



ST. STEPHEN'S
 ANGLICAN CHURCH
 11856 MAYS CHAPEL RD., TIMONIUM, MD 21093

Quinquagesima, being Sunday, March 3rd, 2019
 ✠ In The Name of The Father and of The Son
 and of The Holy Ghost. Amen. ✠

To define the word “radical,” one need look no further than the passage appointed for 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 – a concept that is in direct conflict with every other concept that *has* animated – or *will* animate – human society.

It is not merely counterintuitive. By human standards, it is positively irrational. 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 to be tolerant of people who are different from us. He is charging us with a solemn obligation to love and cherish people he defines as our neighbors – virtually everybody else in the whole wide world – as much as we love and cherish ourselves.

In terms of human wisdom, such a notion is folly. It is not merely an unattainably high standard; it is utterly off-the-wall. Self-preservation and self-advancement are basic human imperatives. They make us tick. They 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 Paul’s concept really is, we need look no further than the society in which he wrote it: the Roman Empire of the 1st Century A.D. Back then, the Roman Empire was by far the best place in the world to live – at least for all but the most fanatical nationalists and lowest slaves. It wasn’t a democracy, but it was cultured and prosperous and it enjoyed an enviably even-handed system of justice.

Yet Roman concepts of human relations were entirely different from anything we would find acceptable today. Not least, love was not regarded as a virtue. If anything it was seen as a weakness. Families were not bound by bonds of affection. Sure, some husbands loved their wives and some parents their children and *vice versa*, but families were actually held together by legal obligation. Fathers had power of life and death over their children until they decided to emancipate them.

Slavery was an energy source as essential to the Roman Empire as oil and coal are today. Slaves weren’t people. They were property that be beaten, sold and slain at will. The demand for slaves was voracious – so much so Rome was constantly at war to obtain more of them.

Concepts such as mercy and pity were no more regarded as virtues than love. Mercy was largely a political tool used to bind the recipients with bonds of obligation. The idea of being mercifully out of a sense of pity would be seen as weakness. It was a society in which every man was for himself – in which the norm was to grab what you wanted in the realm of sex, money and power.

It was in this brutal, ruthless, greedy society that Paul wrote his epistle and addressed it to a church located in the most licentious city in the empire – a church whose members gorged food and wine donated for the poor and in which women flounced about in provocative clothes while their husbands patronized bordellos.

Yet this irrational doctrine transformed the world, not by a massive upheaval but by one human heart at a time. It was embraced by centurions, commanders of Rome’s conquering armies. 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 the official religion; slavery was abolished, along with the brutal gladiatorial games and the sadistic punishment of crucifixion.

The transformation of the West was not instantaneous. Self-preservation and self-advancement remain powerful imperatives. Ruthlessness is still a path to prosperity. But over two millennia, the embrace of the Christian faith and the virtues it upheld rendered the ruthless pursuit of personal and communal goals infamous and disgraceful. Many of the activities considered quite acceptable in Rome have been proscribed as criminal.

Yet today our self-anointed intelligentsia fashionably scoffs at the contention that the Christian faith (and Christianity alone) transformed Western society. It is no longer accepted that Paul's doctrine of charity and love was divinely inspired. It is said to spring entirely naturally from the human heart. Indeed, the European Community deliberately omitted from its constitution all mention of the debt Europe owes to the Christian faith.

Indeed, it is against Community law for many categories workers even to discuss their Christian faith openly. The English courts – like those in the rest of Europe – are dealing with a growing burden of religious discrimination cases – punishing those who openly profess Christianity. All this in a country where Anglicanism is supposedly the established state religion.

Here in America we are headed in the same direction. Equality and diversity rules threaten public sector workers if they are open about their religion in the workplace. Doctors and nurses face disciplinary charges if colleagues or patients accuse them of "preaching." Codes of practice penalize teachers and coaches who discuss their beliefs with pupils. Members of school and college sports teams are forbidden to pray before or after games and punished if they do so.

We differ from ancient Rome only in degree. There, to refuse to worship the state as supremely divine was a capital offense. The legal code encouraged parents to dispose of unwanted babies on municipal garbage dumps. Christians who scoured the dumps to save these children were condemned to die in the arena – on trumped up charges of cannibalism.

Americans once uniformly regarded such practices as infanticide with revulsion, yet today state legislators are debating laws that authorize mothers to kill unwanted newborns. In New York and New Hampshire passage of such legislation was greeted with cheers.

For the newborn, the God-given right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness is no longer guaranteed. All Americans are born equal, but, increasingly it seems, some Americans are born more equal than others.

At the beginning of the last century, the philosopher George Santayana warned that those who would not learn from history would be doomed to repeat it.

America's political and social elite have clearly failed learn the lesson taught by the world's own recent history: That, absent Christianity, efforts to improve the human lot tend to have tragic results.

Vladimir 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.

The present depravity was eloquently articulated by the corporate chieftain who told his shareholders: "If you want loyalty, get a dog." Absent the Christian faith -- as the philosopher Thomas Hobbs observed -- life henceforth promises to be increasingly "solitary, nasty, brutish and short." *AMEN.*

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