

Why we say: “God Bless America”

Text:

Psalm 127: 1-5

A Song of degrees for Solomon.

Except the LORD build the house, they labour in vain that build it: except the LORD keep the city, the watchman waketh *but* in vain. *It is* vain for you to rise up early, to sit up late, to eat the bread of sorrows: *for* so he giveth his beloved sleep. Lo, children *are* an heritage of the LORD: *and* the fruit of the womb *is* his reward. As arrows *are* in the hand of a mighty man; so *are* children of the youth. Happy *is* the man that hath his quiver full of them: they shall not be ashamed, but they shall speak with the enemies in the gate.

Two Revolutions:

The invocation: “God bless America” has been fixed as an expected part of American public rhetoric. We are not surprised when our politicians include it in their speeches, or when our generals send our children to battle with it ringing in their ears. From local mayors to the president we have come to expect our elected officials to invoke God’s blessing on the people they govern. This may be more obvious to me than to some. Having lived a good part of my adult life outside the United States, I often observe my native country with more objective eyes than I would have had I not been exposed to other ways of doing things. While I am sure that such invocations are not absent from French political rhetoric, I do not recall ever hearing a French public official saying: “*Que Dieu bénisse la France*”. What was usually said at the point in the speech where we would expect: “God bless America”, was: “*vive la France, vive la République.*” Now I realize that both statements can be, and on many occasions are, simply expected rhetorical devices, predictable conclusions to hopefully rousing speeches. However, there is a reason for their existence that is deeply rooted in the origins of the two nations.

We have not gathered today for a history lesson; however, a quick comparison of the theological roots of the American and French revolutions will illustrate why the current political rhetoric of the two nations punctuate their conclusions in different ways. France, like the United States, dates the beginning of its Republic to a late 18th century revolution. Since the two took place in close succession, and had some common roots, they are often compared. It is not my purpose to make a full comparison of the two this morning, but to simply make a couple of observations about the theological roots of the two revolutions, and help you to understand

that when the best of America's leaders invoke the blessing of God on our nation it is more than empty rhetoric.

The American Revolution was theologically grounded in the basic Judeo-Christian ideas of a benevolent God who directs history; of humans as created in the image of God; and of sin as the fundamental human problem. Let us look at these three ideas as they relate to how we conduct public affairs. I will take them in reverse order.

Democracy, as it has been understood and practiced in America, sprouted from the soil of the Judeo-Christian worldview. Of the various influences of this worldview on our democratic experiment, none has been more important than its understanding of human beings and their relationship to one another as expressed in the doctrines of the *imago Dei*, and original sin. It is in the balance of these two ideas, that humans are, on the one hand, very great and are to be considered of inestimable value and, on the other hand, incurable sinners not to be overly trusted, that we find the explanation of the success of American democracy. We need also be mindful that if these two pillars disappear from our worldview it will become nearly impossible for the house of freedom to stand.

America was born saying: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, and that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness." If these truths seemed self-evident to the founding fathers it was because they accepted the biblical concept that God had created humans in his own image. Those who do not accept this biblical idea do not necessarily affirm the *imago Dei*, human equality, or even human nature. Even in America we have struggled, and continue to struggle, with the implications of this affirmation. During slavery some Christian theologians taught that the black person had no soul. They did so because they recognized the inherent contradiction between the affirmation of the Declaration of Independence, and the institution of slavery, if the slave shared a common nature with the slave owner. What this cornerstone of Christian theology and American democracy implies is that no human being can be devalued, despised, or disenfranchised. It is for this reason that the current American debate concerning the identity of the human person is as axiomatic to our future as the slavery question was in the 1850's. It is impossible to deny any human person their God-given dignity and remain consistent with our own guiding principles. . It is encouraging to note that in a speech to the National Religious Broadcasters convention, former President Bush stated: "Faith teaches that every person is equal in God's sight, and must be treated with equal dignity here on earth." This must continue to be the attitude of our leaders if we hope to fulfill the course we laid out for ourselves at our inception.

When democracy works it insists on broad participation, the rule of law as opposed to the rule of men, and checks and balances. It does so to protect us from ourselves. We do not believe in

democracy because humans are so good that they deserve to participate in government, but because they are so bad that they are never to be completely trusted. The Judeo-Christian understanding of the human heart as “desperately wicked and deceitful above all things” (Jeremiah 17:9) teaches us that no individual is to be given unimpeachable power. All must be subject to the scrutiny and review of both friends and opposition. If, “power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely”, then power must always be limited. All are subject to the same law and the law is king. When leaders usurp the power of law and seek to circumvent the law they must be removed from power.

The French Revolution, on the other hand, as did the Russian Revolution over a hundred years later, had a far too optimistic view of human nature. Both were rooted in an atheistic worldview. Both believed human genius to be the hope of the future. Both went to great lengths to abolish their Christian past and make their way towards the future fully under the steam of their own genius. France’s churches were closed and converted to temples of human reason. It is not surprising that both France and Russia eventually abandoned atheism as an official position and reestablished their churches, but the damage had already been done. To this day when French politicians close their speeches with “*vive la France, vive la République*”, instead of invoking the blessing of God, they are saying: “we are our own hope.” They are attaching their hope of survival and prosperity to human goodness and genius. On the other hand when American leaders close their speeches with “God bless America” they are acknowledging that while humans may be great and capable of great accomplishments, ultimately, as our text says: “Unless the Lord build the house they labor in vain which build it”.

“Except the Lord Build the House”

This brings us to our text, Psalm 127. Notice that the title of the Psalm is “A Song of Degrees for Solomon”. The association is obvious. Solomon was the king who built God’s house, and yet Solomon could never build God’s House, only God can do that. We see this in David’s prayer in I Chronicles 29. He has committed to Solomon the task that he had desired for himself, but that God had refused him. This is his prayer:

Therefore David blessed the LORD in the presence of all the assembly. And David said: "Blessed are you, O LORD, the God of Israel our father, forever and ever. Yours, O LORD, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the victory and the majesty, for all that is in the heavens and in the earth is yours. Yours is the kingdom, O LORD, and you are exalted as head above all. Both riches and honor come from you, and you rule over all. In your hand are power and might, and in your hand it is to make great and to give strength to all. And now we thank you, our God, and praise your glorious name.

But who am I, and what is my people, that we should be able thus to offer willingly? For all things come from you, and of your own have we given you. For we are strangers before you and sojourners, as all our fathers were. Our days on the earth are like a shadow, and there is no abiding. O LORD our God, all this abundance that we have provided for building you a house for your holy name comes from your hand and is all your own. I know, my God, that you test the heart and have pleasure in uprightness. In the uprightness of my heart I have freely offered all these things, and now I have seen your people, who are present here, offering freely and joyously to you. O LORD, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, our fathers, keep forever such purposes and thoughts in the hearts of your people, and direct their hearts toward you. Grant to Solomon my son a whole heart that he may keep your commandments, your testimonies, and your statutes, performing all, and that he may build the palace for which I have made provision."

(I Chronicles 29: 10-19)

Our text is just a summary of David's prayer in which he acknowledges, on one hand, that all good things come from God, and that without God we are nothing, and on the other hand that we do not deserve God's goodness, and thus accept it for what it is an gift of grace. He then closes by praying that the people would never forget this and that his son Solomon would be wholehearted in his love and obedience towards God.

Why we Say: "God Bless America"

So why do we continue to say: "God bless America"? First of all we do not say it out of egotism. No more that when we say: "God bless my family". I ask God's blessing on my family, not because I do not care about other families, but because they are my family, those individuals for whom God has given me special responsibility. In the same way I ask God's blessing on my country, not because I am unconcerned about the rest of the world, but because I have a special responsibility towards the nation in which I was born; of which I am a citizen, and whose privileges I enjoy.

I should add here that when we ask God's blessing on our family or on our nation that we are never seeking God's blessing simply that we might be blessed, but in order that we, in turn, might be a blessing. We pray as the Psalmist:

"May God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face to shine upon us, that your way may be known on earth, your saving power among all nations." (Psalm 67:1-2)

But above all when we invoke God's blessing on our country, we are acknowledging first, that without his providential care we are without hope, and secondly, that being the limited beings we are we are incapable of fulfilling the mission we have been given as a nation. This is the reason that our best and wisest leaders have from our beginning, and continue to this day to seek God's wisdom and blessing. May it never be an empty platitude, but our sincere and heartfelt prayer: "God bless America".