

OUR HERITAGE

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on November 24, 1963 at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee, and heard over radio station WLAC at 8:05 P.M.

During these past two days we Americans have passed through a great ordeal. Through the means of television and radio we have seen history made before our eyes. We have been caught up in a great unfolding tragedy. The first citizen of our nation, and because of his position perhaps the first citizen of the entire world, our own chief executive, lies dead as the result of a wild, irrational, brutal act of a madman. All of us, nearly one hundred ninety million of us, have stood shocked, unbelieving, stunned, silent and grieving. We have stood united. For a few days there have been no political partisans--only Americans. We have stood united in our sympathy for a bereaved family, and in our grief for a fallen leader, for whom all of us, even those who differed with him in religion and in political ideas, felt affection.

In times of tragedy we find ourselves asking, "Why? Why did this happen?" The act of assassination was the result of a depraved, sinful heart. I am reminded of the words of Jesus, "For out of the heart come forth evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, railings." (Matt. 15:19). This and all other evil acts are born in the sinful hearts of men.

Good Out Of Evil

I am reminded of another scripture. In Romans 8:28, we read, "And we know that to them that love God all things work together for good, even to them that are called according to his purpose." Notice that this passage does not say that all things are good, for there are many things in our world which are not good. In hours like these we are painfully aware of the evil that lurks about us. What our text does say is that all things work together for good to those that love the Lord. God can bring good out of evil. Sometimes we have seen it in terms of sickness, or the loss of a loved one, or financial loss, all of which are not good in themselves, but which have from time to time been overruled by God in such a way as to serve a good purpose. Let us hope that the tragic events of these recent days will somehow be overruled for the eventual good of our nation.

In these hours of national grief, there is a soberness, a humility, a freedom from pride and self-centeredness, which are rare indeed. Times Square, and its counterparts across the land, were darkened. The entertainment media were silent. As the nation contemplates the mad, senseless act that felled our president, it pauses to analyze the events that may have led to this tragedy. Tensions, strife, and hatred build barriers between groups which cause some extremist to take such violent action. It is out of such feelings that this tragic series of events has come. In a sense, all who have contributed in any way to the misunderstandings, the prejudices, and the tensions of our day have contributed a little part toward this awful event. In times like these man is jarred from his usual feelings of self-centered complacency into a willingness to examine the basic issues of life about him. Under the impact of so crucial an event he is able to see things in a clearer light. Perhaps this is an appropriate time for us to turn our eyes backward and to examine our great American heritage.

Most Blessed

Of all the peoples of the earth we are most blessed. First of all, we have inherited a wonderful land and climate. From Maine to California, from Washington to Florida, from Alaska to Hawaii, the richness of our land is apparent. At some more appropriate time, I should like to talk about the wonderful blessings of the land in which we live.

In the second place, we have inherited an excellent system of government. In these past few days we have been proud of its ability to adjust in a crisis. Pausing momentarily, in the assassination of our chief executive, we have already shifted the gears and started moving again. We are proud of our nation for its respect for the individual man, even when a particular man has proved himself unworthy of respect. Ours is a government in which the great masses of honest, sincere people choose their leaders and through them determine the policies of the nation. In the often mentioned but never trite expression, ours is truly a government "of the people, by the people, and for the people."

Our heritage includes a great ancestry of which we can justly be proud. There has been a long procession of great men and women who have furnished the leadership that our nation has required. These are men and women who have possessed courage, initiative, and the drive to accomplish great things. These are men and women of honesty, integrity, and honor. Some of them have been prominent leaders; others have been unknown outside their own families and intimate circle of friends. Equally, they have been great because of the homely, simple virtues that make for greatness.

Finally, the greatest single aspect of our heritage is religious. Those who first braved the dangers of an uncharted north Atlantic sought the new continent in order that they might have religious freedom. Ours has been a history of faith in God, in the divinity of Christ, and in the inspiration of the Bible. Our coins still bear the stamp, "In God we trust." It is these deep religious convictions that have

furnished the foundation upon which our great nation has been built. All of this adds up to the great heritage which we Americans possess.

Trends of Our Day

As we bring our attention from the great heritage of the past to the examination of the present, we become deeply concerned about the drift of our day. The qualities that made our nation great are gradually slipping away. Ours is a nation in which vice and crime are much too prominent. Crime in a recent year was seven percent above the previous year. Although we pride ourselves on being a Christian nation, we have more murders, more sex offenses, and more of certain other types of crimes than any similar segment of the world's population. Ours is a nation in which the taking of dope and the drinking of intoxicants is much too widespread. Ours is a generation in which self-indulgence and sensualism are accurate descriptive terms. As a result adultery is common and the number of divorces rises year by year. It is a time in which materialism has dominated the thinking of a great host of Americans. Ours is a generation in which atheism, agnosticism and doubt loom ever larger. In the realm of religion liberalism has eaten the very heart out of orthodox Christianity. Still further, lawlessness has reached the point of anarchy in various places and at various times.

As I contemplate the drift of our day I am reminded of a passage in the book of Isaiah, in which the prophet sounded a warning against the sinful city of Jerusalem and the nation of Judah. God guided Isaiah to say, "The vision of Isaiah the son of Amoz, which he saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem. Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth; for Jehovah hath spoken: I have nourished and brought up children, and they have rebelled against me. The ox knoweth his owner, and the ass his master's crib, but Israel doth not know, my people doth not consider. Ah sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity, a seed of evil-doers, children that deal corruptly! They have forsaken Jehovah, they have despised the Holy One of Israel, they are estranged and gone backward." (Isaiah 1:1-4).

After he had detailed the sins of Judah, the prophet then made this appeal, "Wash you, make you clean; put away the evil of your doings from before mine eyes; cease to do evil; learn to do well; seek justice, relieve the oppressed, judge the fatherless, plead for the widow. Come now, and let us reason together, saith Jehovah: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool. If ye be willing and obedient, ye shall eat the good of the land; but if you refuse and rebel, ye shall be devoured with the sword; for the mouth of Jehovah hath spoken it." (Isaiah 1:16-20).

A Return To The Lord

The greatest need of our day is a return to the Lord. We need to return to his teachings: "Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth. Blessed are they that hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled. Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God. Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called sons of God." (Matt. 5:3-9). These are only the beginning of Christ's teachings but they suggest the vast storehouse of truth that he gave to mankind.

We need also to return to the life of Christ which he lived as an example for us. It was the Hebrew writer who said, "For we have not a high priest that cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but one that hath been in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin." (Heb. 4:15). The apostle Paul spoke of Jesus as one who did no sin, neither was guile found in his mouth." (I Peter 2:22a)

Across the past nineteen centuries I would take our thoughts back to the cross of Calvary. During all of the years of these nineteen centuries there have been many tragedies: assassinations, deceptions, betrayals and crimes of every kind. In addition, there have been great wars with their untold sufferings. Truly, there have been many tragedies, but the greatest of all the tragedies was when the Son of God was murdered on the cross.

Jesus was no mortal man, but rather the Son of God. Christ faced the cross knowingly, willingly, offering himself for the redemption of all mankind. The Hebrew writer speaks of Jesus, "Who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising shame, and hath sat down at the right hand of the throne of God." (Heb. 12:2). Even in the agony of dying on the cross, Jesus found a joy in it because he realized that it was making possible the redemption of all mankind from sin. When Jesus was crucified, it was not the senseless act of a madman, but rather the calculated plan of the religious leaders of his day. In spite of this He said, "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do." (Luke 23:34). There were no millions of sympathetic, grieving friends when Jesus was crucified, but only a handful of disciples and even some of them melted away under the pressure of the enemies of Jesus. In dying for the sins of the world he was all but alone.

Conclusion

Knowing the tragedy that sin had brought into our world, a tragedy that has continued down to this present hour and is most vivid in our memories at this moment, our Lord died to redeem man from sin and to show him a way of escape from the sorrows and sufferings of this world. Our Lord has brought happiness and eternal salvation to the thousands of those who have been willing to accept him. What a tragedy it is that the world still suffers and evil still runs rampant among men. If only we had been wise enough to follow the example and the teachings of Christ, what a different world this could have been.

Our Lord still calls us to the upward way. If you are not a Christian, listen as he calls for you to come to a life that will bring happiness here and eternal joy hereafter. "Come unto me all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light." (Matt. 11:28-30). Still other words from the Lord present his yearning appeal, "Behold, I stand at the door and knock: if any man hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to him and will sup with him, and he with me." (Rev. 3:20).