

As I have mentioned before, there is one fundamental question that in theological and philosophical terms determines everything else. Is the universe, and therefore humanity, including you and me, a creation, thus implying God? Or is it a random event, a sequence of improbable probabilities that just happen to come together and thus – us? Of course you all know my answer. I do not have enough faith to belief in the impossible, and therefore I believe we are a creation. And given that, I expect, and find, that the universe—reality—is governed by physical and ethical laws. There is a moral order to creation. Therefore I would also assert that a nation whose laws are in accordance with the laws of God, as revealed in the moral order of reality, will be blessed. In other words, the law of cause and effect is valid. There are good things and there are bad things, and these “good” and “bad” things are a transcendent reality; I cannot argue with them – they are embedded in the created order. A fairly direct corollary is this: a nation whose laws and actions are in accord with the created reality will be blessed. A nation who denies God, and therefore denies the created moral order, seeing law and policy primarily as projections of power toward an arbitrary end, will suffer at all levels (and of course the masses will suffer most).

We see this corollary play out in the Old Testament lesson from Deuteronomy 4. Since the fall of Adam, humanity had lost its intimate relationship with God, and therefore also lost the direct revelation of this moral order. God still revealed Himself through what He made so humanity could learn and discover many godly principles, but such discoveries lacked nuance and rationale. In the Mosaic Law, given at Mt. Sinai, God revealed to His special people more specifically what that order should be. Our reading reveals that God's Word, His Law, the special revelation given to the Jews provides a sure and secure and superior foundation upon which they can order their common life. Verses 5 and 6 read, “Surely I have taught you statutes and judgments, just as the Lord My God commanded me, that you should act according to them in the land which you go to possess. Therefore be careful to observe them; for this is your wisdom and your understand in the sight of the peoples who will hear all these statutes, and say, 'Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.'”

Along with laws for a just ordering of civil relations, the Jews also had super-natural laws, laws that went beyond natural law of God, beyond a mere comportment with reality. The dietary laws are an example of this.

Also there are other laws regulating ceremonial cleanness and purity. Don't touch dead things. Exile those with leprosy – they are unclean. There is a harshness here – there is an intolerance for the afflicted because the focus of the Mosaic Law is upon purity, holiness, life, as opposed to uncleanness, sin, and death. The Jews were God's special people in the world, a holy culture through which the Messiah would come to redeem the world. Yet within the Mosaic Law, there was not much consideration given to healing what was defective. Lepers were exiled – there was no means given and no imperative stated to cure them; but if they were somehow healed, they were to be declared clean by the priests and re-integrated into society.

Of course, the curing of sin and death was the purpose of Jesus Christ, the Messiah of the Jews and the Savior of the World. Through the work of Christ, mankind, which was fallen

and corrupted, could be again made holy, and fellowship with God could be restored.

So the Jews were given laws that reflected the reality of God in the world. Other nations had similar law codes – some of these laws make sense to us and some of them seem very strange. These codes relied primarily upon what was observed in the world; they presume a moral order, right and wrong, as well as deference to the power of the king. We can conclude that the more grounded in God's revealed nature that these law codes were, and the more fairly applied to all, the better that nation would fare.

In the Epistle lesson from Romans 8, the Apostle Paul appeals to this fundamental common grace. Governments should want good laws so that their people and nations would thrive. Do these nations miss this goal? Most surely... For example, the persecutions of Christians in the first centuries after Christ was wrong on every level. It takes time for truth to filter through a society, and often governments misunderstand what is good and right, and punish the wrong things. All of this still presumes a theistic world, a world that makes sense, a created world, with a discernible moral order. Even though the Roman government didn't believe in the one true God, it still had to please its pantheon of gods somehow. There is still a sense of obvious right and wrong mixed with political power and a hatred of disorder, and the Apostle appeals to this in directing Christians to obey their governors. They want good and they want peace. So do we.

In the Gospel lesson, we see Jesus healing both a leper and the servant of a Roman centurion in Capernaum. Leprosy was symbolic of sin and death, and lepers were therefore cast out of Jewish society. However, Jesus was greater than sin. Instead of drawing away, Jesus reached out His hand and touched the Leper, and healed him. But then, having been healed, the once leprous man is still subject to the religious realities. He goes and shows himself to the priest so that he can return to his position within the people of God. Jesus cleanses the man, but does not exempt him from the religious, moral code of society.

Alternatively, the Centurion here represents the civil authorities, the Gentiles, outside of God's people, but possessing the power of civil law enforcement during the life of Jesus. It is instructive to note the relationship here between the civil authority and God. The centurion submits to Christ. How? First by recognizing that there are things in this world that are outside of his direct ability to control. He cannot pass a law or appropriate more funds to address all problems. If only we, in our own age, were as wise. Over the centuries, we have gained much understanding of medicine, but the body is infinitely more complicated than an automobile or a rocket. We are arrogant to think we can force all the answers if we just want them badly enough or throw enough money at the problems. Surely we will continue to find answers and understand more and more over time, but this occurs by working within the natural, created order, and requires a certain humility in its approach.

The centurion displayed that kind of humility. He knew that his servant's disease was beyond any human intervention. He had only one hope, which was Jesus Christ, and therefore he approached Christ in humility, "beseeching him, and saying, Lord, my servant lieth at home sick of the palsy, grievously tormented." We today can call on the doctors and other medical experts, but there are so many mysteries about the body which defy our

expertise. We proceed with as much skill and understanding as we possess, but our ultimate hope is to plead with our creator. Christ told the centurion, "I will come and heal him." But the remarkable fact here is that the centurion seems to grasp better than anyone thus far, just exactly who Jesus was. Don't bother to come to my house he says, "I am not worthy that thou shouldst come under my roof, but speak the word only; and my servant shall be healed." The centurion understood just exactly what he could do and what he couldn't do. And he understood, by the faith given to him by God, exactly what Christ could do if He chose to do so. The question in the Centurion's mind was not if Christ could heal; the question was would Christ heal. And Christ indeed would heal, and the servant was healed that very hour.

Would that all government officials understood exactly who was the Creator of the of world, and then sought to govern in accordance with the moral meaning and order embedded into the very fabric of nature. Christ is God. We humans are not. And this is true for us in the household of faith as well. We must be humble in knowing the limitations of our personal wisdom. It is very easy for us all to be backseat quarterbacks when it comes to governing. I do it frequently. "Did you hear what Newsom did now?! Blah, blah, blah." Yet we have not been given the freedom by God to exempt ourselves from the laws which our government passes. We are not a law to ourselves—this would be a recipe for chaos. We are instructed to submit to the authorities over us even if we don't like them, barring, of course, laws which compel us to sin. If backed into a corner, we must obey God rather than man.

At the same time, this does not mean that we resign ourselves to bad governance. We are blessed to have a system through which we can effect change, and we should be doing all that we can to improve our government. And let us not be jaded by the mess in which our country currently finds itself. This arguably is a result of the atheistic trend in the Western world since the Enlightenment. If it took centuries to get us here, do not think this mess is going to be resolved in a few years. We have a lot of work to do as a society. So much work in fact, that it is easy to get discouraged and give up. It may feel as if the world is caving in upon us, and many Christians are tempted to take up a defensive posture, but God does not give us this option. How then are we to move forward? How then are we to continue on in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation?

Well first, please let us be reminded that change starts with each one of us individually. The world might be crumbling, but does that mean that I must capitulate? Does it mean that I have no option but to succumb to the world's philosophy? It does not.

In fact history is full of examples of those who stood against the world and made a real difference. This past week, we celebrated the Conversion of the Apostle Paul who suffered greatly on many different occasions but always held fast to faith in Christ by the strength of Christ, who knew that God's power is especially revealed in our weakness. And on Wednesday evenings we've been reading Athanasius' *On the Incarnation*. It is he who, basically single-handedly, contended for the orthodox faith and of whom it was said, *Athanasius contra mundum*, "Athanasius against the world." And ... he prevailed. Leonardo Da Vinci witnessed four moons circling Jupiter through his telescope and realized that the universe was not an earth-centered system. He might have been silenced by the Roman Church at that time, but

his views prevailed, and he maintained his faith in the process. Of course, then we have Martin Luther, who did not intend to start the Reformation, but would not turn from his convictions. We have William Wilberforce who expended his life to oppose and end chattel slavery in the British Empire. And we have Dietrich Bonhoeffer who condemned the church in Germany for not speaking against the Nazis, and because of his convictions, was finally executed.

Not all of us are called to be martyrs. But all of us are called to be faithful and to follow God where ever he leads us and to speak the Truth in love to those around us. One person can make a difference, and although you cannot control the world, you can control yourself, and you are accountable to God for how you live. Your testimony to the world is important. It is vital.

Secondly, although we act individually, we do not act as individuals. In Christ, we are a community, a true family, and we must stand together and must care for each other, especially in the various trials and dangers that we may face. Most importantly, let us always remember that it is God that is working through His Body the Church to grow His Kingdom in the world. He is the one that will work things out for good. He is the one who heals the lepers and palsied. He is the one that gives courage, faith, and strength, to meet the challenges of life. And He is the one who creates new hearts within us and brings the proud to their knees. If a persecutor of the church like a Saul can be converted to a St. Paul, then no one is beyond the reach of God's grace. And surely no one will escape God's judgement.

No doubt it seems like the world is falling apart. It seems like everything is against us. It is a struggle just to survive and make ends meet. But understand that this world is fallen, and life is and will be a struggle until Jesus returns to take us home. But, as His love has redeemed us, we are compelled to be agents of His love to bring healing to the nations, and that will always cost us dearly. The gospel goes forward only through the sacrifices made by God's people. Christianity started with sacrifice, and it moves forward through sacrifice. By God's grace, we will oppose those who desire to twist the good gifts that God gave us in creation into a means of enslaving people through atheistic lies.

So let us receive the trials that come our way in humility and return good for evil. Jesus heals our sins, He heals our weaknesses, and if He wills, He will heal even our bodies in this world. Submit first to God, and then submit to God's agents in this world. Pray for humility and wisdom. But then trusting in God, go forward in courage, speaking His truth in love back into the world. It is God who will strengthen and protect us in times of need.

Let us pray.

O GOD, who knowest us to be set in the midst of so many and great dangers, that by reason of the frailty of our nature we cannot always stand upright; Grant to us such strength and protection, as may support us in all dangers, and carry us through all temptations; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*