

## BETWEEN EMPIRE AND KINGDOM COME

Texts on Sunday, October 13, 2013

Jeremiah 29: 1-7; Luke 17: 11-18

In the first pages of Howard Zinn's *A People's History of the United States*, the reader confronts a Columbus quite different from the one we learned in school. Some may be aware that he sailed on condition of receiving a large share in the profits from his gold-seeking adventure, but everyone knows that early on October 12, 1492, a sailor finally sighted land.

Columbus' ship was met by Arawak Indians swimming out to greet the visitors. In his journal, the explorer wrote of these Indians:

They are well-built, with good bodies and handsome features. . . [They] are so naïve and free with their possessions that no one who has not witnessed them would believe it. When you ask for something they have, they never say No. To the contrary, they offer to share with anyone... They do not bear arms and do not know them. . . . They have no iron. Their spears are made of cane... They would make fine servants... With fifty men, we could subjugate them all and make them do whatever we want . . .

In the years to come, Columbus did just that. Though he never did find much gold, he certainly found wealth. In 1495, one of his raiding expeditions rounded up 1,500 Arawak men, women, and children and put them in pens. They then picked the 500 best specimens to enslave. Two hundred of them died in the transport ships. Columbus later wrote: "Let us in the name of the Holy Trinity go on sending all the slaves that can be sold." When the Arawak formed an armed resistance, Spaniards with armor, muskets, swords, and horses just slaughtered them. To escape bondage and massacre, some clans committed mass suicide. In two years, by murder, mutilation, or suicide, half of the 250,000 natives of Haiti were dead. By the year 1515, only 50,000 Indians remained alive. By 1550, only 500. One hundred years later, not one member of the aboriginal tribes was found alive in Haiti.

In the name of Jesus Christ, Columbus practiced genocide. This may not be news to you; still the mind boggles. It would boggle less if Americans held the memory of this father of discovery at the distance of remorse, and applied a different name to mark that day of wrath when Europe first arrived upon these shores. But as you know, there has not yet come one American generation which failed to visit genocidal violence upon one people or another.

In 1454, some forty years before Columbus sailed, Pope Nicholas V declared, in what is now called the "doctrine of discovery," that any agent of the Catholic kings conquering any non-Christian people, would thereby gain for the king total possession of those lands and those people. Here is a little of Pope Nicholas' own perfumed language of violence and domination:

The Roman pontiff, desiring the salvation of all, wholesomely ordains and disposes those things which he sees will be agreeable to the Divine Majesty and by which he may bring the sheep entrusted to him by God into the single divine fold, and may acquire for them the reward of eternal felicity, and obtain pardon for their souls. We [have therefore] ... granted...free and ample faculty to the aforesaid King to invade, search out, capture, vanquish, and subdue all pagans whatsoever, and other enemies of Christ, wheresoever placed, and the ... dominions, possessions, and all ... goods whatsoever...possessed by them; and to reduce their persons to perpetual slavery; and to appropriate to himself and his successors their ... dominions, possessions and goods, and to convert them to his use and profit... (Wikipedia, *Doctrine of Discovery*)

In 1823, when there came before the U.S. Supreme Court a question of the rights of Native Americans to possess and sell their native land, Justice Marshall ruled (*Johnson v. M'Intosh*) that this nation had the right to expel Native Americans from their lands. In part, he based this right on the doctrines of the fifteenth century popes, asserting that land-discovering nations gained exclusive rights to extinguish the "right of occupancy" of indigenous occupants. In other words, this nation was founded not on a separation of church and state, but on a hidden, white-hot fusion of the name of Jesus Christ to the unfathomed craving in men "to make them do whatever we want..."

The line is unbroken. As fixed as is the arc of an arrow from a bow is the line that links the pope's doctrine of domination to global warming today at the hands of heedless capitalism, and to every evil in between. It is all one bow that bends to hurl this violence upon history: that emptiness in men that leads them to the love of money and power. That the name of Jesus Christ has been bent to that arc of empire nearly from the beginning must give us quiet. How shall we live under empire?

Empire is neither new nor uniquely Christian, of course. When Jeremiah wrote that letter we heard this morning, it was Babylon's empire stood atop the ancient world. Jeremiah was counseling how to live under empire. When Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee, it was the Roman empire that maintained those districts and exercised power over all those peoples "to make them do whatever we want . ." Jesus' counsels are also for people living under empire. For three centuries after him, the Roman empire constantly threatened the church with violence. Only in the conversion of Emperor Constantine did the Christian religion finally find peace—in service to empire. Never since have the two powers disentangled. The question remains, How shall we live under empire?

If we are pleased with our material condition, the notion that we are living under empire must sound bizarre. Every day, they remind us that ours is the greatest nation, most generous, most compassionate, and so forth. We will not weigh more facts on that balance today. Rather, praise and admiration for this nation notwithstanding, let us note that both in our scrip-

tures and in our courageous witnesses, Christians, like our cousins the Jews, declare that we only exist when we rightly resist the empire.

Consider Jeremiah's counsel to the exiles in Babylon. Recall first how confident Jeremiah was that the exiles would one day return to Jerusalem. Why, on the eve of the Babylonian invasion, Jeremiah purchased a field at the edge of Jerusalem and registered its title as a sign and seal of his faith that God would make sacred sense out of Jerusalem's disaster. Now, to sustain the exiles under empire, Jeremiah encourages them to do two things. One, live your lives. Build, plant, eat, marry, have sex, bear children, multiply in joy! In other words, do not give up on the future. Two, pray to the Lord on behalf of those who have you under empire, for in their welfare you will find your welfare. See into these depths. If you pray for them who aim to use you, you remain distinct from their aims. The greatest peril for them who live under empire is that they become so attracted to the pretty things which empire serves up that they forget who they are, and join in the mass of men leading lives of quiet desperation. But if you pray for them who hold you under empire, you retain your God-given center. Oh, you hurt—but you are not harmed, so long as you know who you are and whose you are! You exist when you resist in prayer your assimilation to all things empire.

The story of Jesus' healing of ten lepers has a like force. By definition, lepers are exiles. They have no community, no power, no health, and no future. They stand for the disinherited, the *anawim ha-aretz*, over whom the powerful gloat that they can make them do whatever they want. When Jesus tells the lepers to "go and show yourselves to the priests," he is sending them to the sole authority who can re-incorporate them into community. That was the priestly role—to decide who was clean and who unclean; who belonged, and who did not. But of the ten men healed, nine took their normalization in stride. They slipped back under the cover of empire and resumed their unmiraculous lives. Only one returned to Jesus with thanks. "And he was a Samaritan." This is to say that only the outsider, only one who remains conscious of her exile, even after healing—only that one can see what God is doing; only one who still feels resistance can know God's existence in his life. All the rest sink back into the benefits of living under empire's wings.

Our condition is not different. Two temptations continually press on Christians of North America. One is to hate those who oppress, violate, and destroy the weakest members of our communities, for hatred sets guards around our self and those with whom we feel moral kinship. But empire laughs at hatred, knowing how brief and small is its flame. The other temptation is so to enjoy the benefits of empire and culture and even some power that one uses even religion and prayer to disappear into the empire, invisible,

refusing to see the evil means empire requires to deliver its stuff to its subject people. What is the way between?

Jeremiah says, Pray for the welfare of them who hold the earth captive to unbridled corporatism, for in their welfare will come your welfare. He might as well have said, Love your enemies and pray for them, for by your prayer, you remember who you are, and do not succumb to fires of hatred quickly quenched. After all, if the Creator has put humankind upon the earth to learn to care for all things therein, then the welfare of the powerful is not as they suppose it. Rather, their welfare is only in their surrender. Pray for them, for in their welfare, you will find your welfare.

Jesus praises the one thankful that he is made whole, for only in the spirit of wholeness and gratitude can one find strength to see as an outsider, as a sojourner here, whose only home is in the kingdom of God. Only the grateful and healed can see the tragic arc of empire under which America has toiled and made millions to suffer. In that spirit of gratitude to God, you can with dispassion acknowledge both the genius of this nation and its fatal flaws. In like mood, you can see the Church of Jesus Christ through the ages, and this church, too, through its age, marked by God with Jesus' generosity and marked also by mortals with fateful, fearful needs for privilege and power.

Prayerful and thankful citizens of the kingdom know they have no allegiance to lesser kingdoms, but only to God's, and to the prayer that "Your kingdom come, Your will be done on earth." Then, with each breath given us not by heated passion but by Holy Spirit, we can find our voice and play our part in the possibility that our generation repent of the evils of empire and release our death-grip on this too-hot blue-green planet, and all its inhabitants, great and small. Then may this church, standing in consequential resistance recover its existence as the body of Christ, and live in joy and hope, visible to a new generation yearning to be free.

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