

Citizens of an Eternal Kingdom

From the Epistle: 1 St. Peter iii. 8 ff.

8 ...be ye all of one mind, having compassion one of another, love as brethren, be pitiful, be courteous: **9** Not rendering evil for evil, or railing for railing: but contrariwise blessing; knowing that ye are thereunto called, that ye should inherit a blessing. **10** For he that will love life, and see good days, let him refrain his tongue from evil, and his lips that they speak no guile: **11** Let him eschew evil, and do good; let him seek peace, and ensue it. **12** For the eyes of the Lord are over the righteous, and his ears are open unto their prayers: but the face of the Lord is against them that do evil. **13** And who is he that will harm you, if ye be followers of that which is good? **14** But and if ye suffer for righteousness' sake, happy are ye: and be not afraid of their terror, neither be troubled; **15** But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts...

Today's Epistle text is a prescription for happiness for God's people, in trying times. This is especially helpful for the Church, when there appear to be great and significant setbacks to what we all ardently believe are ideals that are good, noble, and time-tested. In a mere matter of decades, the whole matrix of godliness that has in some real sense underlain the collective American conscience appears to have been under the process of demolition. At first it was brick by brick, but now, in a devilishly grand frenzy of destruction, the whole remainder has been subjected to a relentless battering ram of opposition, as onlookers stand helplessly on the sidelines, observing the process, but at a loss for answers as to what, if anything, can be done.

St. Peter has invaluable counsel for us, that will transform us from a stance of fearful passivity to one of forthright activity. But we may well have to accept that the measures he recommends differ radically from those we might well have adopted.

I would like to offer at the outset some difficult thoughts which represent long held convictions as I've viewed the phenomenal polarization of ideas that characterizes a nation that although it regularly pledges it, hand over heart, hardly seems any longer "one nation, under God, indivisible...". These will be hard for me to express, and perhaps even harder to be heard, but necessity drives their consideration.

First of all, God has not stated a covenantal commitment to any people, except to the Jews as declared repetitively especially in the Old Testament, and to His people adopted through Jesus Christ into His family... the Church, the Body of New Testament believers. To these "nations" alone God has declared His absolute and unqualified loyalty and faithfulness. Among His very earliest words to the patriarch Abraham are, *And I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee, and make thy name great; and thou shalt be a blessing...* (Gen. 12:2). And of the Church, Peter declares, nearly two millennia later: *But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should shew forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvellous light...* (1 Pe. 2:9). He has not included in this list the United States of America, nor Great Britain, nor the once professing Christian countries of Europe, nor any other constituted body, although it certainly is true that His manifest

blessing has been upon those that have in some measure, to borrow an important phrase from our Epistle, *sanctified the Lord God in their hearts.*

Blessed is the nation whose God is the LORD; and the people whom he hath chosen for his own inheritance is the ringing declaration of Psalm 33:12, and there are surely thousands of Memorial Days and July 4ths when these selfsame words have been solemnly repeated, intoned for the sake of *this* nation, by gatherings of loyal and patriotic citizens, too many to possibly number.

But such words, when mouthed carelessly and conveniently in times of gross apostasy, of falling away from religious commitment and practice, become nothing other than writing checks on an account of righteousness long, long overdrawn, or swiping a credit card at an ATM on nonexistent funds. Pretending that the money is there is easy, and convincing others is, as well, especially when all are involved in the same game of self-deception. But the bank has been closed, its doors locked and shuttered, and the Banker Himself has abandoned the premises and walked away. We can hear His words as He removes, though they be deliberately drowned out by the foolish partying and celebration of a people in a state of suicidal denial:

..at what instant I shall speak concerning a nation, and concerning a kingdom, to build and to plant it; If it do evil in my sight, that it obey not my voice, then I will repent of the good, wherewith I said I would benefit them (Jer. 18:9, 10)

Because of these things, there comes a time when the loyalties of God's people are sorely tested. How can they in good conscience subscribe to the hypocritical declarations of allegiance to righteous principles of a people who obviously despise them, and have long since lost the will and mettle to do the hard work of maintaining and supporting them? At such a time, one has no choice but to abandon what has become a sorry sham, to turn one's heart toward the eternal Kingdom of God, and devote one's energies and strength to its furtherance and protection. I see it as a waving goodbye — as sad and distressing as is the thought — to a beloved land that has set itself without repentance to a course contrary to the will of God.

And so, what is left to us to do? It is here where we turn again to today's text. Does it say, "Take up arms! Spend every last ounce of energy in fighting the enemy to the death! Exhaust every political means available in halting the advances that are so evident on every front! Grab the collar of a foolish nation by the lapels and scream in its face, 'Stop!'"?

No. Here is what it says: *... be ye all of one mind, having compassion one of another, love as brethren, be pitiful, be courteous: Not rendering evil for evil, or railing for railing: but contrariwise blessing; knowing that ye are thereunto called, that ye should inherit a blessing. For he that will love life, and see good days, let him refrain his tongue from evil, and his lips that they speak no guile: Let him eschew evil, and do good; let him seek peace, and ensue it.*

Render a blessing! What can this possibly mean, in practical terms? It is only God's people who, through the power of their faith, can see past the disastrous temporal consequences of the choices that a people given over to sin bring upon themselves, to view a Kingdom filled with peace, love,

joy, and righteousness. To the extent that we apprehend the eternal, we can make it real to others, and indeed *render them a blessing*. In past times of intense persecution, all the world could see clearly written upon the faces of Christians that which they never would have expected to have seen there. This spoke faith to empty, needy hearts with an eloquence unmatched by words.

...*let him refrain his tongue from evil, and his lips that they speak no guile...* How easy it is to react to caustic ideological rhetoric with more of the same! There is the microphone, stuck in the believer's face; there are the cameras; there is the challenging and scornful demeanor of the press, and the temptation proves too much. A hasty word, a bad and uncharitable attitude betrayed, and the high and lofty ground of faith is forfeited. *For the eyes of the Lord are over the righteous, and his ears are open unto their prayers: but the face of the Lord is against them that do evil.* Oh how difficult is the lesson learned that if the Christian merits it, the severity he expected to be meted out upon the unrighteous will instead be dealt to him!

And who is he that will harm you, if ye be followers of that which is good? But and if ye suffer for righteousness' sake, happy are ye: and be not afraid of their terror, neither be troubled... Who will harm you? What does this mean in this context? To the Apostle's readers, this certainly wouldn't have meant, "Who could possibly cause you physical hurt?" since many of them surely were subject to all kinds of violence, as have been believers under fire for their faith ever since then. It couldn't mean being exempt from emotional injury, either, for no Christian would boast nor even desire such stoicism when things go against us. The *harm* spoken of here is deeper. Quoting St. Paul's famous words from the 8th chapter of his Epistle to the Romans:

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written, For thy sake we are killed all the day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter. Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us. For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, Nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

But and if ye suffer for righteousness' sake, happy are ye: and be not afraid of their terror, neither be troubled... *Happy are ye if ye suffer for righteousness!* What would we have preferred the text to say: "Happy are ye if ye win back the ground that you thought was irrecoverable. Happy are ye if the right candidates are elected to high office. Happy are ye if the Star Spangled Banner remains waving uninterruptedly over our beloved nation forever"?

We close with the very most significant verse of this entire text, because it is a pointed directive not to others, but to us: *sanctify the Lord God in your hearts...* (NIV: *in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord*). This phrase points back to Old Testament phraseology with a paradoxical significance. The references to God's holiness there are almost countless, along with the injunctions upon Israel to treat Him accordingly. For you and me, this is our daily labor. Make a place for Him in the very deepest reaches of your being, where He alone reigns, enjoys your highest

esteem, and displaces every other priority. Build Him an altar there which neither blessing nor hardship can disturb.

If this is your practice, it will mark you... count on it. It will mark you far more than your stated opinion or position on any set of current events. Both the seen world of human scrutiny and the unseen world of our ever watchful spiritual opponents will take note of the matter, when they pause to assess the state of things. Herein lies the recapturing of the power and the authority of the Church!

One parting and exceedingly hopeful thought: not one single element of goodness that the Lord God has invested in any nation upon earth will ever be lost! Not one iota! Though the false and outward show of piety and patriotism suffer the fate of which it is worthy, no act of kindness, of nobility, of self-sacrifice, of noble principle, will ever be erased. In this sense, and in this one alone, the very essence of what our nation is will go on surviving forever, as will that of any people anywhere who have knowingly or even unknowingly fulfilled the will of God!

But it is only those with eyes of faith who will be able to part with the temporal in order to affirm the eternal.

God grant it to be so with you and me.

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