

## **564 “for the freedom of man”**

In last week's Reflection we compared the current loud demands for the freedom to protest (whenever, wherever and how ever) with the true freedom, given to us by God's grace, in the Christian Gospel and life.

This Christian freedom involves a simple paradox, for it actually limits our freedom by requiring us to show personal restraint and responsibility in our thoughts, words and deeds. As Jesus tells us, “If any [man] will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me. For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it” (from Matthew 16.24-25, KJV, and parallels). So Christian freedom has nothing to do with individual licence, and everything to do with self-denial in our discipleship of our Lord Jesus Christ. Here then is the paradox - the more we give up and give away, the more blessings we receive in return (eg., Luke 6.38).

This past week saw the sixtieth anniversary of the assassination of President John Kennedy in Dallas. On 20<sup>th</sup> January 1961 in Washington, with genuine fears over global nuclear war, this young, charismatic President had opened his Inaugural Address thus – “We observe today not a victory of party but a celebration of freedom”. Freedom! He went on, “we shall pay any price ... to assure the survival and the success of liberty ... Let both sides (the West and the Communist bloc) unite to heed in all corners of the earth the command of Isaiah, to ‘undo the heavy burdens ... (and) let the oppressed go free’ (from Isaiah 58.6) ... Now the trumpet summons us again (to) a call to bear the burden of a long twilight struggle, year in and year out, ‘rejoicing in hope, patient in tribulation’ (from Romans 12.12) ... My fellow citizens of the world: ask not what America will do for you, but what together we can do for the freedom of man ... let us go forth to lead the land we love, asking His blessing and His help, but knowing that here on earth God's work must truly be our own”.

It is helpful to ponder Kennedy's words in today's equally troubled world (see end, “Topical Article”). For instance, Kennedy was the first Roman Catholic American President, an issue which had caused much comment from his opponents during his presidential campaign. His biblical references in the Address may well have been included to show prevailing Protestant opinion that he was scripturally “onside” after all. Unfortunately after his death Kennedy's involvement with other women became widely

known and raises questions over his own Christian faith and his understanding, or not, of the nature of “Christian freedom”.

He also asks, no doubt sincerely, for God’s help and blessing in the great tasks ahead – a divine reference still more common today by politicians in the USA than in Europe, where in general Almighty God might as well not exist as far as political discourse is concerned. Yet in his Address the President makes no mention of Christ or of the Christian Gospel; perhaps such overtly Christian words were deemed inappropriate on this occasion when he was reaching out to the atheist, Communist Soviet bloc.

This ignoring of Jesus Christ is highly relevant though, for without Him, as “the way, the truth and the life”, and as the “one mediator between God and men” (from John 14.6 / I Timothy 2.5), Kennedy’s stirring, closing words, about God’s work on earth “must be truly our own”, become little more than human boasting about human potential and achievement. Such potential and achievement are undoubtedly real, for they are God-endowed and God-enabled, as in - “for all things [come] of thee and of thine own have we given thee” (David’s words to the Lord, I Chronicles 29.14end), and, “for without me ye can do nothing” (Jesus’ words, John 15.5end). We see here that without our “abiding in Jesus”, human beings can achieve nothing that counts in the Father’s sight as genuine “much fruit”, thereby genuinely bringing glory to God the Father.

As with others, John Kennedy was a flawed man, with some spiritual understanding and some real gifts which he put to good use on the world stage while he could. His awareness of Almighty God, and His call to work together for the common good, still apply to us all in these increasingly dangerous days. When such service is carried out by Christ-believing Christ-abiders, each one redeemed by God the Father through Jesus’ sinless shed blood (egs., I Peter 1.18-21 / I John 1.7), then is found and followed the pathway to real fruit-bearing, to real freedom, and to real God-glorifying, which, when all is said and done, is surely Who and what our lives should be all about.

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