

Always Look a Mob in the Face

Western movies, radio serials, and comic books simply cannot match the thrills and action-packed adventure dramas of the stories of the early Methodists. As the Methodist circuit-riders followed the ever-moving frontier across the vast, unexplored American continent their deeds of daring and courage supplied American history with many of its and virile, whose flaming tongues were matched by steel nerves and hearts of undauntable time again to face the angry violence of drunken and irresponsible mobs. The exploits of Hopalong Cassidy and Roy Rogers pale in comparison.

The inspiration for these early American Methodists came, of course, from the intrepid leader, John Wesley, who, in lighting all of England with the fires of his preaching, faced mob after mob. Wesley's Journal describes 60 riots which had been stirred up by his preaching. A journalist, William T. Stead, once wrote that not even Wesley's great genius would have made any difference on world history "without that marvellous body, with muscles of whipcord, with lungs of leather, and the heart of a lion."*

Wesley's great followers in America also had "hearts of lions." Perhaps they too were able to endure the hardships and hostilities of the frontier because they took seriously the words of advice which came from John Wesley: "Always look a mob in the face." Wesley did not give this advice from the plush safety of a parlor. In his own words here is one picture of a fierce encounter he had with a brutal mob at Wednesbury, on October 20, 1743:

T To attempt speaking was vain, for the noise on every side was like the roaring of the sea. So they dragged me along till we came to the town, where, seeing the door of a large house open, I attempted to go in; but a man, catching me by

*Endless Line of Splendor, Luccock, p. 20

the hair, pulled me back into the middle of the mob. They made no more stop til they had carried me through the main street, from one end of the town to the other. I continued speaking all the time to those within hearing, feeling no pain or weariness. At the west end of the town, seeing a door half open, I made toward it, and would have gone in, but a gentleman in the shop would not suffer me, saying they would pull the house down to the ground. However, I stood at the door and asked, "Are you willing to hear me, hear me speak?" Many cried out, "No, no, Knock his brains out; down with him; kill him at once." Others said, "Nay, but we will hear him first." I began asking, "What evil have I done?" Which of you all have I wronged in word or deed?" and continued speaking for about a quarter of an hour, til my voice suddenly failed. Then the floods began to lift up their voice again, many crying out, "Bring him away! Bring him away!" *

Mobs always have and probably always will rage violently against the moral and spiritual majesty of religion. It was so with the "young and fearless prophet of ancient Galilee." The New Testament might be read as a study in the psychology and actions of mobs. Time and again Jesus was confronted with the surging hatreds of a mob. No doubt John Wesley had derived his own inspiration from the Master because Jesus "always looked a mob in the face." One of the most remarkable examples and descriptions of icy nerve and unbreakable faith occurs in the story of Jesus' rejection by his own townspeople at Nazareth. Jesus had returned to Nazareth to preach his first sermon before those who knew him best. At first they greeted him with a kind of controlled contempt. But as his sermon unfolded and they began to perceive the fullness of his purpose, they became so shocked by this prophet "in his own country", that their contempt burst into flames of wrath. "And they rose up and put him out of the city, and led him to the brow of the hill. . . that they might throw him down headlong." That riotous crowd could have done violence to Jesus, but there was about his bearing a moral majesty so great that they did not quite dare. Note then, how the account of this story ends: "But passing through the midst of them he went away." That was Jesus' power to stare

*Ibid. p. 19

down a mob.

Though we foolishly think that we have become more civilized, and though the Christian faith is more widely, if nominally, accepted, the truest and most daring Christians still have ugly encounters with mobs. The world is still full of hostility and contempt for Christian character and ideals. ~~And~~ The real Christian is one whose spine is stiffened by the advice: "Always look a mob in the face." It will be well for us to examine closely the clear understanding which such stalwarts of the faith possess as they stare down the mob.

-I-

For one thing the fearless person who "always looks a mob in the face" understands that the mob is formed to conceal individual cowardice and weakness of character. Rather than fearing for himself he pities the pathetic individuals who have ganged up against him. To face such a crowd he calls upon the primitive courage of John Wesley and Jesus Christ.

A scene which is forever burned into my memory, whose sounds still thunder in my ears, was the wild mob scene I saw at the world-famous Passion Play at Oberammergau. The surging mob outside of Pilate's court where Jesus was being tried was moved by satanic savagery, and the hot hatred, the frenzied, frothing screams of that demented mass of human beings made one shudder and chill to the base of his soul. As that crowd, choked with rage, clamored, "Crucify him! crucify him!" I lifted my eyes for a moment above the open stage where I could see the peaceful beauty of the Bavarian Alps. Caught in the intensity of that dramatic moment I suddenly realized that it was in this same Bavarian region where the crimes and cruelties of Hitler's satanic mob were conceived and born. I shall never forget too the manner in which Jesus beheld that mob with eyes of

deep, understanding, compassionate sadness. He understood so well that the mob was composed of cowardly individuals who would by themselves would be unable to cry "Crucify him!"

That is the way with all mobs, regardless of how much noise they make. There are some mobs, for example, which work their violence but which make very little audible noise. Harper's Magazine once carried an article entitled "Going Broke on \$10,000 a year." It was written anonymously by a junior executive in the textile industry who complained that he could not make ends meet even though he was in the higher income bracket. In an attempt to prove this he gave an item by item account of his family budget. The major reason offered for this stricken financial picture was that he was compelled by the very nature of his business and social position to live beyond his income. It was expected that in this select company he should have a television set since friends would not call without one. Also his annual liquor bill came to about \$800.00 because his friends and business associates would not accept him if he did not provide suitable drinks. Furthermore he had to pay a higher rent than he could afford in order to live on the "right" side of town. All in all, this man's troubles added up to his being broke on \$10,000 a year because he was submitting as a slave to the dictates of mob rule. Pure and simple, this is another, though somewhat subtle, case of mob psychology. Frankly, I found it impossible to feel sorry for this man in his financial plight, except to pity him for lacking the courage to "look a mob in the face."

In one of his columns the famous newspaper psychologist, Dr. George Crane, used this phrase of John Wesley to describe one of his cases. A young lady, who was also a Sunday School teacher, reported that she worked in a plant that had seventy-five employees, mostly women. They decided to have a company party at the factory. The ringleader, who was

a rather vociferous person, decided that only alcoholic drinks should be served. Grudgingly, however, she put the matter to a vote. The only one to vote against it was this girl. Later some of the girls confessed privately to her that they had really wanted to vote against the issue but were afraid of the bully. At the party the boss mockingly loaded a tray full of liquor glasses, upon which he put one glass of tomato juice. Then he made a big issue out of serving the tomato juice to the lone girl, intimating that she was a freak. Everyone laughed uproariously. But Dr. Crane cited this girl as one who was not afraid "to look a mob in the face."

This is exactly the kind of a challenge which Christian young people face today. On every side there are chiders and mockers of pathetic character who seek to weaken the moral foundations of the strong by the derisive force of the mob. Secretly they feel sick and squeamish at their own cowardice but private fears are propped up by the company of a mob. Emerson once described the hero who "always looks a mob in the face" by saying that he is one who "tak ng both reputation and life in his hand, will, with perfect urbanity, dare the gibbet and the mob, by the absolute truth of his speech and rectitude of his behavior."*

Time and again I gain inspiration by going back to Henry David Thoreau's famous essay, "A Plea for John Brown." John Brown, you will remember, was the gallant soul who defied the law by harboring escaping slaves. Such public wrath rose against him as to constitute the threat of mob violence. But Thoreau leapt to his defense in one of his mightiest essays. He said: "Many, no doubt, are well disposed, but sluggish by consitution and by habit, and they cannot conceive of a man who is actuated by higher motives than they are. Accordingly they pronounce this man insane, for they know that they could never act as he does, as long as they

*Essay on "Herosim"

are themselves." But the fearless person who stares down a mob is precisely one who is determined to remain himself. He will not have his colors hauled down by those who can't come up to him.

So it is that such a person finds his courage to act according to his own principles because he knows deep in his soul that his principles are right and those of the mob are wrong. Though he may outwardly quiver inwardly his courage springs from coils of steel. Again Emerson has diagnosed well the source of the hero's courage: "That which takes my fancy most in the heroic class, is the good humor and the hilarity they exhibit. . . . These rare souls set opinion, success, and life at so cheap a rate that they will not soothe their enemies by petitions, or the show of sorrow, but wear their own habitual greatness." Then Emerson quotes from Beaumont and Fletcher's "Sea Voyage". Julietta tells the stout captain and his company---

Jul. Why, slaves, 'tis in our power to hang ye.

Master.

Very likely,

'Tis in our powers, then, to be hanged, and scorn ye."

There is, then, a way of staring down the mob by laughing at its weakness, and that laughter contains a divine power which both strengthens the person of solitary courage and withers the force of the mob.

-II-

In the second place he who "always looks a mob in the face" knows that mobs are powered by the lowest calibered minds.

Joseph Fort Newton in his autobiography describes the first mob violence which he ever saw. The occasion was a city-wide streetcar strike in St. Louis. Of what he saw he wrote: "A mob is an ugly thing, a mass of organized anger and disorganized reason." "As individuals," wrote Newton,

we may be decent and restrained, but a mob is ruled by the lowest type of mind. Our group-life is our great tragedy, as a convoy takes its pace from the slowest ship."* 1

Perhaps a more contemporary way of describing mob rule is to call it "conformity." In the present time tremendous pressures are exerted in society to get us to conform to the rigid but ruinous patterns of mass behavior. Those who thus submit actually are submitting to the mass. In analyzing the crushing nature of conformity Rufus Jones has noted that "The entire 'drift' runs on extremely little intellectual motor-force. Its havoc is altogether out of proportion to the stock of mental power which is supposed to give it momentum."*2 When we conform to the pattern of society in the mass we are really becoming the slaves of second and third rate intelligence. Hence he who knows this and wishes to follow a higher intelligence is empowered by a higher intelligence.

The pressures of conformity have become so overwhelming in our time that they have even invaded the fields of the arts. A recent article in the Saturday Review deplures "The Cult of Unintelligibility" in current literature. (Nov. 1, '52, p. 10) The writer calls up the images of James Joyce and Gertrude Stein who have wrought such violence upon the English language as to make a fetish out of being unintelligibility. A great many poor imitators, worshipping at this shrine, have come along to further degrade literature. "It is these imitative devotees, writing like men with broken minds, who in considerable part are responsible for the shoddy books of today, when young writers boast that they can complete a novel in six weeks and any man owning a pencil and a ten-cent tablet feels fully equipped to become an author." Yet in the minds of those who

*1 River Of Years, p. 86

*2 Rufus Jones Speaks to our Time, ed. Fosdick, P. 177-78

have been led to conform to this pattern of unintelligibility some of this writing has passed for "greatness." But "Some of this writing cannot be readily distinguished from the pathetic scribbling of the mentally ill."

Adolph Hitler well understood that brute force alone would never be sufficient for any cause to triumph. Brute force, he declared, must be accompanied by a few ideas. It did not matter, however, that those be great ideas: they could be base. So he added to his brute force the accompaniment of some second-rate, cheap ideas. Then he possessed the power to move out with his monstrously evil program. It is the same with mobs. Mobs must always have some ideas with which to join their brute force. But these ideas are always inferior. Hence the true hero, understanding all of this and believing in the ultimate triumph of great ideas, takes his stand whatever the consequences may be. He stares the mob down encouraged to believe that his superior ideas will eventually win.

A line from one of Robinson Jeffers' poems has always haunted me: "The cold passion for truth never hunts in a pack." Indeed the cold passion for truth, for great intelligence, is the mark of him who generally stands alone, able always to "look a mob in the face."

-III-

Finally, those who possess this strength are they whose courage is stiffened and sustained by the presence of God. He who is obedient to the heavenly vision is never obedient to the mob. And yet, to be thus obedient, one must be continuously in search of the heavenly vision where it may be found. Such courage is found in the soul's life with God.

Conversely, I think it can be said that he who has never looked upon the presence of God will not be able long to look a mob in the face. The powers of resistance will be too slim, the power of the mob too strong

for long endurance.

Again the story of early Methodism is full of tales of heroism of brave souls who stared down the mobs. These men were dragged through the dirt by the hair, they were trampled on the ground by heavy boots beaten into bloody pulp with clubs. They were jailed and reviled. But always the next day they were on the road to try it elsewhere. In commenting upon these heroic souls Halford Luccock has said that "It took more than heavy boots to 'tread the Holy Ghost' out of these lay preachers!"*

The viciously thrown stones of an angry mob were not sufficient to "tread the Holy Ghost" out of Stephen, the first martyr. After he had preached to a crowd it is reported: "Now when they heard these things they were enraged, and they ground their teeth against him. But he, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed up into Heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God."

Often I think of the difficulty in raising my children as I greatly desire them to be in this world. After I have done my best there will be hosts of forces to influence them too. They will be tempted and taunted to do and be all sorts of things which would be grievous to me. I cannot be sure that I shall succeed. How shall I teach them? Shall I draw up a list of dos and don'ts by which they shall run the course of their lives? No, let me tell you what I think is most important in my teaching and training: If I can teach them always "to look a mob in the face", I shall not fear for what particular things they may do. But to teach them that I shall have to fortify them with the continual presence of God. The greatest moral and spiritual security I can give them will be to teach them to love the fellowship of God's people in His church. There His presence is continuously invoked, their character is forged with unbreakable power.

Just before Pearl Harbor the great Catholic Bishop, Bernard J. Sheil of Chicago, went unannounced and uninvited to a mass meeting in a hall of hate. For fifteen full minutes Bishop Sheil denounced every vile lie he had heard bellowed by a demagogue, including anti-semitism and white supremacy. While he spoke the audience listened restlessly, seething with hostility. When he had finished he turned around and started down the center aisle. Suddenly the silence was shattered by a scream of anger. A fanatical old woman stepped out and blocked the bishop's way. She shrieked, "I'm a Catholic, but you, you--you're a Catholic bishop. God damn you! Nigger lover! Jew lover! A bishop! Ha, ha! Rabbi Sheil!" Then completely hysterical, she deliberately cleared her throat, and with all her strength spat over one side of the bishop's face. The bishop did not raise his hand to wipe it off. By this time most of the people were standing on their seats and the crowd was roaring madly. Then suddenly the roar died. They perceived that the bishop had turned the other cheek! He waited. The old woman froze, as did hundred about her. Then, as though a sudden chill had gripped her, she began to shake violently. And what had been an instant before a snarling mob became hundreds of lowered faces. The bishop waited another moment, then spoke softly. "Rabbi?" That is what they called our Lord." Then he walked out in silence.

Those who take seriously the Christ of God are never afraid to look a mob in the face.