

Crown Thy Good with Brotherhood

Psalm 48 and 2 Samuel 5:1-5,9-10

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May my words be a lamp to our feet and a light to our path.

When I was in high school, our teachers—good nuns all—would ask for prayer for our basketball or football team to be victorious. I never thought much about the oddness of this request until many years later, when Henry protested that God doesn't take sides in athletic competitions, not even for Roman Catholics, who assumed—back in the 50's and 60's—that God was always on their side! I suppose our teachers came by their view honestly; they were products of the Judeo-Christian tradition that portrayed God choosing sides in secular concerns, especially in governance. Hear these words from today's Psalm:

“Beautiful and lofty, the joy of all the earth, is the hill of Zion, the very center of the world and the city of the great King. God is in her citadels.”

The “great King” is not David, not some earthly ruler, but God, who chooses this city as his resting place. And not only chooses it, but repels other rulers of the earth who try to capture it:

“Behold, the kings of the earth assembled and marched forward together. They looked and were astounded; they retreated and fled in terror.”

In the reading from Samuel, we hear more of the same: God chose David to be king, and “David became greater and greater, for the Lord, the God of hosts, was with him.”

This was a way of thinking that was old and deep in the hearts and minds of the Hebrew people. From Abraham on, they understood themselves to be God's chosen people. People who would inherit not only the land we now call Israel, but who would fill the earth with their descendants. People who would listen to God's voice for guidance in every aspect of their lives,

including their government. So when the Hebrews returned from Egypt after their long captivity, they didn't hesitate to kill and drive out the various nations that had settled in what they thought of as their land. After all, God had given it to them, no matter that they had been absent for many generations. For them, religion and politics were one and the same. It was a way of viewing the world that didn't allow for compromise, for the possibility of honoring anyone else's theology or politics. It was a problem then; it is a problem now. We have only to look at Israel, the Taliban in Afghanistan, Iran, Al Qaeda's presence in Iraq, to see what sorrows come when religious leaders insist on controlling secular governments.

Jesus was pretty clear about this issue. He told his followers that they were to give to Caesar the things that were Caesar's, and to God the things that were God's. God would not become the ruler of the nations, nor would God choose the rulers or lead an army to throw the Romans out of Israel. Jesus did not even say that God was cheering for the chosen people against all others, for God's kingdom was not of this earth, but a heavenly kingdom, and God's followers were to live in the world without being a part of the world. This view of God overturned everything the Hebrews had held dear for centuries: no wonder the leaders despised Jesus and feared his influence!

The founders of our nation were Christian, though many of them were Christian in name only. They were more strongly influenced, I think, by the ideas of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment than they were by any religious principles. And influenced as well, no doubt, by the religious strife in England in the 17th century, which caused many of their ancestors to pack up and head to the freedom of the New World. They wanted to ensure freedom of religious expression for all citizens, and to prevent any denomination from ruling the new land, and so their first amendment to the Constitution says this:

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof. . . .

And so the new United States of America entered into a brave new world, the struggle to balance the tension between religion and politics. For a lot of Americans, freedom of religious expression is frightening. It has become much more worrying for many people in recent years, as this nation has grown more diverse: we are Christian, we are Jewish, we are Muslim, we are Hindu, we are Buddhist, we are atheist, we are not sure. And so the

religious right in America—like the Taliban in Afghanistan or the mullahs in Iran—have been shrill in their insistence that we proclaim ourselves a Christian nation, that it was always God’s intent for us to be so. They fight for keeping religious images in courthouses, city halls, and public schools, as though the absence of those images would destroy not only our faith, but our nation. They have insisted that we elect only good Christians—thoroughly vetted for their views on critical subjects—to public office, and they have sometimes proclaimed that certain men were God’s choice (you might recall that George Bush once said God wanted him to be president: shades of ancient Israel).

They have caused great division in this nation between those who insist that Christianity and patriotism are synonymous, and those who believe that it is possible—indeed a healthy thing—to be both a person of faith (or no faith) and a loyal citizen of this country. I think they have forgotten the words of Jesus on the subject of earthly rulers, and I think they might like to change the First Amendment to the Constitution if they could. But I am hopeful, on this weekend that we celebrate the birth of our nation, that these divisions will begin to mend, that we will grow comfortable with a nation that is ruled by law and not by one denomination or another .

Jesus didn’t hand us an easy faith: he told us to be in the world, but not of the world. It is a lifetime’s work to figure out how to do that, unless we retreat into a hermit’s hut and keep the world away. Our founders did not give us an easy governance: we must ensure freedom of religious expression for everyone, even people we don’t like or don’t agree with, people whose beliefs make us uneasy or challenge our own certainties. But I am hopeful that we can cease to act as though this country is God’s new chosen people, for that attitude has led to arrogance in dealing with the rest of the world. I don’t believe that God chooses our leaders: we do that, hopefully with prayer and thought. I don’t really believe that God chose the kings of Israel: I think that was a people’s way of understanding their history.

We have inherited a rich and beautiful land, a government that—for all its faults—is “by and for the people,” a land peopled with men and women from every race and ethnic background, a nation complex in ways that our founders could not have imagined. But they gave us the tools to deal with that complexity. And God gives us the intelligence, the compassion, the humility that we need to live with that complexity in a way that will enrich the lives of every citizen of this country, that will extend our riches to our

brothers and sisters throughout the world. May our prayer always be, in words we know well:

“America, America, God shed his grace on thee,
and crown thy good with brotherhood from sea to shining sea.”