



SAINT STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

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Quinquagesima, being Sunday, February 15th, 2015

✠ **In The Name of The Father and of The Son
and of The Holy Ghost. Amen.** ✠

If you've ever wondered what the word "radical" really means you need look no further than today's epistle. The 13th Chapter of St. Paul's First Epistle to the Corinthians expounds with crystal clarity a concept that stood the whole world on its head – one that stands in conflict with every other concept that *has* animated – or, for that matter, *will* animate – human society.

St. Paul's notion is not simply counterintuitive. It is, by human standards, positively irrational. How is it possible for us to love our fellowmen, not merely as a vague collective, but as single individuals? Such ideas appear to run entirely contrary to the way we are wired.

St. Paul is not merely urging us to feel warm and fuzzy about folks in our homes and our communities. He isn't telling us just to be tolerant of people different from us. He is charging us with a solemn obligation to love and to cherish the people he calls our neighbors as much as we love and cherish ourselves.

In terms of human wisdom such a notion is folly. It is not merely an unattainable standard; it is utterly wacky, off-the-wall. Self-preservation and self-advancement are basic human imperatives.

These imperatives make us tick, make us strive to improve our lives and by extension the lives of our nearest and dearest. And because a healthy and prosperous community is, usually, a prerequisite for our personal well-being, we strive to strengthen and improve our communities as well.

To assess just how wacky the Christian concept of the paramount importance of the love of our fellow men really is we need look no further than the society in which he wrote it – the Roman Empire of the First Century A.D. For those born in the First Century A.D. the Roman Empire was by far the best place to live for all but the most fanatical of nationalist and lowest of slaves. It wasn't a democracy, but it was cultured, prosperous and had an even-handed system of justice.

Yet Roman concepts of human relationships were entirely different from anything we would find acceptable today. For starters, love was not regarded as a virtue. If anything it was seen as a weakness. Families were not bound together by bonds of affection. They were held together by legal obligation. Fathers held the power of life and death over their children into adulthood until they decided to emancipate them.

Slavery was an energy source as essential to the Roman Empire as carbon fuels are to us. Slaves were not people. They were property. They could be beaten, sold and slain at will. Concepts such as mercy and pity were not regarded as virtues. Mercy was largely a political tool deployed to secure useful end. The idea of being mercifully out of pity was regarded as weakness.

It was, thus, a society which lived by the principle of what Charles Darwin, some 1,800 years later, would describe as “survival of the fittest” – a society in which the ruthless prospered and the most ruthless prospered most of all. It was a society of every man was in it for himself. Grabbing what you wanted in the realm of sex, money and power was perfectly acceptable.

It was in this brutal, ruthless, greedy society that St. Paul wrote: “Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels and have not love I am as sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal.” What’s more, he wrote it to a church founded in arguably the most licentious city in the empire – a church whose members routinely gorged themselves food and wine intended for the poor. It was a church in which women flounced about in provocative clothes and men frequented bordellos.

Yet this crazy doctrine transformed the world, not by a massive collective upheaval but by one human heart at a time. It was embraced by centurions, the courageous but brutal officers who led the armies that fought Rome’s wars. It was embraced by slave owners such as Philemon, who welcomed back like a brother his runaway slave Onesimus. Eventually, it was embraced by the Roman Empire itself. Christianity was proclaimed Rome’s official religion; slavery was abolished, along with

the brutal gladiatorial games and the hideous punishment of crucifixion.

The transformation of Western was by no means instantaneous. Self-preservation and self-advancement remain powerful human imperatives, and ruthlessness is still quite frequently the path to prosperity. But over two millennia, the widespread embrace of Christianity has rendered the ruthless pursuit of personal and communal goals infamous and disgraceful.

Today, however, it has become fashionable among our intelligentsia to pooh-pooh the fact that the Christian faith – and Christianity alone – that transformed Western society. They espouse the quaint notion that St Paul’s doctrine of love and charity is by no means divinely inspired, but springs quite naturally from the human heart.

A hundred years ago the philosopher George Santayana warned us that those who will not learn from history are doomed to repeat it. Europe’s ruling elite and their admirers here in America are clearly determined learn the lesson taught by their own recent history. It teaches that, absent Christianity, efforts to improve the human lot have had tragic results.

Vladimir Illyich Lenin and Josef Stalin didn’t set out with the goal of becoming hated monsters. They expected to be hailed as benefactors of mankind. So, too, did Adolf Hitler, Mussolini, Mao Tse Tung and Pol Pot and most of that tragic century’s murderous despots. But this should come as no surprise: Thomas Hobbs, the great 16th Century philosopher, warned us that, without the Christian faith, life here on earth would be “solitary, nasty, brutish and short.”
AMEN