



St Stephen's Anglican Church

11856 Mays Chapel Rd., Timonium, MD 21093

Quinquagesima Sunday, February 7th, 2016

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

For the past 100 years or so, the nations of the West, that part of the world formerly known as Christendom, have been engaged in a radical social experiment – one that has never been tried by any civilization that has preceded it; not the Egyptians, not the Assyrians, not the Babylonians, not the Carthaginians, not the Romans.

Indeed, search every corner of the globe as you may – Africa, Asia, the Americas, and the subcontinent of India – and, until you reach the 20th Century, you will find nowhere in the world that has attempted such an experiment; not even in the most barbarous of societies.

If they were honest, the theoreticians responsible for initiating the experiment would describe it as a bid to abolish God. Perhaps a more accurate definition of it would be: “An attempt to substitute human standards and human laws for standards and laws believed by previous generations to have been laid down by God.”

Strangely, many people today (not only those actively engaged in the experiment, but also many who have no option but to participate in it) harbor the notion that the human standards and laws instituted under this new regimen actually reflect laws and standards that were once thought to be given to mankind by God.

Those who consider themselves sophisticates might well claim that, far from being divine in origin, the laws and standards once thought to be God-given were actually inventions of the human mind. The idea that a “god” was involved in the process, they might argue, was conceived mainly to convince primitive people to accept them.

Oddly, this experiment in *Secularism* (to give it a proper name) is by no means embraced solely by atheists and agnostics, but even by folks who claim to be Christians. This is clear from the liturgies, teachings, practices and policies of most of America's Protestant denominations. Nor have the Catholic Churches been untouched by it – Romans, Orthodox and, of course, our own.

Jesus, however, said: “By their fruits ye shall know them.” Thus it seems fair to assess the results of the experiment by the standards the folks conducting it have set for themselves. First, how, in practice, do their standards and laws measure up to the laws that were once believed to be of divine origin.

The foundations upon which society's standards and laws are based are the virtues it embraces and the sins it condemns. Handily enough, the virtues espoused by what was once called Christendom are eloquently outlined in today's epistle: The 13th Chapter of Paul's First Epistle to the Corinthians. The things that “Secularists” treat as virtues, however, are rather different.

Judging by what is taught in our schools and practiced in our communities, the first of the Seven Paramount Secular Virtues is “pride” closely followed by its related virtue “self-esteem.” Next up comes “tolerance;” then “empathy;” “good intentions;” and “non-judgementalism” (which is by no means the same thing as tolerance).

The final Paramount Secular Virtue is implied rather than publicly enunciated – presumably for fear it might be misunderstood, or, may be, understood only too well. Indeed, with apologies

to the late Oscar Wilde, it might well be described as “the virtue that dare not speak its name.” It is “the acquisition of power and the exercise of it.” It might be “unspoken,” but it is on display daily in the body-politick, in boardrooms, in union offices, on shop floors, and so forth.

Contrast the “Secular Virtues” with Christianity’s seven paramount virtues: charity, humility, kindness, chastity, temperance, fortitude and patience – virtues that Paul encompasses in the triad: “Faith, Hope and Charity.” Yet far from echoing the Godly virtues, the Secular Virtues appear to be their very antithesis.

Pride, together with its close relation, self-esteem, is Christianity’s paramount deadly sin. It is, indeed, the absolute antithesis of humility, a paramount Christian virtue. Similarly, the Secular Virtues of good intentions, tolerance, empathy, and non-judgmentalism can find equivalents in the pantheon of Christian Deadly Sins.

Tolerance, empathy, good intentions, non-judgmentalism, for instance, collectively represent the Sin of Sloth. They enshrine as a virtue the abdication of personal responsibility by encouraging a bland acceptance of the fruits of the whole panoply of deadly sins – notably lust, gluttony, greed, wrath and envy.

What’s more, all Seven Deadly Sins tend to manifest themselves at one time or other in struggles to acquire power and exercise it. In fact, taken as a whole, the Secular Virtues might be summed up, in the command: “Do what thou wilt!” . . . I wonder who said that?

So how is the experiment in Secularism actually working out? In countries where it has been adopted in its most extreme form, it has resulted in the deaths of countless millions at the hands of their own governments. One might also argue it has been responsible for two World Wars and a host of lesser conflicts.

In the Western democracies, things have proceeded at a more moderate pace. Even so it has fallen far short of its architects’ expectations with cities racked by crime, poverty and addiction; social services overwhelmed by broken families, fatherless children and the mentally ill.

Government *diktats* increasingly regulate relations not only between the sexes and ethnic groups, but also between parents and children, employer and employee, tradesman and customer – supplanting the cultivation of charity, courtesy, neighborliness and mutual cooperation.

No less worrying, the notion of honor and righteousness in the conduct human affairs is going out of fashion at an alarming rate. Lying, for instance, has come to be regarded as a legitimate tool to be deployed in public, commercial and private life. Indeed, there is scarcely an area of human endeavor that has not been coarsened and debased by the effort to remove God from our lives.

St Paul would have had no problem recognizing what has been happening to us. He lived in a largely secular society like our own. Rome had lost faith its ancient gods, but they did not have the temerity to decide to do without. Rather, in desperation, they invented a new god to replace the old ones.

But worshipping the State in the person of the Emperor did little to satisfy the vast spiritual hunger that arose from the loss of the Empire’s moral core. It was St Paul and his fellow evangelists who provided the remedy that filled the void: Faith in our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

The 13th Chapter of the First Epistle to the Corinthians encapsulates St Paul’s prescription for the application of the Christian Gospel. Over the past two millennia it has radically changed the world with its message that every single individual here on earth is equally beloved, and precious, in the eyes of our Creator.

The Gospel, if we will let it, could once again transform our society for the better. But first we must recognize that Secularism merely repeats of mankind’s first sin – the sin of imagining we could “be as gods,” deciding for ourselves what is good and what is evil. For when man attempts to abolish God, he inevitably ends up making himself God – and for the consequences of that we need only to cast a glance at recent history. *AMEN.*

To the Only Wise God, Our Saviour, be Glory and Majesty, Dominion and Power, Both Now and Forever. AMEN.