

WE SHALL BE JUDGED

Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24; Psalm 100; Matthew 25:31-46

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister,

Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, Pa

November 24, 2002

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

Thanksgiving is a *national* holiday that transcends religious differences yet has strong religious overtones. During his first year as President Washington issued a Thanksgiving Proclamation setting aside Thursday, November 26th as "A Day of Publick Thanksgiving and Prayer." Nearly a hundred years later, in 1863, during the Civil War, President Lincoln issued a proclamation calling for the observance of the fourth Tuesday of November as a day of thanksgiving and praise. In 1939, President Roosevelt moved the holiday to the third Thursday of November to extend the Christmas shopping season and boost the economy. After a lot of protest, Roosevelt changed the holiday in 1941 to the fourth Thursday in November, where it stands today. Next Wednesday evening and Thursday morning Americans will gather in mosques, synagogues, and churches to thank God for our blessings. In *our* judgment we have been greatly blessed with wealth and military power. But God judges nation's blessed by a different standard.

Our Gospel lesson tells us that God is the judge of nations as well as individuals. "When the son of man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. *All the nations* will be gathered before him." Jesus claims nations will be judged blessed, not on the basis of military strength or wealth, but on their response to the little people. It's hard for us to imagine the judgment of nations because we're such individualists. But former, less individualistic generations, *knew* God judges nations blessed or cursed as well as individuals. George Washington believed our nation was accountable to God and would come under God's judgment for national sins. In his farewell address, he concluded, "Can it be that Providence has *not* connected the permanent felicity of a nation with its virtue?"

Nearly a hundred years later President Lincoln wrote, "nations like individuals are subjected to punishments and chastisements in this world, (therefore) may we not justly fear that the awful calamity of civil war, which now desolates the land, *may be but a punishment, inflicted upon us, for our presumptuous sins*, to the needful end of our national reformation as a whole People?"

On July 12, 1885⁴⁵ the great Victorian minister, Charles Spurgeon, preached in London (at the height of the British Empire.) "Colossal dominions have withered to the ground, when sentenced by the King of kings.

Go and ask today, 'Where is the empire of Assyria? Where are the mighty cities of Babylon? Where are the glories of the Medes and Persians? What has become of the Macedonian power? Where are the Caesars and their palaces?' These empires were forces established by cruelty, and used for oppression; they fostered luxury and licentiousness, and when they were no longer tolerable, the earth was purged from their polluting existence." Spurgeon concluded, "The omnipotent Judge has not ceased from his sovereign rule over kingdoms, and our own country may yet have to feel his chastisements. [What is there about our boastful race, whether on this side of the Atlantic *or the other*, that we should monopolize the favour of God?"]

Years later, Rudyard Kipling celebrated the Diamond Jubilee of Queen Victorian by writing "Recessional." Kipling knew that nations shall be judged.

Far-called, our navies melt away;
On dune and headland sinks the fire:
Lo, all our pomp of yesterday
Is one with Nineveh and Tyre!
Judge of the Nations, spare us yet,
Lest we forget - lest we forget!

We're living in a time when we may forget that our wealth and unquestioned military superiority *will not and cannot* save us. In fact, as our military power grows, the risks to our nation grow. We may inscribe the Ten Commandments on government buildings but unless we obey God's commands our nation will go the way of Rome. We can put "In God We Trust" on our money, but it's blasphemy when CEO's pocket millions while workers, the little people, go unemployed without pensions or health care insurance. The United States will be ~~remembered~~ ^{blessed} not by our military superiority and wealth, but by how we responded to human need.

Friday night Kay and I had dinner with several Army Chaplains at Aberdeen Proving Grounds. They're convinced war with Iraq is imminent. I hope they're wrong, but whatever happens Jesus reminds us that, *we* will be judged *as well as Iraq*. The church's just war tradition reminds us that God is the judge of the nations especially in times of war. Because God is the judge, America must not use our military to do whatever we want. Because God is the judge of nations, America must enter only a *just* war and must fight *justly* in a just war. We Americans recognize, in our Pledge of Allegiance, that we are "one nation under God" -- under God's judgment.

I recognize that war is sometimes the lesser of two evils and pray that our nation will always use our military strength wisely. But I'm haunted by words Martin Luther King once spoke: "The ultimate weakness of violence is that it is a descending spiral, begetting the very thing it seeks to destroy. Instead of diminishing evil, it multiplies it. Through violence you may murder the liar, but you cannot murder the lie, nor establish the truth. Through violence you murder the hater, but you do not murder hate. In fact, violence merely increases hate. Returning violence for violence multiplies violence, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars. Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate: Only love can do that."

The visionary words of Jesus call nations to visionary actions. People all over the world are fearing war and its unpredictable consequences. We fear deadly terrorist attacks like those that occurred here ^{on 9/11} and, more recently, in Bali and Moscow. Terrorism feeds on human misery. Weapons don't feed the hungry, clothe the naked or welcome strangers although soldier may ^{sometimes} have. What if the United States called on the rich nations of the world to undertake a visionary plan to feed the hungry and clothe the naked? What if Iraq and the U.S. put half as much money into building hospitals ^{as we put into preparing for war?} ~~making peace as war?~~ The Marshall Plan in the aftermath of World War II helped a devastated Europe build a hopeful future and was, surely, blessed by God. As a nation we have a wonderful precedent that draws on the best of our national heritage. Why can't the United States go it alone if necessary, redirecting the billions spent on war to providing basic human needs: food, shelter, education, health? ^{Sent out an Army of soldiers} What if we were to put into action the words of President George W. Bush when he called for a National Day of Prayer and Thanksgiving last year? He said, "Let us become a nation rich not only in material wealth but in ideals. I ask Americans to bow our heads in humility before our Heavenly Father, a God who calls us not to judge ~~our neighbors~~, but to love ~~them~~, to ask His guidance upon our Nation and its leaders in every level of government.

O Lord, judge of the nations, in your sight nations rise and fall, and pass through times of peril. Now when our land is troubled, be near to judge and save. May leaders be led by your wisdom; may they search your will and see it clearly. If we have turned from your way, reverse our ways and help us to repent. Give us your light and truth; let them guide us; through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of this world, and our Savior. Amen.