

Meditations of the Heart - Reflections on the Scriptures

Psalm 19:14 Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer.

Pastor Matt Cadora

December 30, 2009

Throughout this Advent Season, much of the content of our weekly Meditations of the Heart have come from a two-volume book entitled "Letters of Faith Through the Seasons", compiled by Dr. Jim Houston. Dr. Houston personally gave these books to me for the purpose of sharing some of these letters with you, the congregation of Faith Presbyterian Church, in the hope that we might obtain a greater appreciation for the devotion of the saints who have gone before us in centuries past.

This week's meditation comes from the words of Cyprian (200-254), bishop of Carthage, who led the church through the fierce persecution of Christians under the Roman emperors Decius (249-251) and Valerius (253-260). Cyprian's letters inspired Augustine of Hippo, who ministered and defended the church in the same region of northern Africa.

December 26 has historically been considered the day in which the Church recognizes the martyrdom of Stephen. Similarly, in the days following Christmas Day, the Church has recognized the Slaughter of the Innocents (as described in Matthew 2:16-18). These matters lie clearly in the back of Cyprian's mind as he writes to the Christians in Thibaris about the impending persecution they were facing. Note the gravity with which Cyprian views the current events.

Dearly Beloved Brethren,

I had thought... to come to you ... but as we are detained here by pressing affairs... I have sent this letter as a substitute....

You ought to realize and certainly believe that the day of persecution has begun to be over our heads; and that the end of the world and the time of Anti-Christ has drawn near. So we need to stand ready for battle, thinking of nothing else except the glory of eternal life, and the crown of confession of the Lord. So don't think the future is going to be like the past.

A severer and fiercer combat is now threatening for which the soldiers of Christ ought to prepare themselves, with an indomitable faith and strong courage... For this is what it means "to be found in Christ." This is to imitate what Christ taught and did. As the apostle John says, "He who abides in Christ, ought himself also to walk, as he walked" (I John 2:6). Likewise, the apostle Paul exhorts and teaches, saying, "We are sons of God. But if we are sons, we are heirs of God, joint heirs with Christ, provided, however, we suffer with Him that we may be also glorified with Him." (Romans 8:16-17).

Do not the documents [the books of the Maccabees] testify to great virtue and to faith, and exhort us by their sufferings to the triumph of martyrdom? What of the prophets whom the Holy Spirit inspired to anticipate the knowledge of the future? What of the apostles whom the Lord chose? When the just are killed on account of justice, have they not already taught us how to die? The birth of Christ began immediately with the martyrdoms of the infants that for his name, those that were two years old and younger were killed. An age not yet fit for battle was fit for crowns! That it might appear that the innocents are they who are killed because of Christ, innocent infancy was destroyed for his name. It was thus shown that no one is free from the danger of persecution, when even such as these little ones suffered martyrdom.

How serious a stance it is then, for a Christian to be unwilling to suffer since our Lord has first suffered, or indeed, to be unwilling to suffer for our sins, since the One who had no sin, first suffered for us! This Son of God suffered that he might make us sons of God, and yet the children of men do not want to suffer in becoming a child of God!

Prayer

O Almighty God, who out of the mouths of babes and sucklings has ordained strength, and made infants to glorify Thee by their deaths; mortify and kill all vices in us, and so strengthen us by thy grace, that by the innocence of our lives, and constancy of our faith even unto death, we may glorify thy holy Name; through Jesus Christ our Lord: Amen.

Collect for "Innocents Day"

Source: Houston, James M., Letters of Faith Through The Seasons, Colorado Springs, CO: Cook Communications Ministries, 2006, p. 64-65. Reprinted by permission.