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A Fool for Christ¹

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Until I was 18, I was an atheist. I also called myself a Communist. As Paul said in his letter to the Corinthians, I was one of those people who thought that Christianity was sheer foolishness. But at the age of 18, I first began to really think about the Christian faith, through the witness of a fellow student at St. John's College, Oxford, where I was studying law. I began to see the relevance of the Christian faith and a horrible suspicion came over me that not only was the Christian faith true, but it was also going to become very relevant to my life.

That is the reason I stand here this evening, quite unashamed to say that I am a fool for Christ.

Why?

One of the main reasons I am a Christian is that I believe the Christian faith is the most relevant thing to this world in which we live. Frequently, I am asked, "Why did you change from being an atheist and a communist to become a Christian?" I give two reasons. Firstly, I have found that Christianity is true. Looking at the evidence for the resurrection, we begin to see that this marvellous thing called "Easter" actually happened! (Let me recommend to you the book, "Who Moved the Stone?" by another lawyer, Frank Morrison, -it is compulsive reading at Easter. He started to write a book disproving the resurrection, but after looking at all the evidence, ended up writing the best book ever written, proving the resurrection). So that is one reason why I became Christian: I found that Christianity is true.

The second reason why I became a Christian was that I found that, far from being foolishness, the Christian faith is the most relevant thing to the world in which we live. And this is the theme of my message this evening.

It so happens that I am married to a doctor (let me hasten to say, if you are married to a doctor, it does not mean you get any sympathy if you fall ill – my wife has always seen some patient twice as ill that day!). It also happens that many of my best

1. An address given at the London Easter Meeting of the Lawyers' Christian Fellowship on April 1, 1985, at Niblett Hall, Temple, London, England.

friends are ministers. I rather like the way in which the minister, the doctor and the lawyer look at life. Someone summed it up neatly by saying that the minister sees you at your best, the doctor sees you at your worst and the lawyer sees you as you are! I want tonight to take a cool look at our world, to see just what our modern world is like.

Speed Without Direction

Today is my mother's birthday. She is 89. It is interesting to realize that in her 89 years, there have been tremendous changes in the world. Space travel was absolutely unthought of when my mother was a girl. There have been amazing advances in science in every direction. Yet, although we live in a world of speed, sadly enough, we live in a world that seems to lack direction.

A few years ago, I was a manager of an approved school for boys in Lancashire. I thought it might be useful experience when my own boys grew up! Now that they have reached 18 and 21, I realize just how useful the experience was! One of my duties was to interview the boys when it came time for a decision on their discharge from the school. On one occasion, I asked about a dozen boys what I thought was a very basic question: "Why are you here?" Not, "What offence have you committed?" I was trying to communicate the idea that they were there to be helped, not to be punished. Despite court appearances, social and probation reports, magistrates' courts and years in approved school, I was shocked to find that not one of those boys had any idea why he was there. As I drove home that night, thinking about this and wondering what had gone wrong, it struck me that those approved school boys were typical of most people in the world today: taken up with careers, so busy, having tremendous speed, yet somehow lacking direction in their lives.

Now if you have got speed without direction and have never thought about the purpose of life, then you must be foolish indeed.

Existence Without Life

The second way I would describe this modern world is that it has existence without life. In the 89 years of my own mother's lifetime, for instance, there have been tremendous advances in medicine. Any doctor will tell you that most of the drugs used today had not even been invented 15 or 20 years ago. As I mentioned, I am married to a doctor, and the medical magazines come into our house at an alarming rate! I recently read in one of them that the average life expectancy in India was as low as 20 years in 1945, but now that average expectation of life there is 40. Or we could move nearer home: people are living longer than ever before in this country. My own mother is 89, and the Bible talks about "three score years and ten".

Yet a patient who recently went to see her doctor told him, "We are prevented from dying, but we are not helped to live!" "Prevented from dying, but not helped to live." Not only are we aimless, we are also empty. Carl Jung, a leading psychologist of this

generation, stated that this moral and spiritual emptiness lies in the heart of the neuroses of our time.

Again, I say to you, if we are existing without living, if we are prevented from dying, but not helped to live, then we are indeed foolish!

Amusement Without Happiness

Another characteristic of the present day is that we seem to have amusement without happiness. There has never been, I suppose, a generation that has been more "amused" than ours! We live in an age taken up with amusement of every sort, with pop music, with television – people are constantly being amused. In fact, it seems to me that we cannot stay still or silent for a moment. Yet somehow, we have amusement without happiness.

In the United States recently, a Christian doctor carried out a very interesting survey on his patients: as they waited in his waiting-room, they had to fill in a little survey about themselves. One of the questions asked, "What is your Number One wish?" On analyzing the answers, the doctor found that the Number One wish of 67% of his patients was to have peace of mind. Beneath all the amusement and busy-ness, there is a sort of restlessness.

If we have amusement without happiness, it seems to me that we must be foolish indeed!

Acquaintances Without Friends

Have you noticed something else? We live in a world which has acquaintances without friends. This is rather ironic, as we live in a world where, so to speak, there are more people around than ever before. Even in this country, if everyone went down to the seaside on the same day, apparently, there would be 4 inches of beach per person; and if everyone took their cars out on the road at the same time, there would be only 25 yards between each car! Population explosion – more people than ever before – yet somehow, people feel alienated and lonely. We talk to many people, make many acquaintances, but we have very few friends. Especially as we get older, and even amongst young people I have found that is a basic loneliness in human nature.

If we haven't faced this fact, if we haven't thought about it, we must be foolish indeed.

Strength Without Control

Another characteristic of this modern world is that we have strength without control. Modern man has made tremendous advances, in developing nuclear energy, for example, but the sad thing is that he seems able to control everything except himself. I see this every time I read the newspaper, every time I watch the television

news. I see it on the international scene.

A statistic that really came home to me the other day was this: every single minute in our world, eight people die of malnutrition or starvation; in that very same minute, 2,000 pounds are spent on armaments. In fact, when I read this statistic, I thought I'd better get out my watch and hold a minute's silence! If we had a minute's silence this very moment, eight people in this world, where we have so much food and so many resources, will have died. And in that same minute, another 200,000 pounds are spent on armaments! Strength without control.

If this is true internationally, it is also true personally. A Managing Director once came to see me, ostensibly about business, but in reality to discuss the state of his marriage. He told me he was a happily married man with two children, then suddenly revealed that he was having an affair with a 16-year-old office junior. He said, I can't understand myself. If it was anyone else in the firm doing this, I would sack them. I've a wife and two little girls, yet I'm infatuated with this 16-year-old girl. I looked at him: a man with strength, but with no ability to control himself. I know this is an extreme example, but in so many ways, modern man is powerless.

We all have a standard of what is right and wrong! But if we look at ourselves tonight, we fail far short of our own standards! This is what I am talking about: there is a sort of contradiction in human personality. I know how I should behave, but sometimes (and I always like to be honest when I am speaking), I find that I fall lamentably short!

Whether we look at modern man internationally or whether we look at our own lives, we see one marked characteristic: we have strength, but without control. If we have never faced this, then we are foolish.

Sex Without Love

We live in a world that has sex without love. An incredible sexual revolution has taken place in the lifetime of my mother, who is now 89. My daughter is 19. There is a 60-year difference between the two. Whenever my mother and my daughter come to Sunday lunch, the inevitable happens: my mother comes out with, Oh! We never did that in our days. I say, Mother, you're 60 years out of date. And even my daughter agrees with me, which is very rare!

Our permissive society has sex without love. One marriage in every three ends up in the divorce court. A few months ago, in my own parish church, I had to read out the banns for three couples planning to get married. I stood at the front and published the banns of marriage! I asked, If you know any just cause or impediment why these couples should not be joined together in holy matrimony, you are asked to declare it. (I have often wondered what would happen if someone did stand up and object!) It suddenly struck me that statistically speaking, one of those marriages would end in divorce.

Consider abortion. Do we realize that one pregnancy in every six ends in abortion! One baby in every six is aborted! We do indeed live in a world of sex without love: a world that is very short on love. If we have never thought about this, then it seems to me that we must be very foolish indeed.

Today Without Tomorrow

The last thing I want to mention about our world is that we have today without tomorrow. An interesting reversal has taken place in modern time: in Victorian times, you never talked about sex, but the Victorians frequently talked about death. Nowadays, we talk about sex all the time, but death is a forbidden subject.

A few years ago, the Manchester Law Society organized a conference! I was rather interested in it, because of the title of the brochure advertising the subject, which was How to die happy! Tax and financial planning for the next generation. It continued by mentioning capital transfer tax and the important estate planning aspects involved. I considered this too good an opportunity to miss, so I wrote the author of the lecture a little note on How to die happy:

Dear Sir,

As a member of the Law Society, I have received details of your lecture and must congratulate you on the snappy title. However, as a Christian, I feel I must point out that you are not really dealing fully with the subject.

It always amazes me how friends and clients make careful preparation for capital transfer tax on their death, but appear to have a completely blank spot about what is going to happen to themselves. Christians believe that Jesus rose from the dead and that this is the great proof there is a life beyond the grave. For the Christian, this means we can die happy.

I don't quite know what he made of it! I did close by saying, I know this is a very unusual letter, but the subject of one's death is a very serious matter, isn't it. George Bernard Shaw once said: The statistics about death are very impressive. One out of one dies! Nothing is more certain than death. But the time of death is so uncertain: anyone dealing with probate matters will realize how suddenly death can happen. It is the ultimate event in life. I play chess in my spare time. I like the way one Puritan writer described death: he said, At death, God sweeps all the pieces from the chessboard of life, the King, the Queen, the rooks, the knight, the bishop and the pawn into the same box.

Have we ever considered that? If we have never considered this, it seems to me we must be foolish indeed.

Who's the Fool?

It is very significant that in our Lord's parables, there is only one person He actually calls a fool. In Luke 12, Jesus told the parable of a very successful businessman, a

rich farmer, who had big expansion plans. He was planning to tear down his present barns and build bigger barns to hold all of his goods. He said to himself, You have all the good things you need for many years. Take life easy; eat; drink, and enjoy yourself. But suddenly God said, You fool! This very night you will have to give up your life. This night, your soul shall be required of you.

It is obviously important to know how to make tax plans for the next generation and to so die happy, but if we have never thought about our own death, we are foolish indeed. It was Jesus Himself who called that rich farmer a fool.

I have painted what you might say is a very broad picture of the world in which we live; but I thought a lot about it when first faced with the challenge of the Christian faith. I started thinking furiously. I want to stress that one of the reasons why I became a Christian was not because I stopped thinking, but because I started thinking. I thought about this world, and I [sic] things. The world is aimless and empty, people are restless and lonely, powerless, without love and without hope. That s our world.

Questions and Answers

Now the great thing that excites me as a Christian is to find that there is an answer. If I may digress a moment, I think that in this modern world, people are at long last beginning to ask questions. Every Sunday afternoon, I take a young people s bible study group. I recently asked a young medical student what his generation thinks about our world. His answer was very significant. He said, People realize that there is a question. You may be one of those people who realizes that there is indeed a question; things aren t as simple as they once appeared and something does appear to have gone fundamentally wrong with this modern world.

The exciting thing which I humbly propose tonight is that the answer lies in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. This world would think the gospel answer sheet foolishness; they did in Paul s day when he wrote to the Christians in Corinth. Corinth was a great, but very permissive city; a saying of those days, to be Corinthianised, meant to be permissive or sexually loose. Corinth was a cultured Greek city, a city that knew something about the Jewish law, Greek wisdom and the power of the Romans. Paul said to the Corinthian Christians: The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to those who are being saved, it is the power of God. (1 Cor. 1:23,24).

This Gospel of Jesus has the answers to our problems. There is a saying: The man who tries to change the world is an optimist, but the man who tries to change the world without first changing human nature is a sheer lunatic. That is where the Gospel come in! Christians believe in changing the world by changing human nature. Christians proclaim the dynamic power of Jesus to heal the pains of the world, the power of Jesus that we celebrate at Easter-time. Christians say very humbly and I say to you humbly tonight this Gospel is not foolishness, but the power of God to

salvation.

How can this be true? Let's just go back over the things I've described, the things we'd be foolish indeed never to have considered. Let [s see how, in an incredible way, the Gospel of Jesus Christ meets those needs.

The first thing was speed without direction, in other words, aimlessness. The first thing that happened to me when I became a Christian was that I found a purpose, a meaning, in my life. I wasn't just a nonentity. Everything, so to speak, clicked! It is tremendous to be a Christian and a lawyer, to realize there is something only we can be and do for God. We are not alone in this universe, we have knowledge, a purpose in life, we know where we are going.

The next thing I mentioned was existence without life, that is, emptiness. Years ago, the French philosopher, Pascal, said that each person is made with a God-shaped blank in his heart. People in the world are busy filling this void with other things. So was I, until I became a Christian but it is a God-shaped blank, and it is only God who can fill it and give us the fullness of Jesus.

Take amusement without happiness, a very prevalent phenomenon. We are restless in so many ways, and then we hear Christ's words: Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. So you remember Augustine, who left North Africa for Rome; he had a mistress, slept around with women, but deep down, he was restless. Then one day he was converted and became a Christian. He composed a beautiful prayer: Lord, You have made us for Thyself, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in Thee.

Or consider acquaintances without friends, loneliness. One of the greatest things about being a Christian, I have found, is that you suddenly belong to the family of God.

We are living in a world that is incredibly short of hope. I knew David Watson quite well. In fact, he was in my home just about 4 months before he finally died of the cancer that had been diagnosed a year earlier. One of the things that most impressed me about David was his ability to face death; he had this great hope. There is a saying, The church is the only organization in the world that never loses a member through death. When David died, I wrote to his mother, who, in reply, quoted David's words: For the Christian, the best is yet to be. In a world that lacks hope, where death is the last thing we think about, Christians can look at death and echo St. Paul's words, Oh death; where is thy sting? Oh grave; where is thy victory? Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

That is my message; the world around us may well say it is sheer foolishness, but I say that the wisdom of this world is nothing in God's eyes. This Gospel, which so many despise, does have the answer; it is the power of God to salvation to everyone that believes.

Then I also mentioned that we have sex without love. The very heart of the Christian

message, the heart of the Easter message, is that God loves the world and He loves each one of us. I like the story told about the famous Swiss theologian Karl Barth who went to the United States to lecture in American theological colleges. At the end of one of his lectures, during a question-and-answer session, a student asked him: What is the greatest thought that has ever gone through your mind? There was a bit of a hush; this bright American student was sure the lecturer was stumped. For a moment he buries his head in his hands, then lifted up his head and said: Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so! If you forget everything else that you have heard tonight, I trust you won't forget that!

In a world that has sex without love, where it seems that nobody loves and nobody cares, every time we come to Good Friday and think of Jesus' death on the cross and His resurrection from the dead, we are reminded that God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life. (John 3:16). That is the message. Foolishness to this world, but the very power of God.

Verdict

In conclusion, what are we going to do about it? No barrister or solicitor ever appeared in court without asking for a verdict. I too ask for a verdict, a conclusion. I venture to say that if we have grasped what I have been talking about tonight, that this message so despised of the world is the very power of God, then we must do something.

First, we need to apply this message to our lives. I think the very best definition I've ever heard as to what it means to be a Christian is that it is the beggar telling another beggar where to get bread. I stand here tonight, only as one beggar telling another where to get bread.

After applying this message to our lives, the next thing we need to do is to demonstrate it. Jesus said some very remarkable things about Christians: He said that we are the light of the world. In every church, in every circle where Christians meet, including the Lawyers Christian Fellowship, we should be demonstrating the power of this Gospel.

One of the most thrilling stories I have recently heard came out of the bleak situation of the miners' strike. A Christian policeman living in Chester was drafted into Nottingham on picket duty; there was tremendous violence on the part of striking miners and he found it a terrifying experience. Last summer, the policeman and his wife went to a Christian holiday centre and his wife found herself drawn in the putting competition against a young man she had not met before. As they played the course, they found they were both Christians and she admitted that she was married to a policeman. Much to her amazement, the young man introduced himself as a miner, a striking miner. Her husband was drawn in the competition against another young man, who turned out to be a working miner! The four of them got together afterwards

and found that despite the enormous differences in their positions, they had a common oneness and unity in Christ. That is what I mean by demonstrating the Gospel.

Apply it to our own lives, demonstrate it to the world and lastly, proclaim it! Most of us here tonight are probably Christians, but I want this to be a challenge to you. Are you ashamed of your faith? Are you boldly proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus?

As this is the Lawyers Christian Fellowship and our President is Lord Denning, I will close with some words he wrote several years ago, but which are still applicable today:

We have already strayed too far from the faith of our fathers. Let us return to it, for it is the only thing that can save us.