

From the Pulpit

IN MEMORY OF P. A. CHRISTENSEN (1888-1968)

Hugh B. Brown

During a career that spanned some sixty years of teaching at all levels, from grade school to the university, thousands of students knew P. A. Christensen as a great teacher. He was a member of the faculty at Brigham Young University from 1927 until his retirement in 1965, serving as chairman of the English department for twenty-five years. He was also well known as a lecturer and essayist; much of his writing was collected in ALL IN A TEACHER'S DAY (1948) and OF A NUMBER OF THINGS (1962). The following sermon was delivered by President Hugh B. Brown of the First Presidency of the Church, a long-time friend and once a fellow faculty member at BYU, at Professor Christensen's funeral, October 1, 1968.

Sister Ruth, family, in-laws, friends and relatives, Brothers and Sisters, it is an honor, but a humbling experience, to be invited to speak at the funeral of a great man, a great soul. I appreciate very much the invitation to come. I should not have come if I had not had in my system something of P. A.'s independent disposition. I was told by my physicians that due to a slight indisposition I should not come, but I couldn't stay away, because Parley was my friend, and at times I've tried to be his friend.

We celebrate birth and marriage and other events by song and dancing, exchanging presents, etc. But when we come, as today, to celebrate death (and I think some of you might question the use of the word "celebrate" in that connection, but that's what we're doing) — when it comes to that, we come to church. To celebrate, according to the dictionary, is to honor, observe, solemnize with rites and ceremonies, to extol or proclaim. Sometime ago, when Dr. Karl G. Maeser died, someone wrote a little poem that was sometimes sung in our worshiping assemblies, "The Teacher's Work Is Done." I never quite agreed with that thought. I do not agree that his work is done

today. If we knew the truth, Parley is still carrying on; he is still teaching and will continue to teach and to inspire throughout the ages to come. For that I humbly thank the Lord.

I have consulted some of his students of late, since I visited him in the hospital. I had a cousin who was in his classes years ago, and just before she died she wrote something I would like to share with you. It seems applicable to the spirit of P. A., though she doesn't mention him.

If there remains a word to say of me
 When I no more with you shall sing my song,
 Oh not in final tribute let it be,
 For life is short, Eternity is long;
 And this husk of me that sheltered all
 That really lived — and lives — my hopes and fears,
 My loves and loyalties, was but the stall
 Where tethered spirit chomped at bridled years.
 But if, when first convulsive grief has passed,
 You then shall speak of little things I did,
 And laugh, and so remembering, raise the lid
 Of memory on my ultra-mundane past,
 You may be sure that I, from off my star,
 Shall lean to hear, laugh too, and you for.

(Zina Woolf Hickman)

We have been talking today almost exclusively in his own words. In truth it may be said that he is preaching his own sermon, and I have not heard better. Most fitting that we should quote from his writings, most fitting that we should listen to what has been read so beautifully by Brother Romney, his biographical sketch, filled with humor (and he had a keen sense of humor, but it was never unkind). I always found him to be great in the best sense of the word. He had the courage to step out of the beaten path occasionally and see what lies just beyond. And though he ran into some thorns, occasionally, because of that daring adventure, he always came back with a little good fruit. I appreciated that venturesome spirit and so I think the best thing I can do, the best thing I can say, is to continue along the line Brother Romney and Sister Ballif have indicated.

I appreciate very much the singing of "The Lord Is My Shepherd, I Shall Not Want," taken from the Twenty-third Psalm. I appreciated this beautiful instrumental selection because it would have delighted Parley — in fact, I think it did. My faith is so simple that I cannot believe that this life ends with death. He still lives and he will be waiting for you, Ruth, and the rest of you as you go. I expect to join him very soon, if I'm worthy.

I'd like, then, to refer to some things that were said of him and about him, continuing the trend of this occasion. I wanted first to read from his *All in a Teacher's Day* a tribute paid by another student of his. She was a very close friend of mine in England many years ago, and Parley befriended her, as was his wont:

Those thousands who have passed through the lecture rooms presided over by Dr. Christensen, will find in *All in a Teacher's Day* a

source of rich delight not untouched with the magic of reminiscence and recollection.

Through its pages run the author's superb feeling for all that is beautiful, particularly in the works of the masters. Sometimes, as when he teaches his "deuced irony" flashes out —

How well we know that and how we loved him for it — this that she calls "deuced irony" —

do you not love an excellent wit even when it is slightly corroded with satire? There is, too, smooth satisfying Logic, Reason mated with Daring-do, Wisdom which is more exalted than either Logic or Reason, like that evinced in such maxims as "Love your enemies" — and, sometimes, even a certain blessed un-Reason which lends strange, joyous verification to the words "Christ is risen."

I brought these two books along and am indebted to Parley for having indicated some of the things he loved.

Someone has written, "with all the ingenuity of scientific hypothesis it has to be said that no advance whatever has been made since Aristotle or before in answering the question, How from a mindless universe or a mindless organism, a mind could emerge." I think he would have enjoyed that. I'm sure he did; I think he memorized it. But then listen to his own words:

Greatness in nations, as in individuals, is a process. It is not a "having and a resting but a growing and a becoming." Greatness is an eternal search for whatever is virtuous, or lovely, or of good report, or praiseworthy. But it is more than a search. It is a weaving of the best that is thought and felt and done in the world into the warp and woof of the national life and character. It is even more than that. It is helping to make the mental and spiritual accomplishments of the human race the common possession of all nations. (*All in a Teacher's Day*, p. 9)

I happen to know that he liked something that was written by Cicero, and I think I'd like just to refer back to that for a minute because it has a welcome ring and a joyful sound to me. Cicero said, and Parley knew this very well,

I am well convinced that my departed friends are so far from having ceased to live, that the state they now enjoy can alone with propriety be called life. I feel myself transported with impatience to rejoin those whose characters I have greatly respected and whose persons I have loved. Nor is this earnest desire confined alone to those excellent persons with whom I have been connected. I ardently wish also to visit those celebrated worthies of whom I have heard or read so much.

I thought of this the other day, Ruth, when we stood together by his bedside. How he, as I thought then and as has been confirmed by time, was about to join some of his worthies of whom he had heard and read so much. And he wanted to join them, and when he does — now that he has — he'll bring luster to all the best that is in them, and he'll add to that something that many of them did not have — a deep and abiding faith in God.

This that Brother Romney has read about his early youth, his troubles on the farm, can be appreciated by those of us who are almost as old as he was.

But some of us, too, went barefoot. Some of us trod through snow and mud to school. But all of us did not reap from those experiences as richly as did he.

And so Cicero continued,

To this glorious assembly I am speedily advancing; and I would not be turned back on my journey, even on the assured condition that my youth should be again restored. The sincere truth is [and this sounds like Parley], if some divinity would confer on me a new grant on life, I would reject the offer without hesitation. I have well nigh finished the race, and have no disposition to return to the starting point. I do not mean to imitate those philosophers who represent the condition of human nature as a subject of just lamentation. The satisfactions of this life are many; but there comes a time when we have had a sufficient measure of its enjoyments, and may well depart contented with our share of the feast. I am far from regretting that this life was bestowed on me; and I have the satisfaction of thinking that I have employed it in such a manner as not to have lived in vain. In short, I consider this world as a place which nature never intended for my permanent abode; and I look on my departure from it, not as being driven from my habitation, but simply as leaving an inn. (Cicero's "Essay on Old Age," *Fifty Years and Beyond*, by Lathrop, pp. 106-107.)

And so I bring you that thought in connection with what he has thought and said so often.

The philosophers, the scientists, the poets, the prophets have agreed in large measure — in fact there is almost complete unanimity among them — on the one eternal truth, that man is a child of God. And that being true, there is something of God in man. And that being true, man is immortal, and eternal, and death does not end conscious existence. That is my testimony to you today, as I think of him.

One of the modern scientists wrote a little something quite recently which I have appreciated and which Parley knew of. Von Braun said:

Many people seem to feel that science has somehow made "religious ideas" untimely or old-fashioned. But I think science has a real surprise for the skeptics. Science, for instance, tells us that nothing in nature, not even the tiniest particle, can disappear without a trace. Nature does not know extinction. All it knows is transformation.

Now if God applies this fundamental principle to the most minute and insignificant parts of his universe, doesn't it make sense to assume that He applies it also to the human soul? —

I ask you to think on that. He continues —

I think it does. And everything that science has taught me — and continues to teach me — strengthens my belief in the continuity of our spiritual existence after death. Nothing disappears without a trace. (Dr. Wernher Von Braun)

"If we believe," said another, "in man's divine origin, we must conclude that manhood has a mission, that power has a purpose, that every faculty has a function, even though some are not in evidence in our earthly environs." That's the kind of thing that he liked to hear and read and contribute to.

And then let's turn again to our teacher, let him speak for himself. In fact, I think I have never before attended a funeral service in which it seemed the one in the casket was doing the speaking. For as we repeat his words, we are aware of the fact that he, deep down, knew that when he left his body, consigned it to the earth, his soul would go on and on and on. This he wrote in one of his books:

... Jesus' purpose was to find a universal remedy, one that would strike at the taproot of all evil. He found the taproot of all social ills in the workings of the human spirit. His prescription was therefore for the mind and heart.

He took that kind of thing seriously as he thought on it, and he was unafraid of criticism — was sometimes disturbed a bit, but I am glad to be on his side when it comes to announcing the truths of the gospel of Christ in their entirety. He continues —

He [Jesus] accordingly attempted to establish the Kingdom of God, not at first as a substitute for the secular state, but as a complement to it, a complement to exist, not in the trappings of external authority, but rather in the promptings of the inner life. Men must be born again. They must cease to live by bread alone, and begin to live by the things of the mind and heart. The two great demands of the Kingdom were love of God as Father, and love of fellowmen as brothers. Love of God and fellowmen was not an arbitrary prescription. Rather it was an assertion of Jesus' conviction that in the universal scheme of things the personality of God and the personality of man are of first importance. It was merely a call to men to give themselves in love and loyalty to the supreme values in the universe.

This is the man himself, speaking at his funeral.

If Jesus could help men to find in their world a God who is indeed an all-wise and loving Father, if he could help them to discover in one another common qualities and latent powers of infinite worth, then he could do more than statesmen with social programs had ever done, or ever could do, because then all the social inequalities, the injustices, and the brutalities among men would tend to disappear. Man's inhumanity to man cannot exist where men really love and respect one another. In a society conscious of God as a Father to be lived and worshipped, and of fellowmen as brothers to be loved and respected, slavery, sex discrimination, cruelty to children, perversions of justice, intemperance, exploitation of the underprivileged, and war with all its attending evils would naturally disappear. Not perhaps without leadership, but in such a society the necessary leadership would always be at hand. Leaders schooled in the principles and ideals of the Kingdom of God would inevitably apply those ideals and principles to the solution of the problems of the kingdoms of men. Jesus' task, therefore, was to provide the mental and spiritual soil and climate congenial to the germination and growth of the leadership that the world needs. . . .

Let nations, as well as individuals, seek first the Kingdom of God [said Parley A. Christensen] and all other things that really matter will naturally follow after. Let nations like men discover that they cannot live by bread alone, that ultimately it will profit no nation to gain or dominate the whole world in material things,

if in doing so it lose its soul, its sense of eternal values. (*All in a Teacher's Day*, pp. 12-13.)

I must not read all that I have excerpted from his book here, but he has a final thought that I am sure all of us would appreciate. Before reading that final thought I bring to you a thought of my own with respect to what men seek in life and apprehend with respect to the subject of death — which in my mind is improperly designated. I do not believe Parley Christensen is dead. I do not believe he has ceased to be. I bear witness that he still lives, and is conscious, recognizable, and I would like to grasp his hand again, and doubtless will, rather soon.

Even the best of men, when they come to the end of their days, feel their life has been marred by incompleteness. In other words he did not do all he wanted to do; he did not write all he had to say. Remember Victor Hugo said "I haven't said a thousandth part of that which is in me." If they did not do what they dreamed or resolved they would do, may not this be a confirmatory suggestion that there is a design still to be carried out?

The mind of man is never satisfied with its accomplishments. We seem to be built upon a scale that only eternal life can satisfy. Perhaps this is what Browning meant when he said, "A man's reach should exceed his grasp, else what is heaven for?" No earthly change, no earthly vicissitude affects the integrity and the permanence of the self.

May I divert for a moment? Thirteen of her children were standing around her bedside when she died — my mother. She was just about the age of Parley when he died, and she reached out her hand and took mine as I was standing nearest to her, and she said, "My children, I must leave you. This body is worn out, but I want you to know, before I go, that I'm as much alive as I ever was. I'm as much interested in what's going on as ever I was." She said, "There is something about me that time has not touched, although it has practically destroyed my body. And if it could not touch that something in eighty years, I want you to know that I believe it never will touch it." I thought that was a tremendous sermon on the subject of the immortality of the soul.

And then Parley said:

Jesus saw for his mission an ultimate triumph. Always he would have a few enlightened and courageous witnesses to his truth, men who would advance his torch and spread his light. Through their unwearying efforts and through the harsh, relentless lessons of history, more and more minds and hearts would be prepared for his message. Eventually all knees would bend in homage to him and all tongues would acknowledge him Lord, not through external compulsion, but through the discovery that the human race, in its deeper nature, in its most imperative need, is indeed a brotherhood, a family, in which the welfare of each is the responsibility of all; through the discovery that only in losing themselves in the larger life of mankind can men really find themselves. (*All in a Teacher's Day*, p. 16.)

I am compelled to look over many things I want you to read for yourselves in these books and I commend both of them to you, but he said this not so long ago —

I do not know at what time in life, or as a result of what study and discipline one is justified in holding and expressing a deep personal conviction. But whether justified myself or not I feel that I must close this discussion with an expression of a conviction which I have come to hold firmly.

I wish you children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren would remember this, it is like a final testament:

Whether justified or not, I feel that I must close this discussion with an expression of a conviction which I have come to hold firmly. It is that no matter what one's oracle of truth may be, human or divine, its utterance can never become effective in a world of competing oracles until they have been subjected to the unhampered scrutiny of human thought. They will never win, I am sure, universal acceptance until they have been tested and approved in the clear, white light of a free and universal human reason. For even a divine oracle, to be permanently effective among men, must be assimilated to the thoughts of men. God himself is limited when men cease to think. (*Of a Number of Things*, p. 25.)

That is worth remembering.

Sometime, when all life's lessons have been learned,
And sun and stars forevermore have set,
The things which our weak judgments here have spurned,
The things o'er which we grieved with lashes wet,
Will flash before us out of life's dark night,
As stars shine most in deeper tints of blue;
And we shall see how all God's plans are right,
And how what seemed reproof was love most true.

And we shall see how, while we frown and sigh,
God's plans go on as best for you and me:
How, when we called, He heeded not our cry,
Because His wisdom to the end could see.
And e'en as prudent parents disallow
Too much of sweet to craving babyhood,
So God, perhaps, is keeping from us now
Life's sweetest things, because it seemeth good.

And you shall shortly know that lengthened breath
Is not the sweetest gift God sends His friend,
And that, sometimes, the sable pall of death
Conceals the fairest bloom His love can send.
If we could push ajar the gates of life,
And stand within and all God's workings see,
We could interpret all this doubt and strife,
And for each mystery could find a key.
But not today. Then be content, poor heart;
God's plans, like lilies pure and white, unfold.

We must not tear the close-shut leaves apart —
Time will reveal the calyxes of gold.
And if, through patient toil, we reach the land
Where tired feet, with sandals loosed, may rest,
When we shall clearly see and understand,
I think that we will say, "God knew the best."

—May Riley Smith

In these rather rambling remarks, I cannot close without a witness. The most glorious literature in the world, and this was believed in by Parley, is the Holy Scriptures. You remember that wonderful occasion when Mary and some other women were at the tomb. You remember how they looked in the tomb and saw that the body of Jesus had been removed or had left and they saw two persons sitting one at the head and the other at the foot of where Jesus had lain. One of them said, "Woman, why weepest thou. Whom seekest thou?" And she said, "They have taken away my Lord and I know not where they have laid him." And as she stepped back (and here I'm interpolating a little), as she stepped back she became aware of someone whom she thought was the gardener, for she had not lifted her head, so great was her sorrow. She saw the ankles and the knees of this person who was standing there, and she heard a voice which sounded a bit familiar and yet was unbelievable to her even then. And he said, "Woman, why weepest thou? Whom seekest thou?" And she said, "They have taken away my Lord and I know not where they have laid Him."

Then she became aware of an outstretched hand and she heard her name spoken in such a manner as only one in all the universe could say it. He pronounced only the one word, "Mary." Oh, the ecstasy of her soul as she lifted her face and beheld her Lord, resurrected, immortalized, her friend, her Redeemer. And He told her not to touch Him for the moment but to go and tell the brethren, which she did. And they didn't believe her.

It seems remarkable that after His sojourn among them they had not really understood the purpose of His mission, the full meaning of it. — And they didn't believe it. And ten of them were in the room and the doors were closed when suddenly there appeared before them the Master and Redeemer of the world, the risen Son of God, and they fell back, affrighted. They thought it was a spirit. And He said to them, "Come, handle me and see, it is I, myself. A spirit hath not flesh and bones as ye see me have." There was one of the Twelve who wasn't there. His name was Thomas, and when they told him later of the appearance of the Lord, he doubted it. He said, I cannot believe it, unless I can feel the prints in His hands and thrust my hand into His side. Eight days later He came again in the same room. There were eleven of them there then, and He, the Master, spoke to Thomas and said, "Thomas, come hither, feel the wounds in my hands and side, and know that it is I." Thomas did just that and then said, "Oh, Lord, my God."

Brethren and sisters, I bear witness to you that the soul of man is immortal. The soul — the body and the spirit together — live on, and I hope you will remember that because it is a concluding statement I like to make on occasions such as this, as a short supplement to what Parley has so often thought and so constantly believed. God bless you Parley. Thanks for your friendship, for your understanding, for your courage and fortitude. Thanks for what you have done for all of us. And may He give us courage to continue in faith until the end, I pray in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.