trustee? Who knows, elder? Whether you have been called to the Kingdom for a time such as this?

I propose that that building be used initially for adult Sunday school classes and as a meeting place for the various organizations and committees of our church when space is not available here, and we've already been facing that problem.

Plans are under way to expand our adult Sunday school program by the addition of seven classes in September. We don't know where they are going to be located. Now we're going to do it.

This building can also be used for our counseling ministry for the members of our church and a new counseling service to the community.

That an invitation be extended to the Mid-North Food Pantry, the Mapleton-Fall Creek Housing Corporation and the Neighborhood Association to locate their offices in that building.

Secondly, I propose that our outreach to the community be expanded by commencing the following ministries:

1. A medical and dental clinic staffed by Christian doctors and nurses from our church and other Christian churches
2. A legal aid service
3. A tax preparation assistance service
4. A community counseling service
5. A latchkey ministry to youngsters in our neighborhood
6. A clothing closet
7. A community mother's program
8. Cooking and sewing classes
9. Investigate moving our soup kitchen to the Christian Community Center if that will encourage our recipients to eat in the building
10. A junior Young Life program for middle school students
11. Expand our tutoring ministry to include high school students
12. Comparative programs for girls for after tutoring, such as cheerleading, aerobics, cooking, and sewing classes

13. A summer remedial and activity program for church and neighborhood children
14. Expand our volunteer program working with offender aid and restoration and prison fellowship ministries
15. That the media committee be instructed to cooperate with the Christian Concerns Community committee to publicize this ministry and to call for volunteers from all over this community
16. That we call a full-time community minister to administer our Christian Concern Community outreach by no later than the spring of 1993
17. Finally, that our Christian Concern Community ministry all be advanced with a clear-cut presentation of the gospel of Jesus Christ. For what shall it profit a person if he gains the world and has a lost soul?

My dear friends, we are not another secular social agency. We are the body of Christ! And the day we fail to present Jesus Christ as the personal savior of our souls and the souls of our neighbors is the day we cease to be the church of Jesus Christ.

We are not ashamed of Jesus or his name. And on that last day, we want no one we minister to be compelled to say that we neglected to tell them the good news of the gospel. We are called to minister by word and deed, and we must not neglect the word.

Now, it would be my hope, perhaps my dream, that other evangelical churches like Tabernacle would be willing to join us in such a ministry. But if they don't, we have no choice but to follow the Master, who when He found 5000 that were hungry, He fed them - spiritual food and bodily food. Ah, it's my prayer that we might hear the master's voice ringing in our ears as He wept over the city on that Palm Sunday. I was hungry, and you gave me meat. I was thirsty, and you gave me drink. I was a stranger, and you took me in. I was naked, and you clothed me. I was sick, and you visited me. I was in prison, and you came to me.

In as much as you have done it unto one of the least of these, my friends, you have done it to me.

Thanks be to God.

Father, You have placed this church on this corner for a purpose. And in Your providence, oh God, back in 1921, You knew that we would be needed now more than then. Lord, where there is no vision, the people, the church perishes. And where, oh Lord, we stew around and burden ourselves with fantastic plans, the day of the opportunity is gone.

I pray, oh God that this congregation might have the vision, the stamina, the faith, the foresight, to reach out. That men and women and children in this neighborhood might come to know the Master, even as we know Him. And in whose name we pray, believing.

And all of God's people said "Amen."