

“A City on a Hill”

Intro: This week the nation’s attention was riveted on the remembrance of President Ronald Reagan. On Friday at Reagan’s funeral, the speakers focused on an image of America that the former president commonly used in his speeches—the metaphor of a “city on a hill”.

Reagan’s metaphor for the USA was inspired by a 1630 sermon of Puritan John Winthrop who in 1629 was chosen to be governor of a proposed English colony at Massachusetts Bay in America. Sandra Day O’Connor read this excerpt from the sermon:

"For we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us. So that if we shall deal falsely with our God in this work we have undertaken, and so cause him to withdraw his present help from us, we shall be made a story and a byword throughout the world."

Winthrop’s message was a lengthy appeal to his fellow-travelers to forge a society based on godly principles. His intention, of course, was to urge his fellow-citizens to be the kind of disciples that Jesus charged in his famous Sermon on the Mount.

“You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. “Nor do men light a lamp, and put it under the peck-measure, but on the lamp stand; and it gives light to all who are in the house. “Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven. (Matthew 5:13-16)

The original “city on a hill” was a metaphor not intended to describe a community like Boston or a nation like the USA, but to describe the followers of Jesus—to describe what would become the church of Christ.

In this statement of Jesus we see both three declarations and an exhortation.

THREE DECLARATIONS

Declaration #1—You are the light of the world.

Jesus, by using the plural pronoun, makes it clear that he intended his words to be appropriated by each individual disciple in the audience.

The word “light” is a metaphor for the direction or guidance that disciples give. The world is hopelessly confused; but God’s people can provide “light” in this world of darkness. We must emit:

Doctrinal light—that is, it is our duty to speak about God, His nature, His purpose for man’s redemption through Christ, His church as the light bearing organization. We must be teachers of “good doctrine”! We must not only point the way, we must show the way!

Moral light—that is, it is our duty not only to speak for God, but to live a life of purity, holiness, justice, and love. We must be doers of good works.

In sum, this light of which Jesus speaks could simply be described in terms of the “good works” that Christians do.

Declaration #2—A city set on a hill cannot be hidden.

What is the meaning behind this self-evident truth?

It appears that Jesus wants to impress upon the disciples the inevitability of their influence in society. When they live as they should, their lives cannot help but have impact on the people around them! It would be as easy to hide a city on a hill as to hide the lives of the faithful!

Declaration #3—Nor do men light a lamp, and put it under a peck-measure, but on the lamp stand; and it gives light to all who are in the house”.

Jesus appeals of course to the cultural practice of lighting the lamp and putting it on display. Here is an example of such a lamp from the first century. No one would go to the trouble of making or buying this lamp, filling it with oil, trimming its wick, lighting it and then covering it over with a clay pot that obscured the light. Instead it would be deliberately displayed.

So then, if the second statement suggests the inevitability of their influence, then the third suggests the deliberateness of that influence. As the light of the world, we must be bold and purposeful in our display of God’s truth, not timid and inactive.

ONE EXHORTATION—Let your light so shine that men may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven. What does Jesus mean by this?

The apostle Peter it seems to me fills out the meaning of Jesus’ words:

Keep your behavior excellent among the Gentiles, so that in the thing in which they slander you as evildoers, they may on account of your good deeds, as they observe them, glorify God in the day of visitation. (1 Peter 2:12)

He shows us that those good works are displayed:

As citizens (1 Pet. 2:13-17)

As servants or workers (1 Pet. 3:18-20)

In our marriages (1 Pet. 3:1-7)

In our social relationships (1 Pet. 3:8-9)

When we “let our light shine” in these ways, others are led to “glorify God”.

The goal of our light bearing is not self-glorification, but the glorification of God. If we have done our work well, then it is evident that we are what we are because of our faith in Him and because He works in us!

So then, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure. Do all things without

*grumbling or disputing; that you may prove yourselves to be blameless and innocent, children of God above reproach in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you appear as lights in the world, holding fast the word of life, so that in the day of Christ I may have cause to glory because I did not run in vain nor toil in vain.
(Philippians 2:12-16)*

Conclusion: What a challenge Jesus has placed before us! Jesus wants each disciple to rise to a place of guiding influence and together to become “a city set on a hill”. Are we that city?