



Christian Education

A series of Sermons and Occasional Papers
From the clergy and members
of Holy Trinity Church
Forbes Park, Makati

Date: 14 November 2004 Remembrance Day
Title: **"Our God is marching on"**
Comment: Insert Comment here
Author: The Rev. Tyler A. Strand

Readings for this Sunday:

First Reading Isaiah 32: 1-2; 12-18

Second Reading John 14: 23-29

Gospel

This tends to be a very 'British and Commonwealth' occasion, although members of many nations participate in observing Remembrance, or Veteran's Day.

Nevertheless, I would like to draw on my own national heritage today in what I say. This year we observe this day while the world is still at war, both in the Middle East and, in the case of the war on terror, throughout the world. I read in Time magazine this past week the following ominous statement: "After a happy decade, Americans are locked in a war that will last the rest of their lives." That could be terribly true, and if it is, it suggest to us the need to be very clear what our motives and goals are, lest generations to come learn to hate those of us alive today for what the world has become and for the death of those remembered on future Remembrance Days. But to discuss a planet at war is beyond me. I would instead like us to focus on a localized one, and to use as my example something that always seems to feature in American patriotic remembrances: the *Battle Hymn of the Republic*.

It was written by a woman of New York, Julia Ward Howe: educated, acquainted with some of the greatest writers of her day, a devout Unitarian although raised in a Puritan home. It was about this time of year in 1861, at the height of the Civil War, that she and her husband were in Washington D.C. and decided to see the Union troops for themselves. The capitol was at that time dangerously close to the front

line, and her visit to a troop review, in the company of much of Washington society, eventually came to a terrifying end when Confederate soldiers, sensing what we would call a “photo op” and propaganda coup, attacked the parade-ready Union troops. The party quickly dispersed and the society visitors experienced a 19th century traffic jam trying to get back to the city. To while away the time they sang one of the popular tunes of the day, already borrowed from an old hymn: “John Brown’s Body”. The tune is much more famous now as the hymn I am speaking about.

That night in her Washington hotel, Mrs. Howe awoke before dawn filled with the inspiration to write a poem based on her experience of the troops, the nearness of battle, and the apocalyptic sense that many Northerners felt that the principle of freedom for all citizens, not just white ones, was a holy cause, a sacred struggle, a jihad (in the proper Islamic sense of that word.) The result, which significantly fit the meter of the song they were singing on the road, is known to all:

*Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord;
He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored;
He hath loosed the fateful lighting of his terrible swift sword;
His truth is marching on.*

The subsequent verses, known to every school boy and girl in the United States (at least in my day), draw their images from Scriptural references in both the Old and the New Testaments, making extensive use of the 63rd chapter of the book of the prophet Isaiah with its reference to the winepress of God’s anger, and the book of the Revelation of St John the Divine that speaks of God’s vindication of the saints. They are images of war and struggle, of trumpets and marching and divine justice and recompense to the wicked:

*I have read a fiery gospel, writ in burnished rows of steel:
‘As ye deal with my contemners, so with you my grace shall deal;
Let the hero born of woman crush the serpent with his heel,
Since God is marching on.’*

Howe's poem and the anthem that it became are not always in favor today. Some see its stident imagery, its triumphant tone and uncompromising spirit as a glorification of warfare or even of America as a world power. But that is to forget the specific context of Howe's verses: the particular struggle in which her country was then engaged. For her, it was not the idea of America at war with her political enemies that inspired the poem, but a greater struggle against what she saw as the greatest, most visible evil of her society: slavery. The war she viewed and wrote about was not the United States against foreign powers, but the internal battle of a nation for its own soul.

And in the midst of this apocalyptic scene we have the very incongruous mention of the Christmas event, and the gentle birth "in the beauty of the lilies...across the sea" of what is otherwise a fierce warrior king. His advent turns spectators of the struggle into participants, his glory "transfigures" not only soldiers in the fight, but even a wife and mother. Howe, due to her own circumstances, was in no immediate danger of losing husband or child to the war, but she nevertheless felt part of the great struggle she witnessed being fought in and for her country. She is passionate in her opposition to slavery and in her resolve to support the ideals of the Union's cause.

Nevertheless, her poem, however often it is appropriated by political parties or national interest, is not a glorification of war or even of country, but rather of a divinely aided human struggle against evil and dehumanization. When she writes

He is sifting out the hearts of men before his judgment-seat;

it applies as well to the Confederate side of the conflict as to the Union. (Or indeed to Moslem and Christian or Jew, to British or Iraqi, to Tagalog or Moro.) And what is even more subtly significant in this post 9/11 era, her famous line must be correctly heard:

As he died to make men holy, let us die to make men free.

Even in her transfigured, apocalyptic state, Mrs. Howe does not say, "let us *kill*" to do so.

Howe wrote her poem in the context of a civil war fought for both economic and moral reasons. Cynics and idealists can fight over which was the more influential at the time, just as their descendents fight over the war on terror that now engulfs a world far larger than the 36 total North American states in conflict in 1861.

In our current strife, we, too, are tempted to sing songs glorifying a sacred struggle, and are encouraged to do so by some, but we are frightened by other, equally strident and infinitely more threatening slogans coming from other sources who see the conflict in a very different, if no less pious way. This makes it very important to be clear about our own motives and ideals before venturing into the horrors of war.

Another person stuck in that traffic jam back in Washington that November afternoon was President Abraham Lincoln. Earlier that year he had said this in the course of his famous second inaugural address about two nominally Christian foes:

Both read the same Bible, and pray to the same God; and each invokes His aid against the other. [] The prayers of both could not be answered; that of neither has been answered fully. The Almighty has his own purposes.

Indeed the Almighty does, and we can only pray that the God invoked so passionately by both sides in the war on terror has a purpose that will help us transcend a limited perspective of national interest alone and will "transfigure you and me" in a greater, more human cause. But until that is clear, we must do what we can. As my fellow Illinoisan also said in his address:

With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in.

Lincoln wrote that his hearers must

...Bind up the nation's wounds; to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan- to do all which may achieve and cherish a just, and a lasting peace, among ourselves, and with all nations.

But it is a world, not just a single nation or even a small group of nations that fights this current struggle. That makes it both different from the past conflicts whose dead we honor today, and also more immediate to us who are living with this war every day. It is a struggle that embraces us all.

Yet, we cannot pretend that we think that all causes are equally just, equally righteous. We cannot agree that the dead of all conflicts have died with identical nobility, or that all combatants of whatever army, party or method are worthy of monuments and honor. That is because, as I read before, we may ourselves be engaged in a struggle that will last the rest of our lives, and that makes it even more important that we are as sure as we can humanly be that we have considered well all of our options and all the dangers before we state too confidently that God is on our side. God is on God's side, and that is how it must remain for God to be God and for a just end to be conceived. Those who would espouse a righteous cause, however obvious and pious it might seem, must first stop and ask forgiveness for the presumption of a morality that leads to the death of others, and only then, if it must be, advance to battle; in Lincoln's words, "to finish the work we are in."

But as persons of faith, neither must we presume that war is the inevitable occupation of humanity. We must hope for and work towards a day when our solemn occasions commemorate the ultimate sacrifices of the past, not new ones every day. In the seldom-heard last verse of Mrs. Howe's poem, a new Kingdom dawns, one that we pray will fulfill the longings of all peace and freedom-loving people of whatever religion or nationality:

*He is coming like the glory of the morning on the wave;
He is wisdom to the mighty, he is succour to the brave;
So the world shall be his footstool, and the soul of time his slave;
Our God is marching on.*

