

The Parish Paper

OF

ST. JOHN'S CHURCH

SAVANNAH, GEORGIA

Vol. 37 No.

The Eleventh Sunday after Trinity

August 19th, 2012

PRAYER FOR THE CHURCH (II)

Praying for the Church is praying for the fruits of Christ's saving work; it is praying for the success of the Gospel; it is asking God to fulfill his own perfect loving eternal purpose of salvation. What better way to invest our minds and wills, our time and energy?

The first paragraph of the Prayer for the Church teaches us to pray for a Church united in truth and charity. There is no charity without truth; no truth without charity; no unity without both. Where there is unity in the truth and charity, the Church is ready for her vocation to be the Body of Christ.

In the second and third paragraphs we turn from the spiritual unity of the Church in truth and love to consider the institutional means of this unity – first: the Christian prince and magistrate (civil government), and the administration of justice; second: the Christian pastor and curate (ecclesiastical government), and the administration of word and sacrament; and third: the Christian people, and their faith and service. It may seem strange that the realization of spiritual community requires institutional structures; but like soul and body, each requires the other. Oddly enough, a "purely" spiritual church and a merely institutional church become the same thing - spiritual anarchy, or tyranny, a mere power structure.

In countries like the U. S. A., where "separation of church and state" is taken to be a self-evident and unproblematic description of religious and civil organization, the prayer for "Christian rulers" and its priority over prayer for Christian pastors and people may seem strange. Historically it is rooted in the royal supremacy - the English monarch's headship in civil and ecclesiastical government - and, more broadly, in the western Christian (Catholic and Protestant) tradition of the "sacral monarchy", which in turn looks back to Charlemagne, to Constantine, and to the Old Testament kings, Josiah, Hezekiah, Solomon, and David. This idea recognizes that in human society the religious and the political are overlapping aspects of one and the same community. That is not to say there are no distinctions between civil and ecclesiastical; but the distinctions are not separate compartments. God is Lord and King not only in the "religious" sphere but in every aspect of human life. Because of this fundamental unity of society, which is both a political and religious community, the Christian prince and magistrate have a special responsibility under God's Word and within the Christian church for "the punishment of wickedness and vice" and "the maintenance of true religion and virtue".

This idea may seem quaint in the American context, where the ties between church and state have long been loosened (in large part, at the insistence of churches seeking denominational freedom). Yet from the early days of the Republic, the separation of powers was never absolute; it was understood that the virtue necessary to the citizens of a democratic Republic required vigorous churches; for without religion virtue does not flourish. Religion therefore is no merely private concern; it has a proper and legitimate role in the public square: of witness, of education, of prayer, of training in morals.

The tides of secularism have eroded the older consensus about the public good served by religion, the dependence of the state on the ministry of (chiefly) Christian churches, and the need for the state to (at least) provide a setting in which this ministry can flourish. Yet the strength of American religion, and specifically of the Christian churches in the U. S. A., is far from exhausted. The American paradox abides, that it is simultaneously the most secular and the most religious of all modern nations.

(To be continued)