

THE MORALITY OF EXILE: Biblical Aspects of the Theme of Faith and Politics

~: Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger / Pope Benedict XVI ~:

The reading and the Gospel that we have just heard¹ stemmed from a situation in which Christians were not a self-organizing subject of the state but were rather outcasts being persecuted by a cruel dictatorship. They themselves were not allowed to share the responsibility for their state; they could only endure it. Theirs was not the privilege of shaping it as a Christian state but was rather the task of living as Christians in spite of it. The names of the emperors who reigned during the period to which tradition dates both texts are enough to make the situation clear: Nero and Domitian.

And so the First Letter of Peter, too, calls the Christians in such a state strangers or “exiles” (1 Pet. 1:1) and the state itself “Babylon” (1 Pet. 5:13). In doing so, it very emphatically indicates the political position of the exiled Jews living in Babylon, who were not the subject but rather the objects of that state and therefore had to learn how they could survive in it, since they were not allowed to learn how to build it. Thus the political background of today’s readings is fundamentally different from ours. Nevertheless, they contain three important statements that have significance also for political action among Christians.

First, the state is not the whole of human existence and does not encompass all human hope. Man and what he hopes for extend beyond the framework of the state and beyond the sphere of political action. This is true not only for a state like Babylon, but for every state. The state is not the totality; this unburdens the politician and at the same time opens up for him the path of reasonable politics. The Roman state was wrong and anti-Christian precisely because it wanted to be the totality of human possibilities and hopes. A state that makes such claims cannot fulfill its promises; it thereby falsifies and diminishes man. Through the totalitarian lie it becomes demonic and tyrannical. The abolition of the totalitarian state has demythologized the state and thereby liberated man, as well as politicians and politics.

But when the Christian faith falls into ruins and faith in mankind’s greater hope is lost, the myth of the divine state rises again, because man cannot do without

¹ *Author’s note:* This homily was given on November 26, 1981, during a liturgy for Catholic representatives of the *Bundestag*, the Lower House of the German Federal Republic, in the Church of St. Winfried [St. Boniface] in Bonn. The readings, 1 Pet. 1:3–7 and John 14:1–6, were prescribed by the Church’s liturgy for the day. At first they seemed unsuited to the subject, but, on second thought and after closer inspection, they proved to be unexpectedly rich material for this meditation.

the totality of hope. Although such promises pose as progress and commandeer for themselves the slogans of progress and progressive thinking, viewed historically they are nevertheless a regression to an era antedating the *novum* of Christianity, a turning back along the scale of history. And even though their propaganda says that their goal is man's complete liberation, the abolition of all ruling authority, they contradict the truth of man and are opposed to his freedom, because they force man to fit into what he himself can make. Such politics, which declares that the Kingdom of God is the outcome of politics and twists faith into the universal primacy of the political, is by its very nature the politics of enslavement; it is mythological politics.

To this, faith opposes Christian reason's sense of proportion, which recognizes what man really can accomplish in terms of a free social order and is content with that, because it knows that mankind's greater expectations are safe in God's hands. To renounce the hope of faith is at the same time to renounce political reason and its sense of proportion. Abandoning the mythical hopes of an authority-free society is not resignation but honesty, which sustains man in hope. The mythical hope of a self-made paradise can only drive man into inescapable anxiety—into fear of the failure of the illusory promises and of the immense emptiness that lurks behind them; into fear of his own power and of its cruelty.

Thus, the first service to politics rendered by the Christian faith is that it liberates man from the irrationality of political myths, which are the real threat of our time. Taking a stand for sobriety, which does what is possible and does not cry with an ardent heart after the impossible, is of course always difficult; the voice of reason is not as loud as the cry of unreason. The cry for the grandiose project has the cachet of morality; restricting oneself to what is possible, in contrast, seems to be the renunciation of moral passion, mere faint-hearted pragmatism. But, as a matter of fact, political morality consists precisely of resisting the seductive force of the big words for which humanity and its chances are being gambled away. The moral thing is not adventurous moralism, which tries to mind God's business, but rather honesty, which accepts man's limits and does man's work within them. Not the uncompromising stance, but compromise is the true morality in political matters.

Second, although the Christians were being persecuted, they did not have a negative view of the state in principle, but rather they still recognized in it the state *qua* state and did what was in their power to build it up as a state; they did not try to destroy it. Precisely because they knew that they were in "Babylon," they applied to themselves the guidelines that Jeremiah had written to the children of Israel who had been exiled to that place. The letter of the prophet that is recorded in chapter 29 of the Book of Jeremiah was by no means an activist's manual calling for political resistance and the destruction of the slave state, as understandable as that would have been; it is rather an instruction on how to preserve and strengthen

what is good. Thus, it is a lesson in surviving and at the same time in preparing for better days and new prospects.

In that sense, this morality of exile also contains basic elements of a positive political ethos. Jeremiah urges the Jews not to persist in contradiction and denial but rather to “build houses and live in them, plant gardens and eat their produce. . . . Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare” (Jer. 29:5–7). We can read a very similar admonition in Paul’s First Letter to Timothy, which tradition dates to the time of Nero, where it says to pray “for all men, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life, godly and respectful in every way” (1 Tim. 2:1–2). Along the same lines, the First Letter of Peter admonishes the readers to “maintain good conduct among the Gentiles, so that in case they speak against you as wrongdoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation” (1 Pet. 2:12). “Honor all men. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor” (1 Pet. 2:17). “But let none of you suffer as a murderer, or a thief, or a wrongdoer, or a mischief-maker; yet if one suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but under that name let him glorify God” (1 Pet. 4:1–16).

What does this mean? The Christians were by no means fearful, gullible people who were taken in by authorities and did not know that there can be a right to resistance and even a conscientious duty to resist. The very last sentence shows that they recognized the limits of the state and did not bow to it in matters where they were not allowed to bow to it because it opposed God’s will. Even more importantly, the fact remains that they still did not attempt to destroy that state; rather, they tried to build it up. Amorality is fought by morality, and evil by a determined adherence to the good, and in no other way. Morality—doing good—is the true resistance, and only the good can be a preparation for a turn for the better. There are not two kinds of political morality: a morality of resistance and a morality of ruling. There is only one morality: morality as such, the morality of God’s commandments, which cannot be temporarily suspended in order to bring about a changed in the status quo more quickly. One can build up only by building up, not by destroying—that is the political ethics of the Bible from Jeremiah to Peter and Paul.

The Christian always supports the state, in *this* sense: he does the positive, the good things that hold states together. He has no fear that he will thereby favor the power of the wicked, but he is convinced that evil can be dismantled and the power of evil and of evil men can be diminished only by strengthening what is good. Anyone who accepts the killing of the innocent and the destruction of other people’s property as part of the bargain cannot appeal to the faith. The words of St. Peter are quite explicitly against such methods: “Let none of you suffer [condemnation] as a murder, or a thief” (1 Pet. 4:15)—and at that time he was speaking also against this sort of resistance. The true Christian resistance that he is demanding

occurs only in the situation where the state demands the repudiation of God and of his commandments, where it demands evil, against which good is still commanded.

A third and final point follows logically from this. The Christian faith destroyed the myth of the divine state, the myth of the earthly paradise or utopian state and of a society without rule. In its place it put the objectivity of reason. But that does not mean that it brought an objectivity devoid of values, the objectivity of statistics and mere social dynamics. True human objectivity involves humanity, and humanity involves God. True human reason involves morality, which lives on God's commandments. This morality is not a private matter; it has public significance. Without the good of being good and of good action, there can be no good politics. What the persecuted Church prescribed for Christians as the core of their political ethos must also be the core of an active Christian politics: only where good is done and is recognized as good can people live together well in a thriving community. Demonstrating the practical importance of the moral dimension, the dimension of God's commandments—publicly as well—must be the center of responsible political action.

If we act in this way, then even in the midst of confusion and adversity we can understand the words from today's Scriptures as a reliable promise addressed to us personally: "Let not your hearts be troubled" (John 14:1). "By God's power [you] are guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed" (1 Pet. 1:5). Amen.