

No Craven Spirit

II Timothy 1:7

As he sat down to write a last letter to one of his young proteges, the old bishop had every right to feel lonely, lost and afraid, without hope. Because of preaching a doctrine of Christian freedom in an ancient police state, he himself was imprisoned, “shut up like a common criminal,” he wrote. For preaching divine love and human loyalty all his life long – he was now deserted right and left by friends he had trusted – and when he came up for trial in Rome, not one of those he had helped over the years came forward to defend him. “What have you done for us lately?” Amidst the cacophony of this commercial city, his was a small voice, all but drowned by the raucous laughter and curses of what he called these “miserable women” and those men who love “nothing but money and self” who made up so large a part of the population. Besides, winter was coming on and he had forgotten to bring with him his warm woolen “cloak.” And also, he had come off without his “books” and his “notebooks,” and what makes an aging bishop more miserable than to be without these?

Well, as I said, Paul in writing to Tim, had every reason, both great and small, to feel lonely, lost, and afraid during his last days. Every reason to write a discouraging letter, every reason to warn Pastor Timothy about the dangers of being a full-time Christian in a world that couldn't care less about a Jewish Christ, every reason to suggest he better give up proclaiming this odd good news which could serve only to get him in trouble and do something practical for a change like investing in a school for gladiators to make a few sestertia to secure his old age, every reason indeed to sink into private gloom and let the flame of his strange gospel fade away forever. Let the Christian message go down the cloacae maximus.

And yet – quite in the face of such a reasonable attitude – (what could be more logical in the face of human depravity than despair?) – yet, yet -- this old bishop, quite aware of his own precarious position, that his head was on the block (“already my life being poured out on the altar,” he said) – and that the world was composed of originally sinful men (“what fools they really are,” he said) – nonetheless, with a most unreasonable, in a most unexpected turn and with the most debonair spirit – this old man recommends to his young protégé – not despair and not desertion of the cause but rather: “Stir unto flame (my boy) the gift of God which is within you... For the spirit that God gave us is no timid, cringing spirit, but one to inspire love, strength,

and self-discipline. So never be ashamed of your testimony to our Lord, nor of me his prisoner, but take your share of suffering also for the sake of the Gospel and in the strength that comes from God.”

What good words for us – we who live in yet another @ “age of anxiety” – where the organization man is so pitifully disorganized on life’s deeper levels – that he crowds the analyst’s bench while cynically disbelieving that either the priest or the psychiatrist or indeed the government commission can save him, individually or collectively, from himself. In his saner moments (I suppose saner) he laughs loud and long, a horselaugh, at his @ intelligence which has brought him not only instant tea, and instant interest – but instant death. Ha, ha, ha – for our intelligence! What a colossal joke... Joke? Well, maybe better to laugh – at ourselves – than try to escape by sedative means the clinging fog of our newfound neurotic fears – or slow death in a chemically induced carcinogenic society.

But Bishop Paul’s reaction was not mocking laughter. Let others play the rich man’s, the scholar’s, or the debaucher’s fiddle while Rome burns.

No, in the old Bishop there was a dimension of depth. Before all hell and high water, he was “no cringing spirit.” The New English Bible translates it “craven.” You know that word, “craven”? Comes from Latin meaning “cracked” – “broken up” – well, Paul wasn’t going to “crack up” under any sort of pressure – neither the pressures of history or personal pain. Neither Jew nor Roman could cause him to be “all broken-up” – give him a “breakdown.” For his was “no timid, craven spirit” – no cringing, no cowardice, no whining, no feeling sorry for himself, retreating from the battle line, no hiding in schizophrenic corners, no regression to infantile positions of false security, no foetal folding up before life’s slap in the face –

No – “no cringing spirit” in old Paul, but “one to inspire strength, love and self-discipline.”

Can you think of 3 better qualities for the atomic age? “Strength, love and self-discipline.” Why cringe? Though I am like the Presbyterian Scotsman who hesitated to build a fallout shelter because he faltered to shellout (I’m sorry!) – I may build one, but will not buy a pistol to shoot less provident Presbyterian neighbors, even Methodists and Baptists, because I’ve often wondered why all this added atomic fear anyway? Someone asked this pertinent (or impertinent?) question: “When you come right down to it, is it any worse to die wholesale than

retail?” We all have to die sometime – none of us will make it out of this world alive, and everyone must do his own dying. And it must be done only once – and those who have gone before us seem to have gotten through it alright. After all, no one has had to come back. So, except lamenting the loss of our civilization, or our culture – and better ones have been lost before ours – wholesale death ought not to put us in a cringing spirit – any more than retail – all at once or in single file ... it’s six of one and half-dozen of the other.

Anyway, though we would by every means postpone it, to be sure, death for the Christian is “going home” – “coming for to carry me home” – and this we would finally deny to no man after a long, hard journey trying to get there. “Home!” That’s a friendly word – a good one – and so is death – when you’re weary and ready. No cringing for the Christian here. Rather strength.

But in the meantime, says Paul, and may that meantime be a longtime – let there be love and self-discipline. For these are what make whatever time there is left supremely worthwhile. And who knows how many years of “love and self-discipline” lie ahead for us individually and/or collectively? It’s a sin to sound one’s own death knell – to try dying before one’s time – is an affront to the Almighty – for only God can do that, only he can set the alarm. When we face some little personal defeat, pain, family problem and start whimpering like a spanked or sick puppy, “it’s all over, I’m done with, going to die, leave me alone, let me go peacefully and make everyone miserable,” -- you know what God does, he chuckles, pokes us in the ribs and says, “come off it now, cut out the comedy; as for your demise, the whole thing’s up to me; I will come and get you when I please; you presume too much and try my patience; don’t try dying, try living a life of love and self-discipline for however long I give you. Now be up and doing!”

There is great strength in the good ole Presbyterian – and I must say Biblical – doctrine of Providence. Our lives are in God’s hands. You believe that? Read Paul, then be at peace. God is not awed by our atomic firecrackers and various nuclear sparklers – our moon flights amaze him not nearly so much as the inexplicable flight of the bumblebee around the sunflower. And when God wishes to destroy the world by the fire – as he promised, I believe – it shall probably not be by any fire we pyromaniacs are capable of setting – but by a similar conflagration of colliding worlds out of which he brought us in the first place. How preposterously presumptuous of man to predict that he can terminate what God began. God is the beginning and the end.

Well, in the meantime, as I was saying, wasn't I, in the meantime, above ground or below ground or wherever we drive ourselves with our dangerous tinkertoys, let us get on with "love and self-discipline" – for that alone will make God's best out of our worst. And like "strength," these graces too – as the Bishop said – come from God's spirit in us – certainly not from ours. For we too, too obviously do hate and do as we please. But hate is hell and so is discipline that must forever be externally imposed. So hold out your hand – no, your heart – there, God gives you love and self-discipline. It's a gift, the work of Christ makes it possible; take it and make use of it. It's the only way.

Stir it "into flame" – so that life in any age – ancient or atomic – becomes most livable and death most unafrightening and hope most real.

November 12, 1961

Re-written in 1981