

THREE STAGES OF HISTORY

“But I say to you who hear: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, and pray for those who spitefully use you. To him who strikes you on the one cheek, offer the other also. And from him who takes away your cloak, do not withhold your tunic either. Give to everyone who asks of you. And from him who takes away your goods do not ask them back. And just as you want men to do to you, you also do to them likewise. “But if you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. And if you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. And if you lend to those from whom you hope to receive back, what credit is that to you? For even sinners lend to sinners to receive as much back. But love your enemies, do good, and lend, hoping for nothing in return; and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High. For He is kind to the unthankful and evil. Therefore be merciful, just as your Father also is merciful. “Judge not, and you shall not be judged. Condemn not, and you shall not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven. Give, and it will be given to you: good measure, pressed down, shaken together, and running over will be put into your bosom. For with the same measure that you use, it will be measured back to you.” (Luke 6:27-38)

Ever since the beginning of the Christian Church there have been trials and struggles the people of God have had to endure. Time and time again, the world has tried to rid itself of Christianity, and time and time again it has failed to do so. As we survey our own religious past, I believe we can divide these various historical clashes into three main stages: physical aggression, intellectual persuasion, and deceitful imitation. By in large, these three stages follow one after the next in chronological order. This, of course, is not to say that these stages are neat and tidy without any overlap between them; but rather this threefold pattern provides us a way to understand our history along a linear path, with each new stage being progressively more dangerous than the last.

As paradoxical as this might sound, the first stage, that of physical aggression, posed the least danger to the survival of the Christian Church. The opening centuries of Christianity was marred by persecution and bloodshed as powerful nations used force of arms to compel Christians to abandon the faith. And while this brutality left physical scars it did not cut deep enough to have a lasting effect, for in no other period did the Christian Church thrive as it did under threat of physical violence. Gladly accepting martyrdom, Christians stood firm, made their good confession, and won the respect of onlookers. For, as it turns out, you can bruise the body, but you can't crush the spirit.

So, the world changed tactics and tried a new strategy. The second stage, that of intellectual persuasion, corresponds to what we might call the Middle Ages. The nations of the world brought to bear not only physical force, but also argument and contradictions meant to undermine the certainty of God. Intelligent and educated thinkers lined up to poke holes in the fabric of faith. Science sought to replace religion as the reasonable choice. This was the Age of remarkable advancement and Christianity came to represent the Dark Ages, a stain on man's progress towards enlightenment. Many fell victim to the allure of a world without God; many lost their faith, for while you can't argue anyone into faith you can argue it away. But the triumph of reason over revelation was short lived because for every enlightened thinker there was an equally enlightened Christian ready to defend orthodoxy. Out of this stage of persecution came remarkable clarity as faith sought understanding and found new ways to express old truths.

As bad as these two stages were, they pale in comparison to the stage we find ourselves in today. We battle the same enemy as before, but in a much more dangerous form. And like the hydra of ancient Greek mythology, the hydra of secular humanism has spawned a new head and shown us a new face. This third stage involves the world's effort to imitate our faith all the while hollowing out its essential meaning. This new enemy lays claim to prophecy and the founding of a new Law contrary to Divine religion. The real danger is this godless religion speaks just enough truth to sound true. So, whether we are talking about the Woke culture or the "Be Kind...Be Tolerant...Be Accepting" ideology, they all share one thing in common: they poorly imitate the Christian understanding of human personhood. They plagiarize our chief doctrine "to love our neighbor as ourselves" without giving credit where credit is due; they systematically eliminate Christ all the while pilfering His Divine perspective. They want heaven on earth albeit without God. They seek to imitate our faith and reject our faith with the same breath. Our Gospel reading this morning lays out God's unique vision for His people—it is a vision of love not hate, goodness not evil, giving not receiving; a vision of mercy, compassion and understanding. Our Lord embodies these virtues

in Himself, and He calls upon His people to live according to these very same virtues. But these virtues are not natural to the human race; yet somehow in our time we foolishly think they are. How else can one explain all the empty chatter? The kind of world these secular movements and programs are trying to create can only be achieved by true faith—a deep love for God which spills over into a deep love for humanity. For what possible reason can secular atheism give to support being tolerant towards another—whether that be another person, gender or race? What possible support can be garnered to make me want to choose the lesser portion or put others before myself? An appeal to Fairness or Kindness or Equality? No these won't do because I can always talk myself out of them with the simple question of "What's in it for me?" We are not built to care for others, there's always an ulterior motive, and no matter how much legislation is passed, you can't rid the world of self-interest. The only way I will admit I am weak is when I'm bested by a stronger force; the only way I will acquiesce is when I am silenced by Truth. According to my sinful nature, nothing on earth is my equal. Only God can put me in my place; only God can be the Absolute; and so only He can inspire self-sacrifice. God inspires by example because what He asks of us, He Himself was willing to do for us. God put the whole world ahead of Himself by sending His Son in the form of a Servant to live and die. And if the Creator would become subject to His own creation, who am I to refuse to put others before myself. But this is the way of Love, the way of Christianity. No matter how much the world tries to imitate it or legislate it or compel by force, the way of Divine love doesn't work without the Divine. Either it's all God or it's nothing at all. Amen.

In Christ,

Pastor Jeremy H. Mills