

## The Last Words of David

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the 14th Sunday after Pentecost, August 25, 1991, at Sacred Heart Roman Catholic. Scripture Lessons: 2 Samuel 23:1-7; John 6:55-69.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

Several years ago the Buffalo News ran an article entitled, *Words Uttered On Death's Bed*. It documented the last words of ordinary people as well as world leaders. Among those whose last words were recorded was Arnber Hoovey of Bath, Maine was one of those whose last words were recorded. On his death bed, a young nurse leaned over to find out if he was still breathing and he gasped, "Boo!" She jumped back, startled, and then he died. Another was Henry Joseph Green. He felt his pulse, looked up and said to his friends, "I can't feel my pulse." And then he died. One of my favorites is the last words of General John Sedgwick, a Union artillery officer in the Civil War. It was during the battle of Spottsylvania. He was scolding some of his men who were avoiding enemy fire by hiding in some tall weeds. He stood up and urged on his men, "Come, Come! Why they couldn't hit an elephant at this distance..." No sooner had he said this then he was hit by an enemy bullet and died.

But sometimes the last words of a dieing man or woman are very moving. Thomas Jefferson seemed to want to hang onto life until he reached <sup>The anniversary of</sup> that most significant day in his life, when America declared its independence. His last words were, "Is it the 4th?" When he was assured that it was, he died. The last words of President Grover Cleveland when he

died in 1908 were, "I have tried so hard to do what is right."

David's last words are no less moving. He was ancient Israel's greatest king. He was a war hero. He unified his divided nation. He transformed Jerusalem. He brought his nation prosperity and prestige. But his last words mentioned none of these accomplishments. They describe, instead, the blessings of just national leaders.

"He that ruleth over men must be just, ruling in the fear of God. And he shall be as the light of the morning, when the sun riseth, even a morning without clouds; as the tender grass springing out of the earth by clear shining after rain."

David knew from first hand experience the temptations that face national leaders; the danger to gratify your own ego; the danger to use power and authority to enrich himself; the danger of oppressing the weak; the danger of forgetting the poor. He knew that what makes a leader great

~~is a love for justice. ... A leader who knows there is a real right & a real wrong ... and who knows that right is based, not in human conventions, but in God's nature~~  
Next year we'll elect a president. In a few months we'll have local

elections. The majority of people eligible to vote will probably not vote. And many of those who do vote will vote only in terms of self-interest. How will you vote? Will you simply vote your party affiliation? Will you vote for the best looking candidate? Will you vote for the person who is most like you? Will your Christian faith direct you when you vote?

Patterson and Kim in their book entitled, *The Day America Told the Truth*, report that ninety percent of the people they questioned said that they truly believe in God. Yet when they asked how people make up their minds on issues of right and wrong, they found that they simply do not turn

to God or religion to help them decide about the moral issues of the day. Patterson and Kim write, "For most people, religion plays virtually no role in shaping their opinions on a long list of important public questions."

This is a tragedy. One of the characteristics of our Reformed and Presbyterian faith is that God is Lord of all of life. The Reformers who shaped the Presbyterian church in the 16th century believed that the Bible tells us not only about personal salvation and personal morality but also about good government and the characteristics of good leaders.

All the 16th century Reformed Confessions of Faith deal with the relation of Christian faith to political leaders. The Reformers wanted to reform, not only the church, but all of society in accordance to the Word of God. John Knox, in the Scots Confession, writes that national leaders are ordained by God for the good and well being of all people. The Westminster Confession of Faith says that God has ordained civil magistrates for the public good. "The chief duty of the magistrate" the Second Helvetic Confession says, "is to secure and preserve peace and public tranquility." "Let him govern the people entrusted to him by God with good laws.... Let him not respect any man's person or accept bribes. Let him protect widows, orphans and the afflicted." *specially* *i. e. the weakest in society*

The Reformers didn't think it was improper to place in a Confession of Faith what we believe the Word of God teaches with regard to political rulers. Believing that God has ordained rulers for the wellbeing of the

people the Reformers spoke out against injustice, tyranny, and oppression from the pulpit. Mary Queen of Scots said she feared the preaching of John Knox more than all the armies of England. Wherever the Reformed faith went tyrants fell and democratic republics arose.

As Christians who live in a democratic republic it's our Christian duty to vote for and seek just leaders at every level of government. Our primary concern should not be whether a candidate is male or female, rich or poor, educated or uneducated, Republican or Democrat, Northerner or Southerner, conservative or liberal, but does this candidate have a love for what is right and fair and just for all people and not just for some people.

The original meaning of the Hebrew word "just" [Sadiq] is "straight" as in a straight line. We still hear something of the original meaning of that word when we say that a page of print is justified; all the words on the page are in a straight line. They're straight and even.

A just leader is concerned that all people have an opportunity to play on an even playing field. Think of a basketball court which is uphill. One team has to play uphill and the other team has the advantage of playing down hill and they never switch. It's not fair. Some people in our society, because of the poverty in which they're born, or because of their physical or mental handicaps, have to play going uphill. A just leader is concerned for laws that try to even out the playing field and give those who've been handicapped an equal opportunity to succeed and compete and contribute to

the welfare of the whole society.

A just leader is one who's concerned that all people have an opportunity to start even in the race. Think of a track meet where all the runners start at different places. One runner has to run a hundred yards, another 50 yards and a third, 10 yards. You'd say, "It's not fair. It's not just." Everybody should have an even start. A just leader is one who's concerned that all segments of society have an equal opportunity to start even, with equal opportunities to win the race and to be successful, whether you're rich or poor, male or female, black or white, married or single, straight or gay, conservative or liberal.

I think the most important influence on my life with respect to the whole concept of justice was my father. He had a deep understanding of the biblical concept of what is just. He talked about justice to me as we rode together in the car or sat at the dinner table. For him certain things were right and certain things were wrong. Right and wrong were not social conventions. They had a reality that derived from God. He'd sit there at the kitchen table with his elbows on the table, a knife in one hand and a fork in the other, with his mouth half full of potatoes and say, "It's not right for a man to work 60 hours a week and still not earn enough money to pay the rent and put food on the table for his family" and he'd bring down his fist on the table and everybody would jump.

He would have agreed with David that "one who rules over men must

be just, ruling in the fear of God.”

Good government and just leaders are among God’s greatest blessings.

“It’s as the light of the morning, when the sun riseth, even a morning without clouds; as the tender grass springing out of the earth by clear shining after rain.”

Let us pray: O Lord our Governor, bless the leaders of our land, that we may be a people at peace among ourselves and a blessing to others nations of the earth. To President Bush and members of the Cabinet, to Governors of States, Mayors of Cities, and to all in administrative authority, grant wisdom and grace in the exercise of their duties. To Senators and Representatives, and those who make our laws in States, Cities, and Towns, give courage, wisdom, and foresight to provide for the needs of all our people, and to fulfill our obligations in the community of nations. To the Judges and officers of our Courts give understanding and integrity, that human rights may be safeguarded and justice served. And finally, teach our people to rely on your strength and to accept their responsibilities to their fellow citizens, that they may elect trustworthy leaders and make wise decisions for the well-being of our society; that we may serve you faithfully in our generation and honor your holy Name. For yours is the kingdom, O Lord, and you are exalted as head above all. Amen.