

We Stand on Guard for Thee

Based on Psalm 72

My thanks to Harvey Bell for encouraging me to read "The Gifts of the Jews" by Thomas Cahill, which has inspired some of my thinking today.

I was always taught that the pulpit was no place for politics. So then, how does one speak about God and nation on a day such as this, without talking about politics? Very Carefully! Rather like tip-toeing through a field of live mines and smelling like a tulip on the other side...I hope! So in case I miss the mark this morning, here are the two things I'm trying to say:

- 1) You cannot entirely separate church and state.
- 2) People are precious.

The great king David had come near the end of his mighty reign. It was difficult to imagine that David's beginnings were that of a humble shepherd boy, drawn into battle against the Philistine giant, Goliath. One victory led to others, to new commands, and finally, the palace. There had been some less than glorious moments. David had wrestled the 'deadly sins'. Sometimes he had failed, and fallen from favour with YHWH. Politically, David had pushed back his enemies, and

created a nation now in an enviable position. For any trade from the north, the south, or the east, had to move through his kingdom. And that would require a tax, a tribute. Israel could sit back, negotiate trade alliances, and accumulate much. Times were good.

Now, late in life, preparing the path for his son Solomon to take the throne, David thought back on all the ups and downs of his life, and remembered two things:

- 1) It was YHWH who had given him the strength and courage to achieve all this.
- 2) YHWH had been steadfast, even during the chapters of life he was not.

Praise be to the LORD God, the God of Israel, who alone does marvelous deeds. Praise be to his glorious name forever; may the whole earth be filled with his glory. Amen and Amen. (v18-19)

One imagines David, at a large banquet, after a feast of food and wine, standing to address the court, filled with officials and bureaucrats and politicians; drawing their attention to his son, Solomon, dressed in great finery at the head table. His speech was almost like a passing of the torch, a commission, and I think, whispered in the

background, an appeal. David began:

Endow the king with your justice, O God, the royal son with your righteousness. (v1)

He continued on with a long list of attributes for a king to address in his reign:

May he judge...
May he defend...
May he endure...
May he rule from sea to sea...

The list goes on for several verses. Then, a brief change in grammar. Verses 12-14 begin this way:

For he will deliver...
For he will have compassion...
For he will rescue...

Just as abruptly, "Long may he live!" and a return to more of the 'may he's'. I cannot help thinking that perhaps this small break from the prepared speech was in some way, and appeal, from father to son, from a king to his heir, from a servant of YHWH to another: "Don't forget the people."

Today, we see ourselves not as a country from 'sea to sea' (v8) but from sea to sea to sea. These days, we recognize that whether our family has been in this country for generations, or for a year, we all immigrated here at some point in time. I suspect that if written history could go back far enough, even our Indigenous brothers and sisters moved-here from

some-where. But we have all arrived to this land, where there is space and freedom, and immense beauty, and we all call it home.

We live by laws that stem from even more ancient laws. In the church, we call them The Commandments, and trace their history to the time of Moses. They are rules to keep us safe, to keep society in good order, and to take care of the people. These days, the courts work at keep us safe, the social system works at keeping our society moving, and I would like to think that the church works at reminding the world to take care of the people. So while we may operate as separate identities these days, the history of church and state, are intertwined by even more ancient laws and rules, and if you listen carefully, by God Himself. For who was it who gave those laws to Moses in the first place? You may be able to take God out of the schools, my friends, but you cannot take God out of the picture. And that makes me smile.

And we must not forget the role of the church as this

great country of ours was settled. The local church symbolized more than just a place for Sunday morning worship. It was a community center, a town hall, a concert venue, a funeral parlour, a disaster center, a school, a Women's Institute hall, and a drop in center for quilting bees. From sea to sea to sea, the community church has continued to be a place for the people: to worship, to make decisions, to socialize. God's whispers were busy at work, even between the stitches of quilting fabric: *For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them." (Matthew 18:20)*

As King David neared the end of his life, he recognized that his success came from honouring YHWH first, and taking care of his people second. Personal gain and fame had come only when he followed these principals. He fervently hoped that his son Solomon would come to understand this, live by this, and rule by these truths.

The whispers of God have been busy at work in this great country of ours over the generations and will

continue to work quietly behind the scenes for the generations to come. The role of the church in our communities has changed. Yes. But that does not mean that our intentions to honour God and to look after His people needs to. If we continue to serve those in our pews and those in our midst with compassion and care and careful attention, we continue to honour God. When we use the laws of our land and the social system to help direct those in need to resources they are in search of, then our country is also serving God, although it may not realize it.

For those who need to keep church and state separate, we'll just say that our democratic system of government arranged for assistance. For the Christians among us, we know that God's hand is quietly at work. And so, I will smile.

We, here, will stand on guard for thee, O God. Amen.