

Zc 9:9-13
3 July 2011

“Faithful Patriotism”

Our country’s 235th birthday is tomorrow. For the occasion, I want to include a couple of quotes from one of Banu’s favorite movies, *The American President*. It came out in 1995 and stars Michael Douglas, Martin Sheen, Annette Bening, and Michael J. Fox. Douglas plays President Andrew Shepherd, who is running for re-election. His opponent is Senator Bob Rumson.

This first quote is from a televised speech: “America isn’t easy. America is advanced citizenship. You gotta want it bad, ‘cause it’s gonna put up a fight. It’s gonna say, ‘You want free speech? Let’s see you acknowledge a man whose words make your blood boil, who’s standing center stage and advocating at the top of his lungs that which you would spend a lifetime opposing at the top of yours.”

I’m not exactly advocating shouting. It seems we already have too much of **that** as it is. Douglas’ character is speaking about one of the truly great things about America; we have freedom of speech. There are still places in the world where, for example, criticizing the leaders will get you tossed into jail—or worse.

The other quote is from an argument he has with Lewis, who is one of his staff members. He’s played by Michael J. Fox. The president refuses to answer his opponent’s mudslinging accusations. Fox’s character, Lewis, gets on his case. “You have a deeper love of this country than any man I’ve ever known. And I want to know what it says to you that in the past seven weeks, 59% of Americans have begun to question your patriotism.”

Shepherd begins to respond, but Lewis interrupts him, “Bob Rumson is the only one doing the talking! People want leadership, Mr. President, and in the absence of genuine leadership, they’ll listen to anyone who steps up to the microphone. They want leadership. They’re so thirsty for it they’ll crawl through the desert toward a mirage, and when they discover there’s no water, they’ll drink the sand.”

Shepherd corrects him. “Lewis, we’ve had presidents who were beloved, who couldn’t find a coherent sentence with two hands and a flashlight. People don’t drink the sand because they’re thirsty. They drink the sand because they don’t know the difference.”

I mention these quotations because they deal with confusion, confusion about who we are as Americans. The first quote reminds us about our responsibilities as citizens. We have people, not to mention people in political office, who are quite literally confused when it comes to our history. Those who don’t know their identity as Americans—those who don’t bother to learn—are easy to manipulate.

Being a good citizen, especially the citizen of a democracy, requires effort. It takes discipline. On the other hand, to live in a dictatorship requires very little effort. We need only ignore our responsibility to others and to the planet. Without discipline, even **spiritual** discipline, democracy slips through our fingers like sand. And that’s true of **American** democracy, as well.

(Understand, I’m not blaming people who live in countries ruled by dictators. I’m saying that we have to pay attention to maintain democracy.)

The second quote deals with confusion about leadership. Leadership isn't about the one with the most swagger—or about building oneself up by knocking others down.

For those of us who are Christians, there can be confusion between patriotism and faith in God. There can be confusion between loving one's nation and loving one's God, the God of **all** the nations. We can take heart in knowing that we aren't the **first** to struggle with that confusion. It's a struggle that probably goes back to when human beings started thinking of themselves as nations.

Our Old Testament reading in Zechariah 9 deals with that very kind of confusion. It's the confusion that says, "We are a special case. The rules that apply to all of the **other** nations don't apply to us." Considering the state of the people, and what they've been through, it would seem to be an understandable reaction.

Zechariah and his fellow prophet, Haggai, are active in the late sixth century B.C. This is right after many of the people have returned from exile in Babylon. (And that's what I meant when I just said "what they've been through"!) The two prophets are eager to rebuild the community, and that includes rebuilding the Temple, which the Babylonians had destroyed decades earlier.

There's no clear consensus, but starting with chapter 9, it seems we're transported a couple of centuries into the future. Alexander the Great and his Greek army have run wild. Verse 13 talks about the Greeks. I can say that the last part of the book makes a little more sense **to me** if it happens in the Greek era. That better explains the frustration we sense, now that the Greeks have taken control.

Whatever the case, Zechariah (or a later prophet in the spirit of Zechariah) has some powerful words for the people.

Throughout chapter 9, we see promises of some sweet, juicy revenge on the nations surrounding the Jews. In verses 4 and 5, we're told that "the Lord will strip [Tyre] of its possessions and hurl its wealth into the sea, and it shall be devoured by fire. Ashkelon shall see it and be afraid; Gaza too, and shall writhe in anguish; Ekron also, because its hopes are withered."

And **after** our scripture text, referring to the Jewish nation, "The Lord of hosts will protect them, and they shall devour and tread down the slingers [of stones]; they shall drink their blood like wine, and be full like a bowl, drenched like the corners of the altar" (v. 15). (Now **there's** something to think about in a few minutes, when we receive the body and blood of the Lord!)

Getting back to my earlier point, this looks like a good statement of ancient Jewish patriotism. As we zero in on today's reading, in verse 9, we hear this promise from the prophet: "Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey." Wait a minute! Is this a joke? Why is the king on a donkey?

In the next verse: the king will remove the chariot, the war-horse, and the battle bow. The enemy forces, and all of their weaponry, will be forced out of the capital. Okay, that sounds good! But what's this about the king commanding "peace to the nations"? Are you kidding me?

It's been pointed out, "The hope that [the prophet] offered the Jews envisioned a future far different than the one they might have understandably sought given their humiliating circumstances...It imagines a king who rides a young donkey rather than a

regal stallion...The future kingdom is peaceable, not provocational. It's also universal, extending to the ends of the earth."¹

This is a patriotism that, to borrow a phrase from our opening hymn,² "sees beyond the years." For those who love and serve a Lord beyond all space and time, it's difficult to claim "that God loves your own country more than...other countries."³ It's difficult to go along with "confusing and conflating God's loves with national values, and invoking God's wrath against your enemies." It's difficult to settle for a God who is that small and spiteful.

I've been privileged to know Christians from numerous nations and from every continent on planet Earth. (Except Antarctica, that is!) I'm **married** to one such Christian! Maybe that helps to put things in a different perspective.

This king riding on a donkey—indeed, a colt, a young donkey—is an image we in the church associate with Palm Sunday. In that case, it's the **Romans**, not the Greeks, who the Jews are itching to get rid of. When Jesus shows up, riding on a donkey, it's not exactly the intimidating, tail-kicking image many of his followers have been dying to see!

Still, we hear the words of the prophet. "As for you also, because of the blood of my covenant with you, I will set your prisoners free from the waterless pit. Return to your stronghold, O prisoners of hope; today I declare that I will restore to you double" (vv. 11-12).

There is a strength that confounds our minds. It is a strength that resides in meekness; it inhabits weakness. We just finished our Bible study of 2 Corinthians. The apostle Paul appeals to the Lord three times about his thorn in the flesh. He wants it removed! But the Lord responds, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Co 12:9).

There is a strength, a power, that only faith can apprehend. It doesn't flow from the barrel of a gun. It isn't delivered by missile guidance systems. It is the power of *shalom*, of *salaam*, of the messianic peace that the king on the donkey makes available, if we only seek it.

There's an essay by the great American rabbi Abraham Heschel, who died in 1972.⁴ It was published in February 1944. During World War 2, he speaks of that lack of spiritual discipline that permits dictatorship and war to thrive. Heschel's words remain relevant for us today.

"Let [terrorism] not serve as an alibi for our conscience. [I have put "terrorism" in place of his original word, "fascism."] We have failed to fight **for** right, **for** justice, **for** goodness; as a result we must fight **against** wrong, **against** injustice, **against** evil. We have failed to offer sacrifices on the altar of peace; now we must offer sacrifices on the altar of war."

He touches on an important point. A **faithful** patriotism doesn't wait until things fall apart, and we find ourselves at war. A **faithful** patriotism fights for justice, for that peace I mentioned earlier. As Christians, we should be the **first** to work for that peace

¹ www.journeywithjesus.net/Essays/20080630JJ.shtml

² "O Beautiful for Spacious Skies"

³ www.journeywithjesus.net/Essays/20080630JJ.shtml

⁴ www.bruderhof.com/articles/heschel-cain.htm?source=DailyDig

demonstrated by the king on a colt. In that regard, if my own faithful patriotism could be weighed in the scales, I fear it would be found wanting.

Heschel goes on, “A tale is told of a band of inexperienced mountain climbers. Without guides, they struck recklessly into the wilderness. Suddenly a rocky ledge gave way beneath their feet and they tumbled headlong into a dismal pit. [Maybe not unlike the “prisoners” in “the waterless pit” we saw in verse 11?]

In the darkness of the pit they recovered from their shock, only to find themselves set upon by a swarm of angry snakes. Every crevice became alive with fanged, hissing things. For each snake the desperate men slew, ten more seemed to lash out in its place. Strangely enough, one man seemed to stand aside from the fight. When the indignant voices of his struggling companions reproached him for not fighting, he called back: If we remain here, we shall be dead before the snakes. I am searching for a way of escape from the pit for all of us.”

We can become so focused on the agenda that’s been handed us—or that we’ve chosen for ourselves—that we forget to stop, lift up our heads, look around, and explore other possibilities. A faithful patriotism works for the good of all.

I want to close with the first two stanzas of the hymn, “A Song of Peace”.⁵

“This is my song, O God of all the nations, / a song of peace for lands afar and mine; / this is my home, the country where my heart is; / here are my hopes, my dreams, my holy shrine: / but other hearts in other lands are beating / with hopes and dreams as true and high as mine.

“My country’s skies are bluer than the ocean, / and sunlight beams on cloverleaf and pine; / but other lands have sunlight too, and clover, / and skies are everywhere as blue as mine: / O hear my song, thou God of all the nations, / a song of peace for their land and for mine.”

⁵ prometheusli.com/musings/a_song_of_peace.htm