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The Parish Paper

OF
ST. JOHN'S CHURCH
SAVANNAH, GEORGIA

Vol.36 No.3

The Third Sunday in Advent

12/12/04

Where We Belong (II)

We are called to be citizens of the Kingdom of God. The mystery is that the love and knowledge of the Father teaches us how to love and care for our neighbors, our fellow-strangers and pilgrims on this world. We do not know how properly to love and care for ourselves or for anyone else unless and until we know both ourselves and them in terms of the love of God in Christ. Dean Inge rightly said, now fifty years ago: "Cut off from the sacred passion for God, compassion for our fellow men regularly withers from its roots."

Therefore it is the Church's one absolute business to remember and hold fast all the time to her supernatural spiritual life. The other things will be added to her and to us when this priority is enacted. We do not know how to love ourselves or our neighbor, or how to minister to and within our world, unless our first love goes to God, and our first allegiance to His Kingdom.

Consider the martyr's choice. Is it better for me to die, thus depriving the world of many years of my perhaps useful existence? Why should I not burn the incense to Caesar and live, to be of further earthly use? And how selfish our prayers most often are: "Keep me safe"; "Make me well"; "Let me be happy"; "Give me what I want." Most of what we speak toward God is concerned with the help we need to get along in the world and to fare well within it. Against this stands the most austere of all Jesus' sayings (and who can or will receive it?): "Whoso hateth his life in this world shall keep it unto life eternal." No wonder people left him when they heard that, or that his disciples were so often uncomprehending.

To want God's help in this world is not wrong or bad. It is "natural" to us. We cannot avoid it, and God in his mercy is merciful to our prayers. He provides amply and generously the means of grace. Yet we must recollect that God does not exist to meet and to serve what you and I and all the rest of the world may have decided we want and need from Him. God cannot be turned, even by the most fervent prayer, into a means for our ends. "Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done"; and only then, "Give us..."

We are not meant to be miserable and unhappy and fearful in this world. The fact that we often are so is the consequence of what is called sin. However, we are not meant to be at our ease here either, for this is not home. Heart's ease is not here, and never will be. It belongs to that other Kingdom, the price of our entrance into which

our good Lord Jesus paid for us with his life and death because he loved the Father more than he loved himself, and did the Father's will rather than his own.

He died when he was barely thirty, leaving how many needs unmet, how many wounds unconsolated, how many sick not healed, how many miracles unperformed? When he returned from the grave he seemed to think it had been more important for him to die than to continue living his wholly useful and ministering life on earth out to his full threescore years and ten.

Not many of us can join St. Paul with a full heart and say, "I had rather be absent from the body and present with the Lord." But this difference of mind remains both the rebuke to our worldliness and also the touchstone of authentic Christianity. How much do we give to Caesar? As much as he requires and as little as we can get away with, mindful of his dominations and powers, which will take whatever they decide they want or are entitled to have. How much do we give the Lord? His spiritual Church is no tax-collector, but it asks no less an offering than your whole self, soul and body. His temporal Church asks you only to remember where you belong and to whom, and then, as a sacramental sign of your citizenship in heaven and your membership of the blessed company of all faithful people, to share yourself and your possessions with her, the Church on earth, "to the glory of God", whose Church she is and shall always remain, do the institution and her governors what they will.

You offer something here. It is presented "up there", at the altar. The offering is to God, and only incidentally to St. John's Church in Savannah. "Your citizenship is in heaven", and your participation in this earthly house is the sacramental sign that you belong to God, and are meant to inhabit his kingdom.

There is no doubt in my mind that every single one of us has more extensive and necessary obligations to Caesar than we ever imagine rendering to God. There is an element of "do it or else" with Caesar.

The "or else" with God is tempered by his mercy, but I see no reason to expect that we will go to his Kingdom and live with Him forever in it if we have shown miserly contempt and utter worldliness through neglect of his offerings.

Begin with God, with the first commandment and with God's Kingdom and his righteousness. Pray without ceasing, "Thy Kingdom come." Then and then only see what you can do and should do to try to effect the will of God on earth. But never the other way around. The first and great commandment remains first and great. The second is "like unto it"; but never to be considered apart from it or independent of it. On its own, without the first, it is the counsel of despair and a radical impossibility.

We must not forget that our citizenship is in heaven, "from whence we look for the Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ, who shall change our vile bodies"—not just your and my individual worldly selves, but the whole body of the world, Caesar and all his works—"that is may be conformed unto the body of his glory." This transformation in Christ, to which St. Paul is the supreme witness in Christian history, is mysterious, multifarious, and not to be measured in any finite way. It

is also the most nearly self-evident thing in the whole world, once it happens. The world did not treat Jesus very well, even though whole life was given as a ransom for it. The world did not treat Socrates or Dante very well, either. But no one could mistake any of them for anything other than what they were—transformed, different, living for God's Kingdom and his righteousness. Would that someone could say that of any one of us.

The end of the matter is this. If you begin with God, you will end with God. If you begin with the world and yourself in it, no matter how neighborly you may feel, and no matter how acute your conscience is, you will end in the world. Your fate will be "your stinking self", but worse. You will never come to heaven; not because God is mean or unwilling to have you there, but very simply because you have not wanted to go. May God forbid.

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