

G O V E R N M E N T

An exposition of I Timothy 2:1-6

D.B. KNOX

THE PROTESTANT FAITH.

Sermon preached in St. Andrew's Cathedral, Sydney,  
on the nineteenth anniversary of the accession of  
Queen Elizabeth II in the presence of their Excellencies  
the Governor of N.S.W. and Lady Cutler by the Reverend  
Canon D.B. Knox

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We celebrate today the anniversary of the accession of Queen Elizabeth II; and in this connection I read the first six verses of chapter two of St. Paul's first letter to Timothy:

"First of all, then, I urge that petitions, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be offered for all men; for sovereigns and all in high office, that we may lead a tranquil and quiet life in full observance of religion and high standards of morality. Such prayer is right, and approved by God our Saviour, whose will it is that all men should find salvation and come to know the truth. For there is one God, and also one mediator between God and men, Christ Jesus, himself man, who sacrificed himself to win freedom for all mankind, so providing, at the fitting time, proof of the divine purpose;".

St. Paul is instructing Timothy on the principles of his ministry. A few verses previously, he has called on him to fight the good fight of faith, and he now spells out what this means in practice. It is interesting to see what St. Paul puts first. He writes: "First of all, then, I urge that petitions, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be offered for all men;".

He puts prayer as the first activity of the Christian. An activity in which all are to engage. Prayer is an expression of our world view; those who engage in earnest prayer acknowledge that God is the sovereign upholder of all things and that He is a gracious God, ready to listen and answer the needs, hopes and aspirations of His sons and daughters. Our prayer honours God, for by it we acknowledge that He is good, gracious and able to help. We glorify Him and declare our belief in his character, by entering his presence with our prayers and supplication. Lethargy in prayer shows that our faith is growing feeble; that our viewpoint is veering towards materialism, that our hearts and lives are directed to this world and are ceasing to be centred on God and on our Saviour, on His present help and on our future hope and expectation. St. Paul urges that first of all petitions, prayers, intercessions and thanksgivings should characterise Christian life and Christian community. We have, of course, the example of our Lord Jesus Christ, whom we often read of in the Gospel narrative as engaging in long sessions of prayer, of communion and fellowship with His heavenly Father. It wasn't always easy for Jesus to obtain opportunity for prayer. We read that He would rise up early in the morning and go out into an isolated place in order to be undisturbed in his prayer fellowship with God. Hudson Taylor, who did so much in evangelising China last century, was a man who staked his work on the efficacy of prayer. "Prayer changes things" was his motto, and indeed prayer is potent to bring about that which is good and wholesome in our own lives and in our community. Prayer brings about God's



purposes, for it is the Spirit of God who prays our prayers within us.

You will notice that St. Paul's injunction to prayer is not cabined nor confined. Prayers are to be made by Christians for all men, not merely for their own interests or their own sect, because the true religion is as wide and as catholic as humanity in its concern for mankind. In calling upon God for his blessings we call upon Him for all men. As we pray for others, prayer welds us into common fellowship.

Note next that when the apostle descends to details he puts first the sovereign as the object of our prayers. We are all tempted to begin with our own circle. It might have been natural for the apostle to have mentioned the Christian congregation or the bishop or other church office bearer and of course we ought to pray for one another and those who have responsibility in the congregation and on other occasions St. Paul is explicit on these points. But here as he expounds in order the duty of the Christian he puts in the place of pre-eminence, prayer for the sovereign and for all in high office. I wonder whether we are aware that this is our first Christian duty? How often do we pray for those who exercise government among us. For example, do we, as individual Christians, follow the apostle's injunction to pray specifically for Mr. Gorton as Prime Minister or Mr. Askin as Premier or are we deceived into thinking we have discharged our Christian duty when we follow the old-fashioned forms of the Book of Common Prayer which restricts the set form of prayer to the Queen and the Royal Family. When the Prayer Book was composed the Queen governed, but the way our constitution has developed since then the actual government is shared by many. The Crown now symbolises and unifies Government, but we must be realistic in our prayers (for prayer is real) and as we continue to pray for the Queen and the Royal Family as holding eminent positions in the community we are duty-bound to pray specifically for those who govern through the Queen's commission, for Her Ministers who form the Cabinet and particularly the Prime Minister and Premier, for the Judges, Commissioners, permanent heads of the Civil Service Departments. We should pray for all these if we are to fulfill St. Paul's injunction to pray for sovereigns and all in high offices.

Note next, that St. Paul joins thanksgivings with these prayers. "I urge that petitions, prayers, intercessions and thanksgivings be offered for all men", like prayer, thanksgiving is an expression of faith in God, it honours God for it acknowledges that the benefits that we experience are his gifts, and so by adding thanksgiving to prayer God's blessing, called down by the prayer of faith, returns to Him in praise and grateful acknowledgement and thanksgiving. If we pray little, I think



we will find that we give thanks even less, for selfishness is our characteristic sin. Since we do not in practice believe that our life is, moment by moment, dependent upon God we do not in actual fact give Him thanks; and man's characteristic failure is unthankfulness. We ought to be thankful moment by moment for the continuation of health, life and financial resources to provide us with a home, food and clothing. We lose a lot, in actual fact, by unthankfulness because experience shows that a thankful spirit is able to enjoy God's gifts much more than a spirit which takes them all for granted as though they were his own inalienable possession. Thanksgiving increases enjoyment of the pleasures and benefits which we experience.

So St. Paul enjoins us to give thanks and we are to give thanks firstly for the sovereign and for all in high office. It may seem strange that government is an object of thanksgiving as we so often find that acts of government are personally galling and constricting, nevertheless, just as we are to pray for government so we should give God hearty thanks for it. For government is the gift of God to us. It matters little what form government takes; it has differed widely over the centuries and is very diverse in its forms in the world today. What does matter is that it should fulfill its purpose of maintaining justice and righteousness and the rule of law, for only so can we live happily in the community. The need for government is the result of humanity's sinfulness. Were there no sin, that is to say, no selfishness, greed, anger and such like, there would be no need for overt organs of government, we would all be our own governors, doing what is just without external constraint. Interestingly enough, Karl Marx has recognised this and expresses it by his theory of the withering of the state which he argued will result from the regeneration of mankind when its economic conditions have been transformed through the class war, revolution and the dictatorship of the proletariat. Marx was, of course, mistaken in thinking that these various activities would lead to a regeneration of man's nature through economic change. There can be no withering of the state, no dispensing with government, until man is no longer a sinner. The true regeneration is only brought about by the Holy Spirit of God through the Gospel of Christ. We look forward to the day of renewal and regeneration which God has promised, when there will be a new heaven and a new earth, characterised by righteousness and justice. But till that time comes external overt government is a necessity for human society and it is God's gift to us, for which we should not only pray but also give thanks, as we do this morning for the government of Queen Elizabeth II. All exercise of government is a delegation of God's own sovereignty and a reminder that God is Lord of all. He is the supreme judge and governor, in whose name human judges govern and to whom they give account.



The purpose of government, as St. Paul goes on to explain, is that we might live a peaceful and tranquil life peaceful externally in society, tranquil internally within our own hearts. Government may be able to establish external conditions of peace but it is only the Gospel with its promise of forgiveness, and faith in a heavenly father that can bring tranquility to the heart. But as St. Paul says here, government provides the conditions for men to hear and accept the gospel.

St. Paul concludes this passage by reminding Timothy that the gospel of salvation is for all men, that is why prayers are to be made for all. No one group, one nation or one class has exclusive claim to God's favour, but He wills that all men should find salvation by coming to know the truth. For to know the truth is to be saved for that truth is, of course, God Himself, and His relationship to us through forgiveness in Christ. So the apostle concludes "There is one God and one mediator between God and man, Jesus Christ, himself man, who gave himself as a ransom for all" a ransom to set us free. Good government, says the apostle, provides the opportunity for men to hear the Gospel and to know the truth, to know God, through the forgiveness of their sins in Jesus Christ. This renewed relationship with our heavenly father means freedom, we are, in our actions, no longer under the compulsion of sinful passions nor chained in our spirit by the fears from a guilty conscience. The Gospel is freedom, for the Gospel of forgiveness through the death of Christ for us brings us into a free and happy relationship with our sovereign God. Free in His presence, free to do his will, we are our own governors, gladly doing the will of God.

So we may see that government, God's gift to us, is a double sign. A sign first of all of our sin, for it is because of our selfishness and the passions that go with it that we need the restraint of government if we are to live in community and it is a sign of our salvation in a twofold way. It is a sign of God's will for our salvation. God is long suffering with rebellious, God-ignoring humanity. He prescribes society through government in order that we might come to a knowledge of the truth. All government acts in the name of God, the only governor. It is His minister for righteousness and part of His will for our salvation. For it is the object of government to maintain justice and so peace and thus to provide the conditions for the spread of the truth, the truth which sets us free from our sinful nature by recreating us in Christ. Then government is a sign of our salvation in a second way. We ourselves will be kings, already are kings. The Bible frequently describes our status as Christians in terms of our reigning with Christ, sharing His throne, being kings. A king in the ancient world was completely free from external restraint. A king could do exactly what he wanted to do. As Christians we are kings, for through the

regeneration of our nature which the Holy Spirit creates in us when we renew our fellowship with God through forgiveness, we gladly do what is right and as it were, become our own governors. We stand in God's presence free, no longer needing the external restraints of exterior government because our heart and disposition now gladly follows what is right. So as we pray for kings and governors and give God thanks for them, we are reminded not only of our need for salvation and of God's provision of salvation in Christ but also of that future salvation which by God's grace we will enjoy when we ourselves, all of us, will be kings and governors, sovereign and free, serving God in His presence and serving one another according to His will. We may enter on this salvation now by bringing our world view round to seeing and acknowledging Christ as Lord of all, the centre of humanity's history and of our relationship with God our creator; the present and future is His and we enter it now by accepting Him as our own sovereign Lord for our own lives.

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