

Today is a sad anniversary in the history of the United States. November 22, 1963 is the day President Kennedy was assassinated. It's also the last Sunday of the church year, the day celebrated as the Reign of Christ or Christ the King Sunday, or the Feast of Christ the Anointed.

Whatever we call it, the challenge of this day is to ponder issues of divine and human power - as is evident in the scene from the gospel where Pontius Pilate wrangles with Jesus about whether or not Jesus is a king - and what that even meant to Jesus. Obviously JFK was not a king; still it seems especially relevant on this day to delve into the maelstrom of religion and politics. And it seems that lately it's almost impossible not to get sucked into it. Have you seen the bumper sticker that has surfaced in the last week or so? It says "Pray for Obama" and then reads "Psalm 109:8". Now that seems harmless. Until you check out the verse, which reads: *May his days be few; may another seize his position.*" And since you've got your Bible out, you read further on, and find that it says: *May his children be orphans, and his wife a widow. May his children wander about and beg; may they be driven out of the ruins they inhabit. May the creditor seize all that he has; may strangers plunder the fruits of his toil. May there be no one to do him a kindness, nor anyone to pity his orphaned children. May his posterity be cut off; may his name be blotted out in the second generation.* And so on.

Well, it's been tearing up the blog-o-sphere. Some take it as a joke and advise us to lighten up. But many are appalled. The ACLU thought about condemning it as hate speech but backed off because it doesn't fully fit the profile, since it's not clear if the prayer is for Obama to be finished after one term or to die before the term is up. The bumper sticker does quote only v. 8. But since the next verses read, *May his children be orphans, and his wife a widow* and the passage goes on the same way, this prayer does more than anticipate a shake-up at the ballot box.

Frank Schaeffer, former member of the Religious Right, in an interview with Rachel Maddow, talked about the danger of this correlation of President Obama with the unjust kings of ancient Israel, and calls it "trawling for assassins." These are the times when we are tempted to wince at a Christianity that can produce something like this. And to make it worse is the fact that the quote is absolutely biblical. There is no getting around it; these sentiments, these words are in our sacred scriptures. They are part of the body of writings that we sing from each and every week - the Psalms.

In his book, *Reflections on the Psalm*<sup>7</sup>, C.S. Lewis observed: "In some of the Psalms the spirit of hatred which strikes us in the face is like the heat from a furnace mouth. Examples can be found all over the Psalter, but perhaps the worst is in (Psalm) 109." Indeed.

Psalm 109 is one of the psalms known as "imprecatory" prayer - meaning a curse, that conveys a wish or threat of evil. These psalms (or sometimes parts of psalms) are petitions for God to destroy one's enemies. They are the prayers of someone who has been dealt an injustice by another - and usually more powerful - person. The words of Ps. 109 are those of deep agony, the longings of a victim for retribution and justice. As in Hannah's song last week, when I said that we have to recognize some of its problematic, triumphalistic language and recognize that these are lamentations and prayers of people who have been subjugated, who are living under harsh political oppression. Ps. 109, however, is considered one of the most difficult of all the psalms for us to reconcile with its violent images of vengeance and death. Most biblical scholars recommend that it not be used in worship, let alone as a bumper-sticker political slogan. C.S. Lewis thought it probably best to leave such psalms alone. But then he also says that we must face "facts squarely." *The hatred is there - festering, gloating, undisguised - and also we should be wicked if we in any way condoned or approved it, or (worse still) used it to justify similar passions in ourselves.*

But what do we do with these parts of scripture that are so problematic? I know there are some churches that just don't use the Psalms at all. Ps.109 appears nowhere in our own cycle of readings, and the imprecatory parts of others are usually skipped over. But when one of them surfaces on a bumper sticker (and t-shirts, hats,

buttons), we can't ignore it. We can't just dismiss those who are buying and displaying them. Because they're our Christian brothers and sisters, whether we like it or not. And they're quoting our scriptures, whether we like it or not. And if we want to present a Christianity that does not condone hatred and violence, we'd best be prepared to engage them on biblical grounds.

I found a book years ago that addressed this issue, although in a larger context. In *A Cry of Absence*,<sup>1</sup> Martin Marty writes about the psalms, which he describes as speaking to the whole range of human experience. He talks about his first wife's death after a long bout of cancer. He stayed with her in the hospital and each night they took turns reading the Psalms to each other. One night, when it was his turn to read Psalm 88, with its dark wailing language of abandonment (*I am like those who have no help, like those forsaken among the dead, like the slain that lie in the grave, like those whom you remember no more, for they are cut off from your hand*), he skipped it. When she asked why, he said, "I'm not sure you could take it tonight." But she had him read it anyway and said, "I need that kind most of all." We have to admit to all of our emotions, even the ones we consider to be negative.

Psalm 109 is of a different kind, but it does speak out of very human experience and emotion. One conservative writer defends himself this way: *Imprecatory prayer is the Christian answer to persecution, injustice and tyranny, a last resort appeal to God for justice. The so-called 'curses' are simply the just penalty called for in the scriptures for the alleged crime. Imprecatory prayer is an appeal to the court of divine justice (1) for protection and (2) the appropriate punishment for the criminals. Imprecatory prayer is most often used when the criminals are the rich and powerful or corrupt men in government. The prayer asks God to solve the problem and bring the criminal to repentance, or to judgment.*<sup>7</sup>

Marty says that Ps.109 and others like it "speaks out of and to the rage of angry people." I remember when President Kennedy was killed. I was 13 years old and clearly remember my rage and my pronouncement that whoever had done it should have to really suffer. He should be dragged from town to town to be stoned by every citizen. Death should not be quick and should not be merciful. So I get it. Without condoning it, we can recognize the fear, the helplessness, the rage that is just oozing out of some people today. But, Marty says: *With a psalmist like that for a friend, one will not likely rise above the emptiness of uncreative rage. The psalm is here to serve as a scandal . . . when white-heated rage against the enemy turns uncreative. To all purposes, it blocks out the very God who is being invoked.*

And he suggests that when we look at the Psalms as a whole we see that: *while a cursing rage serves as evident therapy for a psalmist who had lost self-control, a self-confident righteousness appears in other places.* Such as in Ps. 139:

*O God, you have searched me and known me . . . For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.*

Then: *O that you would kill the wicked, O God, and that the bloodthirsty would depart from me . . . Do I not hate those who hate you, O God? And do I not loathe those who rise up against you? I hate them with perfect hatred; I count them my enemies.*

And ends with: *Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my thoughts. See if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.*

That seething rage in the midst of faithfulness is a human response to some of the crises of life. But we can't stay there. We have to come through it to a place of trusting and waiting for God and soul-searching for our own faults and contributions to the problem. And all of us should stand against the kind of thinking that says it's OK to pray for the death of the president – no matter who the president is. We can claim the psalms as expressions of human emotion and prayer. But we do not condone the use of language that goes against the very nature of the gospel.

I think, for me, this kind of nonsense is offensive because it hijacks the Bible and distorts the Jesus who embodied grace and relationship, not destruction and domination. It distorts the Christpower that Jesus told Pilate is not the power of this world, but a healing power that brings unity, interdependence, creativity, and freedom. But we can't just complain about it; we have to stand up to it. I got a posting on my Facebook page that said: *Let's see how many people on fb aren't ashamed to show their love for God and admit that Jesus is their Savior... We need to get God back in America... If you're not ashamed, copy and paste this in your status!* My first reaction was not positive, but it got me thinking: how would I describe my faith on my fb status? The best I could come up with at the time was "I am a follower of Rabbi Jesus." But I need to do some more thinking about it. We all do. And if take nothing else positive from the "Pray for Obama" campaign, let it be that we do pray for our president and his family – not as a political agenda, but as faithful followers of Rabbi Jesus and members of the body of Christ.

Amen

---

<sup>1</sup> From: Diana Butler Bass, !! HYPERLINK "<http://blog.beliefnet.com/progressiverevival/2009/11/psalm-1098--a-prayer-for-obama.html>" ¶ Psalm 109:8--A Prayer for Obama or Ourselves? ⊥ HTTP://WWW.BELIEFNET.COM/SEARCH/SITE.ASPX?Q=DIANA+BASS

<sup>1</sup> Martin E. Marty, *A Cry of Absence: reflections for the winter of the heart*. San Francisco : Harper & Row, c1983

<sup>1</sup> !! HYPERLINK "<http://www.moseshand.com>" ¶ [www.moseshand.com](http://www.moseshand.com) ⊥