

St Paul's Episcopal Church Camden, New Jersey



September 2011

A Message from the Rector:

“Come now, you rich people, weep and wail for the miseries that are coming to you. Your riches have rotted, and your clothes are moth-eaten. Your gold and silver have rusted, and their rust will be evidence against you, and it will eat your flesh like fire. You have laid up treasure for the last days. Listen! The wages of the labourers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, cry out, and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts. You have lived on the earth in luxury and in pleasure; you have fattened your hearts on a day of slaughter. You have condemned and murdered the righteous one, who does not resist you.”

(James 5:1-6)

Dear Friends, It's Labor Day. I suspect that for most people it signifies the end of the summer season, a time to close down the beach house, a time to think about going back to school. That is pretty much what it has become in contemporary America. Way too many forget that it was intended as a day set aside to honor men and women whose work improves the material quality of our lives through the goods and services they supply. Even fewer think of the long and dangerous struggles of a century ago by which men and women put their lives on the line to protest excessively long hours of work, downward sliding pay scales, dangerous working conditions, and child labor.

This summer I visited my sister the history teacher in Michigan. She was excited about the story of labor, having just completed a summer course on the so called “Gilded Age” in American history - the period from 1890 to 1920. She gave me a copy of the classic novel *The Jungle* by Upton Sinclair. It tells the story of a Slavic immigrant family, who arrived in Chicago during the first decade of the 20th century and began working at the stockyards in the meat packing industry. The family gradually sank into poverty and degradation as a result of dreadful working conditions and terrible labor relations due to the sheer greed of the bosses and owners. In its day the book inspired many in the struggle for fairer labor relations and new Anti-Trust Laws to break the power of the industrialists. Some of this was accomplished during the presidency of the progressive, reform-minded Teddy Roosevelt - a Republican! (How times change!) The accomplishments of the Progressive Movement blossomed in the 1950's. Working people could count on steady work, decent pay, solid benefits, safer working conditions, and respectful treatment from those in charge. My father was one of those industrial workers and enjoyed a good and undiminished pension until he died at age 98!

Labor Day 2011 is a very different time. Far from holding working people in high esteem, we see instead efforts to eliminate jobs, cut benefits, and circumvent the rules of collective bargaining by which workers and their bosses establish safe and reasonable practices in the workplace and determine fair value for labor. Nowadays, men and women are laid off from their jobs by managers because the money saved by not paying a salary will enhance the profit margin. Once this is done, they begin to ask the remaining employees to take up the slack left by the loss of their co-workers. In effect, they are asking people to increase their workload for the same pay, which is really a crafty way of lowering wages and salaries. As if assaulting working people were not enough, many among the political class call for the repeal of regulations, claiming that they cripple business growth. Most of the regulations on their hit lists deal with things like environmental protection, labor laws, and agencies whose job it is to keep everybody honest. Without too much exaggeration, it can be said that some would like to return to the practices of the "Gilded Age" - the captains of industry running multi-national businesses with huge sums of money spread all around the globe and making huge fortunes by whatever means they can. How quickly we forget unregulated disasters like Enron and the crash of lending institutions which made ill advised investments and loans!

From the vantage point of Camden, this comes as no surprise. For as long as I have lived here, the working poor and the underclass of chronically unemployed have always been held in disrespect. It is not for their benefit that governments and other institutions exist. There is a thinly veiled mind-set which resents any benefit that might actually dribble down to the poor. "Why should I support these people? They make their own problems. After all, I had to work my way up!" Those who would rally public opinion away from any social conscience play to just such emotions. "Americans pull themselves up by their bootstraps. We are a people who encourage individualism. We don't believe in mooching off others." "Foxy," aren't they?

Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world. (James 1:27)

None of this socio-economic observation might have been raised in the church's Newsletter, had not some of our politicians and political "wannabees" tried recently to drag our Lord Jesus onto their platforms. I have heard preachers blather about their political preferences. Some of them have been downright disgusting like Pat Robertson urging people to "take out" the elected president of Venezuela! (Did Jesus ever authorize the "taking out" of any irritating politician?) But those are preachers. Preachers are often given to excess gas! However, when politicians try to turn the Lord Jesus into one of their party backers by turning pre-election pep-rallies into prayer meetings, I take serious issue!

OK! They have insisted on bringing Jesus into the political arena, let's do it! If there is one continuous thread which weaves its way through the Bible story of God and his people it is the theme of Redemption - God raising up his people. From the beginning when man and woman tried to put themselves in the place of God (***... You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, ... Genesis 1:4,5***) God did not abandon them to their own devices. The people he chose to speak for him were recruited from the ranks of ordinary and sometimes unlikely people. Abraham and Sarah, immigrants; Joseph, sold as a slave; Moses, rescued from the river; David, youngest of the sons of Jesse. Through the Law and the Prophets God made it abundantly clear that he was always concerned with the poor, the lowest, and the least. ***"The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners."* (Isaiah 61:1)** No prophet of the Hebrew God ever taught that we existed to amass our own wealth or to make something of ourselves. We exist - and our organized communities exist - first of all to defend, protect, and

nurture the “widow and the orphan” - that pair which in the Bible is the synonym for the weakest and most vulnerable in society.

According to the prophets, God does not even accept the worship and praise of people who do not care for justice and have no regard for the poor. **“I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt-offerings and grain-offerings, I will not accept them; ... Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.” (Amos 5:21-24)** Throughout, the Bible is clear on this point. God will not ever condone injustice - anywhere! The market place, the law courts - every aspect of human life is meant to be a place where God’s justice, mercy, and peace come alive. The Lord Jesus - the Word made flesh and come among us - did not come with a new Gospel. The kingdom he proclaimed was the kingdom of God, fueled by the power of sacrificial love. Jesus made no secret of how this would work. He personally reached out to the lost, the least, the left behind and the forgotten. Common people loved him and were filled with hope and a sense of their own worth. The rich and the powerful, less so. No less a believer than the Mother of Jesus sang a song of thanksgiving which echoes in the Christian Church down through the ages, **“He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.” (Luke 1:52-53)**

My warning to those who try to enlist Jesus in their service - it would be better to enlist in his service! Rather than claim that we are bringing our country back to Jesus, we all would do well to ponder and work for the kind of country that would please Jesus. If the Bible is anything to go by - and be assured, it is! - it would be a country focused on the most vulnerable citizens - the widows and orphans of our own day. Our investment priorities would especially improve the quality of life and education for the poorest and weakest citizens. Our economies would not be at the expense of those who have the least and would be hurt most. Those with greater resources would be asked to share them proportionately. This would enable them to know the real blessing of giving and sharing, which are trademarks of Christian love. Oh yes! On the subject of taxes - the raising of which is such anathema to some - Jesus also had something to say. **“Show me the coin used for the tax.’ And they brought him a denarius. Then he said to them, ‘Whose head is this, and whose title?’ They answered, ‘The emperor’s.’ Then he said to them, ‘Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.’” (Matthew 22:19-21)**

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