

DIVINE THINGS

**A Sermon by Dean Scotty McLennan
University Public Worship, Stanford Memorial Church
March 16, 2003**

It looks as if our country will be going to war with Iraq this week. I fervently hope and pray that some way will be found to avert what President Bush has called a last resort response to the threat, to our nation and the world, posed by Saddam Hussein.ⁱ Yet, if we do go to war, it must not be business as usual here at home. After the terrorism of September 11, 2001, we were encouraged by our government to carry on, and not to let our lives be disrupted. President Bush said to the American people on September 20, 2001: I ask you to live your lives...and I ask your continued participation and confidence in the American economy."ⁱⁱⁱ New York mayor Rudolph Giuliani said, "We should go about our business, and we should show these people that they can't stop us."ⁱⁱⁱ Yet, when we declare war on another nation, and our troops' lives are at risk, along with those of Iraq and its civilian population, we must honor and participate in their sacrifice with at least some level of sacrifice of our own. We must not set our minds just on human things. We must set our minds on divine things.

In this morning's gospel lesson,^{iv} Jesus is preparing his disciples for the trials and tribulation that lie ahead, both for him and for them: "The Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected...and be killed." If his disciples want to follow in his footsteps -- and any of the rest of us want to do so, because now Jesus is speaking to the crowds as well as to his disciples -- they must "deny themselves and take up their cross." One can only save one's life by losing it for Jesus' sake. Peter won't have any of this and rebukes Jesus, either because he doesn't want Jesus to have to suffer and be killed, or because Peter is afraid of suffering himself. This is the apostle, after all, who later deserts Jesus and denies knowing him after Jesus has been arrested.^v Yet, he was the rock upon which Jesus chose to build his church.^{vi} Some thirty years after Jesus' crucifixion, Peter is himself crucified in Rome, upside down in his case.^{vii} By biblical evidence or legend the other disciples also eventually suffer deeply and are executed painfully: For example, Andrew is martyred on an X-shaped cross,^{viii} Bartholomew is skinned alive,^{ix} and Simon is sawed in two.

Now, war is not pretty. It's hell. There's a strong Christian tradition, tracing back to St. Augustine, which holds that war can be justifiable under the right conditions, but it's never holy. It's hell. Chris Hedges, a New York Times reporter who covered the Gulf War, Bosnia and Kosovo, and Central American wars, writes about war's deceptive glory and attraction in a new book entitled War Is a Force that Gives Us Meaning.^x He writes not as a pacifist, but as one who deeply believed in the armed interventions in Kosovo and Bosnia and who respects the

qualities of professional soldiers. Yet he tells stories which can help set our minds not on human things, but on divine things:

In a Salvadoran town he got caught in a crossfire between government and rebel troops: "As we rounded a corner, several full bursts of automatic fire rent the air. We dove head-first onto the dirt. The rebels began to fire noisy bursts from their M-16 assault rifles. The acrid scent of cordite filled the air. Dust was in my eyes. I did not move. I began to pray. "God," I thought, "if you get me out of here I will never do this again." ... Rebels around me were wounded and crying out in pain. One died yelling out in a sad cadence for his mother. His desperate and final plea seemed to cut through the absurd posturing of soldiering. At first it haunted me. Soon I wished he would be quiet. 'Mama!'...'Mama!'...'Mama!'"^{xi}

Later in the book Hedges writes: "I knew a Muslim soldier, a father, who fought on the front lines around Sarajevo. His unit, in one of the rare attempts to take back a few streets controlled by the Serbs [outside the city proper], pushed across Serb lines. They did not get very far. The fighting was intense. As he moved down the street he heard a door swing open. He fired a burst from his AK-47 assault rifle. A twelve-year-old girl dropped dead. He saw in the body of the unknown girl lying prostrate in front of him the image of his own twelve-year-old daughter. He broke down. He had to be helped back to the city. He was lost for the rest of the war."^{xii}

Following the Gulf War, during the Shiite uprising in Basra, Hedges was captured by the Iraqi National Guard. "One afternoon, in the driving rain, I was seated in a jeep, hot-wired and stolen by my Iraqi captors during the frantic flight from Kuwait City. We had stopped to fill our canteens from muddy puddles. All of the water purification plants had been bombed. The muck and rainwater had already turned my own guts inside out. As I made my way to the brackish pools I noticed a woman and two small children scooping up their hands to drink. I knew what such foul water would do to these innocents, and in the cold downpour recited Auden's "Epitaph on a Tyrant" as a kind of quiet, unintelligible blessing: 'Perfection, of a kind, was what he was after,/ And the poetry he invented was easy to understand;/ He knew human folly like the back of his hand,/ And was greatly interested in armies and fleets;/ When he laughed, respectable senators burst with laughter,/ And when he cried the little children died in the streets."^{xiii}

Mark Twain's War Prayer^{xiv} brilliantly demonstrates how easy it is to "set your mind not on divine things, but on human things," in time of military conflict. He describes a minister praying in a church at the beginning of a war: "Father of us all...watch over our noble young soldiers and aid, comfort, and encourage them in their patriotic work; bless them, shield them in the day of battle and the hour of peril, bear them in your mighty hand, make them strong and confident." As he was praying on and on, a white-haired old man in a robe entered the church, slowly made his way up the aisle, mounted the pulpit, and motioned the minister to step aside, "which the startled minister did." Then he began to pray what he called the other part of the prayer: "that part which the pastor, and also you in your hearts, fervently prayed silently." As he explained,

"When you have prayed for victory, you have prayed for many unmentioned results which follow victory -- must follow it, cannot help but follow it. Upon the listening spirit of God the Father fell also the unspoken part of the prayer. He commandeth me to put it into words: ... O Lord our Father, our young patriots, idols of our hearts, go forth to battle -- be Thou near them! O Lord our God, ...help us to cover their smiling fields with the pale forms of their patriot dead... help us to wring the hearts of their unoffending widows with unavailing grief; help us to turn them out roofless with their little children to wander unfriended the wastes of their desolated land." Twain's poem goes on in powerful, excruciating language, reminding us how much suffering and horror there always is on both sides of a war.

So, as our troops head into harms' way, as they lay their lives on the line, and as this war is fought on Iraqi soil with tens of thousands of Iraqi deaths expected,^{xv} what should we be doing back here on American soil? It can't just be business as usual. May I make a modest suggestion? A traditional Christian suggestion. Prayer, fasting, and almsgiving.

First, let us pray fervently that this war will end quickly and with as little loss of life on both sides as possible. Let us pray fervently, in the tradition of just war theology, that greater good shall come from the harm that will be wrought. Let us pray fervently, as just war theologian Reinhold Niebuhr taught, for God's forgiveness for our fallen state, and our imperfect actions, and our inability to have avoided war in the first place.^{xvi}

St. Augustine wrote in his treatise on The Usefulness of Fasting^{xvii} that a primary concern of ours during this mortal life should be to hunger and thirst after justice.^{xviii} In the words of Jesus, "Blessed are they who hunger and thirst after justice, for they shall be satisfied."^{xix} Fasting from food and drink is useful, Augustine claims, in helping us to be less attached to earthly pleasures and in freeing us for a fuller and more rewarding spiritual life in pursuit of justice. We move from heaviness and being burdened to lightness and freer awareness of the meaning of God's love.^{xx} This allows what he calls our sense of Charity to be more attentive.^{xxi}

If our country goes to war against Iraq, I plan to fast for a 24 hour period each week until the war ends. I think of fasting as a way to be deeply conscious of the gifts of life and health that I have, and so often take for granted. As people who fast hunger and thirst, we're reminded deep down in our belly -- literally in our gut -- of all those who hunger and thirst involuntarily. Our stomachs help our minds and our spirits to remember the profound deprivations of war. We can gain a small sense, albeit a very small sense, of solidarity with those who face death and destruction all the time. A little personal sacrifice on a weekly basis here at Stanford of course pales before the immensity of sacrifice and suffering that American soldiers, and Iraqi soldiers and civilians, confront daily, but it can stimulate greater empathy, attention and appreciation. It may also bring some humility in the realization that our own civilian population at home may be at greater risk as we attack another country.

Fasting has a long history, going back to ancient Israel where it was observed especially in times of mourning and of calamity, in order to give added force to prayers for delivery.^{xxii} In the New Testament, fasting was understood not only as an expression of mourning and a strengthening of prayer, but also as a stimulant to almsgiving.^{xxiii} It has had many other meanings historically, including ones which we should be particularly aware of during Lent, like penance and self-purification. Yet for me it's not complete without an explicit connection to almsgiving, or charity, or (perhaps more importantly) to justice -- in Jesus' sense of "Blessed are they who hunger and thirst after justice."

So I plan to give money I save by fasting to groups that I know have a solid history of good humanitarian work in Iraq, like UNICEF, the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees, and Caritas International. I want to work to protect Iraqi Americans, international students, and others who may be susceptible to discrimination or oppression in this country. I plan to remain politically involved to be sure that we fulfill our promises to rebuild Iraq after the war.

It seems as if we have some hard times ahead, much more so for those in uniform, of course, and for those who are simply trying to live their lives in Iraq. We may find an increased risk of terrorist attacks here in America as well. I still hope for the miracle of deliverance from war and of deliverance from the dangers represented by Saddam Hussein. But I also feel we need to prepare for the worst. Jesus prepared his disciples carefully for the reality of future suffering, and he made it clear that narrow concentration on saving their own lives would only mean that they would completely lose them. He asked them to set their minds on divine things, not human things.

Yet this is not easy, as Jesus himself found in the Garden of Gethsemane, when he asked God to take the cup of suffering to come away from him.^{xxiv} On the cross as well, Jesus found it hard to keep his mind on divine things when he cried out, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?"^{xxv} Yet, Jesus died with Psalm 22 on his lips, which begins with those words, but ends with powerful words of praise for God, as you heard in this morning's reading^{xxvi} by Mary Greene. The alternation of complaint and praise in Psalm 22 leads to a realization that affliction cannot be avoided in this life, but that God is always present with the tormented, walking by their sides and literally feeling their pain with them: "For he did not despise or abhor the affliction of the afflicted; he did not hide his face from me, but heard when I cried to him."^{xxvii} That's the message of Jesus on the cross, and of taking up one's cross to follow Jesus. God is not only present in our suffering, but God shares in it with us and understands how it feels. Then, turning to God, and praising God, and setting our minds on divine things, means that our hearts live forever, in the psalmist's words, both in this world and the next. We live within God's love every moment, if only we realize it, and if only we can express it reciprocally in our own love. If we let inward love guide our every deed, by this we can then truly worship and be forever freed. AMEN.

NOTES

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- i. See President George W. Bush, "State of the Union Address," January 20, 2003; and MacNeil/Lehrer News Hour, "President Bush Says Iraq Must Work With U.N., Calls War Last Resort," November 20, 2002 (www.pbs.org/newshour/updates/iraq_11-20-02.html).
 - ii. President George W. Bush, Speech to a Joint Session of Congress, September 20, 2001 (San Jose Mercury News, September 21, 2001, p. 21A).
 - iii. As quoted in Elizabeth Kolbert, "In Charge: The Best of Rudy Giuliani," The New Yorker, September 24, 2001, p. 40.
 - iv. Mark 8:31-38.
 - v. Mark 14:66-72; Matthew 26:69-75; Luke 22:54-62; John 18:25-27.
 - vi. Matthew 16:18.
 - vii. Peter Calvocoressi, Who's Who in the Bible (London: Penguin Books, 1999), pp. 147-148.
 - viii. Ibid., p. 18.
 - ix. Ibid., p. 25.
 - x. Chris Hedges, War Is a Force That Gives Us Meaning (New York: Public Affairs, 2002).
 - xi. Ibid., pp. 40-42.
 - xii. Ibid., pp. 86-87.
 - xiii. Ibid., pp. 89-91.
 - xiv. Mark Twain, The War Prayer (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1968).
 - xv. Retired Army General Barry McCaffrey, who led the 24th Infantry Division in the 1991 Gulf War, stated recently that "I fully expect we'll have to kill 15,000 Iraqi soldiers before it's over" in Juan O. Tamayo and Drew Brown, "U.S. Plans Coordinated, Fierce Strike on Iraq," San Jose Mercury News, March 14, 2003, p. 2AA.
 - xvi. Hedges, War, pp. 17, 144.

xvii. St. Augustine, The Usefulness of Fasting, translated by S. Dominic Ruegg (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1951).

xviii. Ibid., p. 65.

xix. Matthew 5:6.

xx. Ibid., p. 69.

xxi. Ibid., p. 73.

xxii. New Catholic Encyclopedia (Detroit: Gale Publishing Co., 2003), Vol. 5, p. 633.

xxiii. New Jerome Biblical Commentary (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1990), p. 645.

xxiv. Mark 14:36; Matthew 26:39.

xxv. Mark 15:34; Matthew 27:46.

xxvi. Psalm 22:23-31.

xxvii. Psalm 22:24.