



Mosaic of Micah in Vienna by Carl Meyer

The Great Wall of China was a wall finished in the 17th century to protect the Ming Dynasty against Manchus invading from the north. But Beijing fell from within in 1644, to the Rebel leader Li Zicheng who promised fairer land distribution, and relief from the corrupt tax system.¹ The Manginot Line was wall built by France after World War I to protect itself from invasion along it's borders with Germany. But in World War II Germany simply drove their tanks north to Belgium and invaded from there. France had spent so much of its treasure and energy on the Manginot Line that its military forces in the north of the country proved inadequate against the German attack.² The Berlin Wall was a wall built in 1961 by East Germany, to cut off the Communist state from any Western influence coming from the democratic capitalism practiced in West Berlin. But the demise of Communism in East Germany rendered the Berlin Wall obsolete, and it was

torn down in 1990.³ It would seem that every time a great nation builds a wall to insulate itself from outside threats, that nation really needs to be focusing on those things within that render the people weak and faithless. Because there's no wall high enough that can protect a lost and wandering people from themselves. Put another way, you can put lipstick on a pig to try and make it more attractive. But if the pig insists on remaining a pig, come first frost it's going to end up as sausage!

Isn't it interesting that the Collect for today is a prayer for God's peace in our time. There's a sense of urgency here in what Thomas Cranmer wrote, perhaps even desperation. And when you consider the foment of those very first years of the Protestant Reformation where the very world seemed to be turned upside down, a world in which political intrigue, international upheavals, and social turmoil were the order of the day, it's not difficult to imagine the author of our Prayer Book and a major architect of our denomination – it's not at all difficult to imagine Cranmer down there on his knees, earnestly pleading to God for national, Spiritual and personal salvation. "God, I know you called me to this time and these challenges. So God, I need your peace that passes all understanding in this time and in these challenges. Yes, Lord, I need it right now, for such a time as this." And I bet you've been there where Thomas Cranmer was too, down there on your knees desperately seeking God's peace and protection, for "such a time as this."

God's questions in Micah 6 are His indictment of Israel, as God asks His chosen people to name just one time when He hasn't been absolutely faithful to His Covenant with them. Many Bible scholars have noticed how this passage reads like an accusation made in court on behalf of a plaintiff. In fact the Hebrew word *rib* which appears twice at the beginning of this accusation (See Micah 6:2) actually refers to the legal charges which were brought before a judge in a court case held in the land of Israel.⁴

The oft repeated Biblical context of man's righteousness being on trial before the judge of the universe comes from the Hebrew worldview of the Old Testament. And this context of our needing an advocate to defend us before the Heavenly Throne, this context of seeing salvation as a case tried before a Heavenly judge translates very aptly into the Greco Roman reality of the New Testament.

¹¹ See <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Li-Zicheng>.

² See *Winston, Churchill. The Second World War 2. HoughtonMifflin. ISBN 0395410568.*

³ See http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/places/berlin_wall.

⁴See <http://biblehub.com/hebrew/7379.htm>.

Early Christians were very much aware that their faith in this strange new Man-God, Jesus – all Christians knew that the profession of this faith was going to be constantly on trial in the violent, pagan world of their day. It became a kind of daily occurrence to defend their beliefs in this Resurrected Lord and his teachings to the many unbelievers around them. So, the early Church developed what was called an “Apology” to defend the teachings of and their faith in Jesus. This “Apology” combined the new Christian theology with concepts of Greek philosophy and observation of the natural world, to explain and defend the Gospel of Jesus Christ in terms the wider world could understand. And once again, the context around which early Christians developed this “Apology,” this defense of their faith, found its roots in the legal world of the day.

The original meaning of the word “Apology” was very different from what you and I associate with it today. An “Apology” in Jesus’s day was not at all a means of saying “I’m sorry.” No. You see, in a classical Greek court of law, accusations against a person were brought before the judge in the form of what was called a “*Kategoria*” by accusing counsel. Then, the defense attorney would present evidence of the accused’s innocence in a legal format of what was called, an “*Apologia*.”⁵ So you see, the term “Apology” actually meant providing the defense for an innocent person.

And boy’s howdy, the early Christians were constantly having to defend themselves against false accusation! They were persecuted for the first 300 years of the Church’s existence, sometimes hunted like game animals. Why? Why were so many false accusations launched against the Christians? Well, you see, if you want to exterminate a group of people so that you can remove their political opposition, or steal their money, or their land, or their resources, well you’ve got to come up with a reason for committing that kind of mass murder. Oh, the reasons the perpetrators of these “ethnic cleansings” come up with are never true. But that doesn’t really matter in this broken world. No, it’s sufficient for you to tell a lie enough times and with adequate conviction. People will eventually believe it. So, if ISIS wants to take the land around Mount Sinjar from the Yazidi people, a peaceful Zoroastrian culture that has lived in Northern Iraq for almost 1,000 years, well then ISIS just tells everybody that the Yazidis are really Devil-worshippers and need to be eradicated. It doesn’t matter that this is a lie. It’s just enough for ISIS and their supporters to believe it, in order for them to give some kind of twisted justification to their horrific beheadings and mass murder.⁶

If you’re Hitler, and you want to eliminate the Jews so that you can confiscate their wealth, and their property, you tell the German people that the Jews must be exterminated for the sake of the purity of the “Arian Race.” It doesn’t matter that this is absolute nonsense. If you say it often enough, then enough people will buy into it so that you can proceed with Dachau, and Auschwitz, and the Holocaust.

And for Christians, there was the same problem. The persecutions of Christians probably began with the Roman Emperor Nero. You see, he wanted to build himself a beautiful new residential compound. But, unfortunately the land he wanted to build it on was where many of the early Roman Christians lived. So, Nero started a big fire, and then blamed it on the Christians, claiming they wanted to destroy Rome, because these Christians hated the human race.⁷ It didn’t matter that the Christian faith was actually based on God’s immense love for us, and the requirement that we love Him and each other more than we love ourselves. No, Nero’s lie that Christians hated other humans just needed to be told enough times so that enough people would believe it. That way, the Roman Emperor could justify mass murder and confiscate the 200 acres on which he would build his *Domus Aurea*, his “Golden House.” So, you see, while they didn’t have tweeting in ancient Rome, they certainly had fake news!

⁵ See “*apologetics*”. Merriam-Webster Dictionary. Retrieved 5 October 2016.

⁶ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/aug/07/who-yazidi-isis-iraq-religion-ethnicity-mountains>.

⁷ This is recorded by the Roman historian Tacitus in his Annals. See <http://www.eyewitnesstohistory.com/christians.htm>.

As the persecutions of the early Christians continued, so did all these slanderous lies that people were telling about them. Two of the most popular lies that people spread concerning the early Christian church were that Christians were cannibals and that they practiced incest. Cannibalism was an easy lie to tell about Christians, since they professed to gather together on The Lord's day to share with each other the Sacrament of Christ's body and blood, which, of-course you and I know has nothing to do with cannibalism. But that didn't matter, as long as enough people believed these weird Christians were practicing dark and sinister magic in their gatherings, it became easier to get rid of them. The charges of incest probably came from the fact that so many of the early church referred to each other and members of their families as their "brothers in Christ" or "sisters in Christ." Now, you and I know that has nothing to do with sex. But that didn't matter to people who were just looking for any reason to kill Christians.⁸

Because of this constant need for Christians to defend themselves against slander, the early Church developed their own practice of "Apology," in order to present to the outside world sound, observable reasons as to why the Gospel was truly the Good news in Jesus Christ that all men needed to hear. The new Church was blessed with amazing leaders in whom the Spirit was very strong, people who developed these explanations of the Gospel; early Saints like Irenaeus, Justin Martyr, and the great Augustine of Hippo. But, the lies that people tell about Christians continued, and even continue to this day.

There is such great need for Christians to be ready to present their Apology, the need for their faith. We need to be prepared to present to others the reasons why we believe the things we do. And of-course it starts with Scripture, but it doesn't end there. We all of us need to be ready to calmly demonstrate to all those we encounter how broken this world is, and how much blessing, and truth, and abundant life there is for anyone who really picks up their cross to follow Jesus. And this explanation, this Apology of the Christian faith can't be done in the Fox News style of two people just screaming at each other. No. This explanation of our faith needs to be delivered with humble, quiet, confidence, and then acted out in selfless gestures of love and encouragement. That's the way an effective Christian Apology is delivered.

The final verse from Micah this morning is a wonderful platform on which to build the explanation of our faith. When Micah tells us that the most profound thing we can do is to practice justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with our God, these are the same primary forms of love which Jesus says the hypocritical Pharisees lack in Matthew 23. That's the passage when Christ laments the Scribes and Pharisees' lack of justice, mercy, and faithfulness (See Mt.23:23) The ESV Study Bible describes these traits of justice, mercy, and faithfulness as the primary forms of love.⁹

At the beginning of Paul's 1st letter to the Corinthians, did you notice how Paul is actually presenting his own Apology, his own explanation for the victory of God's grace? Paul sets forth here what many theologians call "The Scandal of the Cross," explaining that God chose man's humiliation of His son Jesus to shame the world. And God chose the willing acceptance of death on the part of His son Jesus to give all mankind the ultimate victory of eternal life. In verse 22, Paul writes that, "Christ Crucified is a stumbling block to the Jews and folly to the gentiles." You see, for the Jewish power brokers of the day who wanted to maintain control of the people, the Cross of Jesus and His Resurrection are offensive. (See Mt. 16:22; Gal. 3:13; 5:11) And from the standpoint of Greek philosophy which was considered the pinnacle of earthly wisdom, the Cross of Jesus seemed an absolute and nonsensical folly.¹⁰ And by the way good people, things have not changed. This world still finds the Crucifixion and Resurrection of Jesus offensive, because attesting to its truth means having to admit how broken we really are.

⁸ See "[Why Early Christians Were Despised](#)". *Christianity Today (Church history timeline)*. Retrieved 21 September 2016.

⁹ See ESV footnote, 1705, 6:8.

¹⁰ See ESV footnote, 2193, 1:22-25.

This world still finds the Cross and Resurrection of Jesus nonsense and folly, because it's much easier to sneer at and mock the things of this world which would force us to cast off the state of denial we cling to, that state of denying that we are in fact in need of saving.

The last thing I want to say about this witness we make to the rest of the world about the Good News in Jesus Christ, this Apology for the faith all Christians are called to present – the final point I want to make here is that a real convincing witness to the grace of Jesus can only come from an experience of pain and sacrifice. When Jesus is describing all the blessings that the faithful disciple can expect, he uses two different verb tenses, the present and the future. So, Jesus assures us that those who mourn **will** be comforted, the meek **will** eventually inherit the earth, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness **will** be satisfied, the merciful **will** receive mercy, the pure in heart **will** see God, and the peacemakers **will** be called "Sons of God." (See Mt.5:4-9)

But there's another series of blessings Jesus talks about here, and those rewards are all in the present tense. So, it seems to me that Jesus is saying this: "Those of you who suffer in Spirit – those who are poor in spirit – to you belongs right now the Kingdom of Heaven." (See Mt.5:3) "Those of you who are persecuted for righteousness sake – those of you who suffer simply because you insist on being righteous no matter how painful or unpopular it is, yours – right here and now – is the Kingdom of Heaven." (See Mt.5:10) "And to all of you who are reviled and persecuted for my name's sake, you should rejoice and laugh your head off, because your reward in heaven is great, and it's there for you to reach out and take hold of right now." (See Mt.5:12) In the Beatitudes we heard this morning from Matthew Chapter 5, it's important for you to understand that our greatest blessings from God often arrive and are most clearly presented to us in our moments of pain, especially when that pain involves being true to our Discipleship. Evidently, persecution and suffering are not only part and parcel of the Christian witness. This persecution and suffering is our most direct means by which you and I actually end up dwelling in God's Kingdom in the right-here and the right-now.

You see, there are moments in this life of great pain and significant loss when the nights are especially dark. And in those moments when the shining face of Jesus' love comes bursting into our lives, those are the times when we truly see the Lord of Love in his wondrous glory. And those blessings that come to us in pain, they are the ones that are ready for us to grasp hold tightly in the immediate here and now.

Good people, we cannot wish away our adversities. We live in the most interesting of times, facing challenges that this world hasn't seen in decades, or perhaps forever. Yet, to such a time as this you and I have been called. So let us fix our eyes on the great Perfecter of our faith and run with diligence the race which has been set before us. (Heb.12:1-3) And as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord. (Joshua24:15) We will do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with our God.(Mic.6:8)

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen. JWB+ 1-27-17