

**ST. BARTHOLOMEW'S ANGLICAN PRO-CATHEDRAL IN THE TOWN OF TONAWANDA**

The Very Rev. Fr. Arthur W. Ward, Jr. + Dean

Scripture: Various

***"Why I Believe" (part 8)***

**A BLESSED MEMORIAL DAY**

On this Memorial Day weekend we again remember those who made the ultimate sacrifice; men and women of our armed forces who gave their lives in service of our nation. Such sacrifice is the greatest gift one can give for their nation and fellow man. Whether or not people realize it, it also reflects selfless love. It reflects the heart of the Father who gave up His Son for us, and the love of the Son who actually died for us. Jesus Christ knew he was headed to the cross, and there came a point when he had to make a decision to go forward; and then there was a point of no return.

I think of the navy airmen who flew into the heart of the Japanese fleet during the Battle of Midway whose anniversary is next weekend. The ones that had the most difficult time were the torpedo bombers. The TBD Devastators were slow. They would be sitting ducks when coming in to drop their ordnance. Most were shot down. One navy airman, Lloyd Childers, who was one of the few survivors, said he knew that we were headed for trouble when the cooks served steak and eggs for their breakfast. He overheard a fellow airman behind him say, "Last meal for the condemned men." But it was those torpedo bombers that ended up distracting the Japanese Zero fighters and allowing the Dauntless dive-bomber group led by Buffalo, NY native, Lt. Wayne McKlusky to break through and sink three of the four carriers. It was the turning point in a Battle that became a turning point in the War in the Pacific.

**WHAT IT ALL MEANS**

Freedom is not free. It costs. Our history as a nation is testimony to this fact. Think about it for a moment. The American Revolution was to gain our freedom as a people and nation, to be free under laws that have their basis in God's Word. The War of 1812 was fought to gain our freedom for commerce and trade and to finally get Great Britain off our backs. The Civil War was fought to preserve the Union and end slavery. And World War 2 was fought to protect our world for total conquest by fascism – whether it be from the Nazis, Italy's Mussolini, or Japan's military rulers.

No American Revolution? There would be no Bill of Rights, no US constitution, no United States of America. No Civil War? Again no United States of America. No World War 2? Again, no United States of America and no Israel for that matter. You see, everything that happens in history is the result of what has happened before. Everything is linked together.

And the reason for the United States, the reason for our successes and more so than for our failures, the reason for the preservation of democracy and the spread of freedom throughout the world is because of one thing. Do you know that that one thing is? It is the sixth reason Why I Believe in the God of the Bible. Recall we have been doing a series entitled, Why I Believe. We have looked at five reasons so far – Creation, Truth, the Bible, Jesus Christ, and Life Transformation of people. Today I want us to look at another.

## **CHRIST WILL BUILD HIS CHURCH**

Please turn with me to **Matthew 16:13-20**: *"Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, He was asking His disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" 14And they said, "Some say John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; but still others, Jeremiah, or one of the prophets." 15He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" 16Simon Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." 17And Jesus said to him, "Blessed are you, Simon Barjona, because flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but My Father who is in heaven. 18"I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it. 19"I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; and whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven." 20Then He warned the disciples that they should tell no one that He was the Christ."*

Remember when we spoke of Christ and how the most important question in our world is, Who is He? How we answer that question makes all the difference in our present lives and our future life after we die. Either He is Who He said He is, Lord and the Christ/Messiah or He is a fraud – a liar or lunatic.

But something else is true about Jesus. He said that He would build His Church – and the foundation of the Church will not be Peter, per se, but the confession Peter made – *"You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God."* Recall what that means. Jesus is both fully God and fully man, He is Lord of heaven and earth, and He is head of something else – He is head of the Church. In fact, the Church is called the Body of Christ. And this Church which in the Greek is *ekklesia* (and which means the "called out ones") will be God's witness on earth and will be built on earth and will conquer evil and will not be able to be thwarted by Satan. In other words, the Church will continue to grow and expand; and though attacked from within and without, it will prevail until Christ returns again. And this Body of Christ is not an institution. Institutions are man made. They come and they go. They are not eternal. But the Church? If it is Christ's Body, it means that it is eternal. If we are each individually members of that body, it means that it is living. And if it is a Body that is eternal and living, then it is no institution, it is a living organism. It's a living organism that is diverse and complex and beautiful, but it is One Body! And that means there is a unity to it that is reflected in its purpose and its head. And we know its purpose is to spread the Gospel to the ends of the earth so that all men and women and children can become disciples of Jesus Christ. So that all people can be transformed through a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. And that purpose is found in how we live our lives individually and how we live them corporately as a Body of Christ.

Recall what Paul writes in **1 Cor.12:12-14**: *"For even as the body is one and yet has many members, and all the members of the body, though they are many, are one body, so also is Christ. For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. For the body is not one member, but many...and then in verse 27, "Now you are Christ's body, and individually members of it."*

So what is the reason why I believe? The Church of Jesus Christ! When I look at what has happened since the Holy Spirit came upon the first disciples and they believed and the Church was born at

Pentecost, I see the expansion of the Kingdom of God and the Church of Jesus Christ. That in and of itself is a miracle. You ask, "How so?"

### A MIRACLE OF HISTORY

Let me put things in perspective. When the Church began, it was a minority religion that was persecuted by both Jews and Gentiles alike. The Roman Emperors didn't like it because it said there was another Lord over all. The Jews didn't like it because it taught that Jesus was their Messiah and that one did have to become a Jew first to be a follower of Yahweh. Despite the persecutions and resistance by Roman Society, eventually the Christian faith grew to the point that when the Roman Emperor Constantine was converted in 312 AD, Christianity became the majority faith of the Roman Empire and decades later even became the official state religion of the Empire! In fact, it was because of the Christian faith that the gladiator games and crucifixion were abolished in the Empire.

When the Roman Empire fell in 476 AD, after the barbarian hordes from the east invaded Europe entered a period known as the Dark Ages. Many ancient works of literature and art were lost. Where however, were the Bibles preserved and other important ancient documents and artifacts – the monasteries. Monasteries served as hospitals, places of refuge; Monastic schools trained scribes to preserve manuscripts; monasteries also developed agricultural skills and knowledge; The Scholastics remain a pivotal period of intellectual growth. It became a time of major artistic development: architecture, music, literature. And who were eventually converted? The Barbarian tribes of the East – the Celts in Ireland, the peoples of present-day Eastern Europe and Russia, the Vikings – all converted to Christ. Who stood up against the expansion of Islam from the east? The Church.

As a result of the Christian faith you had the scientific revolution. Science rose in the West, not in the East. Why? Concepts conducive to scientific inquiry were expressly Christian; concepts like a positive attitude toward the world; an awareness of order (i.e. cause/effect, cf. **Rom. 1:20**); views of man as a steward and overseer of nature; and a positive attitude toward progress ("*Have dominion . . .*" Gen. 1:28ff)) In fact, many of the first great scientists were not only theists but Christians: Newton, Pasteur, Kepler, Paschal, Fleming, Edwards.

Certainly, there were those in the Church that became part of the problem. It is true that the church as an institution has not always been a positive influence for social change. The secularists like to say that the Church and Christian religion is the problem. But they miss the forest for the trees. No doubt, there have been some bad trees in the Christian forest, but they are not reflective of the true gospel. Do you remember what the Apostle Paul said in our second reading from **Galatians 1:8-10**? If someone comes to you with a different gospel, let them be accursed! Even if Paul comes and changes it or even if an angel appears to you, if it is not the true faith of Christ, Paul says, "*I say it again, let that one be accursed!*" Those are some heavy words because it is true - there is nothing worse than a false gospel. For it appears to be saying this is from the Lord, but it really is not!

So the true Christian faith is not found in the Renaissance Popes but in St. Francis of Assisi. It's not found in Spanish explorers like Pizarro and Cortez, but fellow Spaniard and Dominican friar, Bartolome de Las Casas, who fought against slavery and the oppression of native peoples in the New World. It is not

found in the slave captains of the British Empire but in William Wilberforce, the English parliamentarian who led the fight to abolish slavery in that same Empire.

Likewise, even though much good came through the Roman Catholic Church - like the promotion of education through universities and the care for the poor through monasteries, the Roman Catholic Church as an institution became spiritually sick.

But even when it became spiritually sick, God raised up others who stayed true to the message of the gospel; folks who confronted the Church and the State to the truths of Christ and His Word. The result? The Protestant Reformation out of which the Church of England became no longer a Roman Catholic institution but a Church grounded in the Holy Scriptures. A Reformation which resulted in the birth of other churches that now had the opportunity to be Word centered rather than Institution-centered.

Concurrent with the Reformation came the age of exploration and with it missionaries. Granted, many of the explorers did not have godly motives and indigenous people were exploited but the gospel still went out; and there were those in the church that set up missions and fought against the exploitation that resulted.

One of the chief problems that resulted from European exploration and colonization was slavery. But who brought an end to slavery in the Western World? The Church. And who helped bring about an end to child labor, and promoted workers' and women's rights, as well as the humane treatment of the mentally ill and the mentally challenged? The Church. How about the need for education and hospitals? The Church. And again I am not talking about the Church as an institution, I am speaking of a Church as a living organism whose members are living in and for Jesus - they are abiding in Jesus and as a result are changing the world around them. Jesus said in **Jn. 15:5**: *"I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing."*

### **THE CHURCH AT ITS FINEST**

When the Church is at its finest, it is reflecting not just the principles of her head but the very presence of her head, Jesus Christ. When it is at its worst, it is going against not only those principles but it is not following Christ as its head. And if Christ is not at the head, who is? Man.

Why did America become great? Why did America become a beacon of hope for the world? Because of three major revivals in our land where millions of our citizens came to Christ. They are historically called the Great Awakenings. The first occurred during the decades prior to the American Revolution and set the stage for our declaring independence from Great Britain. The second occurred from about 1790-1820 in part due to the preaching of the Wesley brothers, Anglican priests that our church was not willing to embrace! As a result churches sprang up throughout the frontier regions of America as it expanded westward. And the third occurred in 1858-59 right before the Civil War and continued to about 1900 but which led to an explosion of missionary agencies and philanthropic organizations.

Why were the Nazis stopped? Why did the Iron Curtain of Communism fall? Why did Islam not take over Europe and has not taken over the world today? The Church working through every facet of society in many parts of our world.

**THE ONLY HOPE FOR OUR WORLD**

The truth is that the only hope for our world is Jesus Christ. And the means through which this hope is seen and heard is through the Body of Christ – the faithful followers of Jesus who seek to be the light and salt of the earth. Jesus said to His disciples, to us, to His Church – ***"You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden; nor does anyone light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. "Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven."*** (Mt. 5:14-16)

And so it is through the Church I can see positive change and I can see the world transformed. Not by me as an individual. You have heard me say it before; God did not create us to be lone rangers. He created us to be in the community - first in an earthly family and then in a spiritual family. When we are born again, we are born into the Body of Christ. And as members of the body of Christ, each of us has a role to play in serving and being the body.

Just over 55 years ago, in his inaugural address, then President John F. Kennedy declared, *"Ask not what your country can do for you, but ask what you can do for your country."* Such words reflect an eternal truth - and that is we were created not to be served but to serve. We were created not to be takers but to be givers. We were created not to hate but to love. We were created to be the Body of Christ. And so I say on this Memorial Day, "Ask not what your church do for you, but ask what you can do for your church."

For it is when we look at the church through that lens that we will truly be the Body of Christ! In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, AMEN!