

A Call to Order

From the Epistle: 1 St. Peter ii. 11 ff.
The Book of Common Prayer, p. 17s

11 Dearly beloved, I beseech you as strangers and pilgrims, abstain from fleshly lusts, which war against the soul; **12** Having your conversation honest among the Gentiles: that, whereas they speak against you as evildoers, they may by your good works, which they shall behold, glorify God in the day of visitation. **13** Submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake: whether it be to the king, as supreme; **14** Or unto governors, as unto them that are sent by him for the punishment of evildoers, and for the praise of them that do well. **15** For so is the will of God, that with well doing ye may put to silence the ignorance of foolish men: **16** As free, and not using your liberty for a cloke of maliciousness, but as the servants of God. **17** Honour all men. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honour the king.

The Bible is a book of paradoxes. At times there seem to be irreconcilable concepts that our best efforts to harmonize fail. Today's text provides us with one of these, and one that is especially relevant to the times in which we live, as we shall see.

At certain places in Scripture, it is obvious that pious and godly men took issue with the prevailing authorities, even to the point of complete defiance. We all remember Jesus' renunciations of the practices of the Jewish leaders: *The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat*, He said; *All therefore whatsoever they bid you observe, that observe and do; but do not ye after their works: for they say, and do not* (Matt. 23:2). Jesus acknowledged the importance of the Law that had been entrusted to the Pharisees, but not their hypocrisy. Likewise, the Apostles, after Jesus' ascension, were hauled before the established religious courts for interrogation, but their word to their hostile persecutors was a fearless...: *We ought to obey God rather than men* (Acts 5:29). St. Paul was also put on trial before the kangaroo court of those who were in power over the institutions of his day, whose judgments he was forced to oppose.

But today's Epistle seems to advise a contrary attitude: submission to authority on all levels, and an unqualified honoring of rulers. Other New Testament teachings appear to offer the same counsel. Listen to these stern words from St. Paul (Romans 13):

1 Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God. 2 Whosoever therefore resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God: and they that resist shall receive to themselves damnation. 3 For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to the evil. Wilt thou then not be afraid of the power? do that which is good, and thou shalt have praise of the same: 4 For he is the minister of God to thee for good. But if thou do that which is evil, be afraid; for he beareth not the sword in vain: for he is the minister of God, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil. 5 Wherefore ye must needs be subject, not only for wrath, but also for conscience sake. 6 For for this cause pay ye tribute also: for they are God's ministers, attending continually upon this very thing. 7 Render therefore to all their dues: tribute to whom tribute is due; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honour to whom honour.

How are we to understand these two apparently opposite approaches to the same question? We are not by any means the first to have asked it. Not only the first century Church, but virtually

every subsequent generation of believers, has had to struggle with this issue. When does the need for such submission, *for the Lord's sake*, give way to the need follow a higher law, that of God Himself, especially when it conflicts with the laws of men? At numerous points in Western history crises have occurred when men in the name of Christian faith have taken it upon themselves to defy what they considered to be arbitrary rule. The Reformation is a prime example, along with numerous conflicts that were its direct result. English history is replete with similar instances, and our own nation was founded by determined men and women who certainly knew Scripture, but felt in good conscience that they could no longer tolerate unjust government.

History and eternity will judge the rectitude of any of these causes and the decisions involved. But in returning to our text, we need to examine the mandate that it places upon us in our times, and how we can make peace, as best we can, with its underlying principle.

Christians have generally been justly appreciated for their earnest efforts to be productive, peaceful members of the cultures they occupy. They have been noted for their law-abiding, orderly, and respectful deportment, even among cultures which have been openly hostile to them. It is precisely such a context that St. Peter is addressing, and this is noteworthy. The ruling Caesar of the day was none other than Nero, a brutal persecutor of Christians, an extravagant liver, and murderer even of his own family members, who died by his own hand. How can Peter offer such counsel, under these circumstances?

Our Epistle from last Sunday, as we remember, spoke of imitating the example of Christ, *who, when he was reviled, reviled not again; when he suffered, he threatened not; but committed himself to him that judgeth righteously...* (1 Pe. 2:23). The result, says Peter, is that *whereas they speak against you as evildoers, they may by your good works, which they shall behold, glorify God in the day of visitation*. And so it was with the Roman empire, which over time was won to Christianity, not by force, but by the quality of the Christian witness in its midst, especially under the most extreme trials.

Fulfilling this calling in our own context is the task which we have been given. How successfully we do so will be gauged in part by the reactions of the world around us. There may be increasing hostility to *what* we believe, along with complete indifference to the idea of divine authority and of God's commandments that we maintain should receive obedience and respect. But the attitude of the Church, displayed in word and action, will be the determining factor in an age absolutely inundated with those who, armed with all sorts of truth claims, are among the competitors for men's hearts.

So what will win the day? Angry rhetoric? Disrespectful denunciation of political leaders whose views we don't share? Threats of retaliation with force? Confirming in the public eye that

Christians are nothing other than just another political interest group, out for the defense of their own status quo at the expense of others?

This is why I stated earlier that these issues are very delicate and hard to resolve. We must promote righteousness at all costs. We cannot back down, for example, when it comes to standing up for the rights of the unborn, or opposing immorality, or the imposition of godlessness through the changing of the country's laws and statutes. Our Christian consciences forbid it, and our reasonable rights as citizens of a nation that guarantees them allow and even urge us to do so.

But notice that Scripture enjoins us to a "holy passivity". It is an attitude of quietness before the Lord, of peace, of implicit trust in God who in His infinite creativity finds a way to work His holy will out through all human vicissitude. Such peace, when believers allow it to appear within themselves, is a banner of display to all others that Christians know that their destinies are not slavishly attached to the rise and fall of the fortunes of this world. They will neither crow nor boast over their victories, nor groan and moan over their reversals. *For so is the will of God*, says St. Peter, *that with well doing ye may put to silence the ignorance of foolish men*. It is foolish men that portray Christians as backward and ignorant, and of being unable to accept that the times have changed, and that moral standards should change with them. It is foolish men that are in a hurry to cast aside the time-tested treasures of religious tradition, the shared principles that have served to keep us together as a nation, in favor of the new and empty gods of their own making. To *put them to silence* would be a victory, indeed!

In a world sinking into disorder, we are to remain at all costs the greatest example of order we can possibly be: *Honour all men. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honour the king*. With eyes of faith, we behold that the entire universe is a hierarchy whose smoothness of operation depends upon each level's recognition of its place in the scheme of things, its glad acceptance of its role, and its deference to all others in their's. It is only sin that has caused disruption in this orderly picture, and it is sin that continues to bear the potential to do so. As we grow in grace, learning to submit our lives ever more increasingly to the Lord, we will serve mightily among those factors that are working to reestablish that which sin has so grossly overturned.

Power in powerlessness, as it were, in an age that glorifies power, is a tough stance to take. We grow weary, and disgusted, and start thinking of modes of vengeance against that which seems to be intolerable. We find it easy to allow a host of strong emotions to take the place of the Christian attitudes that we know are proper. It is far easier to forcefully "let off steam", than to find some more spiritual way of venting it.

But each victory that you have — that I have— allows us to chalk one more up in the success column. And the results may well mean the saving of souls...

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.