

### *Time to Decide*

In 1787, Catherine II, Empress of Russia, better known to us as Catherine the Great, set out on an extended tour of a large region newly added to her domain, and either to impress her, or more likely to impress several foreign ambassadors who had been invited along on the tour, one of her ministers arranged for a very inventive deception. He built several villages along the banks of the river down which they were traveling in order to give the impression of a populous and thriving region.

Now they were not real villages, of course, merely facades erected alongside the river to look like villages, and as the royal barge passed by and floated on down the river, the façade would be disassembled and moved downstream, where it would become another apparently thriving village, full of people obviously delighted to be new subjects of the famous sovereign. The minister of state who arranged for this tour was named Grigory Potemkin, and his creations have gone down in history as *Potemkin villages*, a term that's been applied ever since to anything whose appearance is intended to deceive, to deceive an observer into thinking that there's more there, than is actually the case.

Of course, Potemkin was far from the first person to attempt such a deception; his was simply one of the more creative efforts along these lines, and no doubt has been an inspiration to those who have followed in his footsteps down to the present day, though his modern-day successors have far surpassed him in their powers of deception. Indeed, there is an entire industry devoted these days to the creation of Potemkin villages in just about every aspect of life, the polishing of images which are so sophisticated that one is never entirely clear whether their efforts are aimed simply at putting the best face on something that is actually there, or covering up for the fact that there's little or nothing behind that very attractive facade.

So sophisticated, in fact, that these days we more and more often seem to prefer the image to the reality, even when there actually is a reality, since we've gotten so good at projecting images that how something looks or sounds may be even more important to us, than the fact of its actual existence. After all, it's a lot easier to produce a really attractive image of something, than it is to actually bring that thing into existence, since reality can and often is a rather messy affair, requiring a lot of hard work and almost always involving a number of compromises.

Which is presumably why political parties these days are so much better at producing their own versions of Potemkin villages, utterly pure little ideological dream worlds, than they are at actually producing concrete results. Because actually getting something done in the real world generally means getting your hands dirty and hammering out compromises with everyone involved, which apparently is not nearly as attractive to donors as coming up with those perfect little dream worlds, where everything can be exactly how they'd like it in their own perfect little

world. The fact that nobody actually lives like that, that nobody even *could* live like that, tends to get lost in the clouds.

Of course, political parties have nothing on the church in this regard, since if anything, the church has done this very same thing for a lot longer with even less shame. In fact, religion these days—pretty much all religions, as far as I can tell—seems to be much more about going off and creating our own perfect little dream worlds where everything is just exactly the way we think it should be, than we are actually working with other people to bring about that world, a world that may not be perfect, may not be exactly how we'd like it, but would certainly be a lot better than what actually exists. Because what's merely better is not good enough; these days, it's got to be perfect, even if that means it will never happen.

Indeed, we seem to have arrived at the point where a perfect dream world is to be preferred to a merely better real world. So we religious types are all off in our own little corners, tending our own little dream world hothouses, while the real world goes to hell in a handbasket. Sadly, the people who are out there actually trying to do something, actually trying to live out their religious values, actually trying to make this a better world often become the target of criticism because they have made compromises with reality, because they have settled for something less than a perfect world.

I have a hunch that this, or something like this, is what's going on behind the Gospel of John, a gospel which seems to reflect the concerns of a very distinctive community of Christians who were out there really and truly trying to make this a better world, actually trying to live out their faith, and were taking a lot of flak from religious types who preferred their religion absolutely pure, including no small number of their fellow Christians. Not surprisingly, this community gathered around the so-called beloved disciple of the Gospel of John tended to view the world in very different terms than did the other religious folks, which I think is what accounts for the distinctive structure of John's gospel when compared to the other three gospels, the so-called synoptic gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke.

In John, each chapter—and they tend to be long chapters—each chapter generally consists of one event that's happened, very often one of the miracles of Jesus, or as John prefers to call them, one of his signs. In the first few verses of the chapter, John tells us what happened, and then at much greater length, he goes back and tells us what really happened, in the process tearing down the facade that often obscures the truth in so much religious talk. John is determined to tell it like it is, which is why there's a particular phrase that occurs over and over again in his gospel. The phrase is "Very truly, I tell you," and that's not just a casual expression. Jesus means it quite literally, his ways of saying, "I'm telling you the truth, the real truth." Unlike everyone else.

You see, John was utterly convinced that Jesus coming into this world stripped away the facade and revealed the religion of his day for what it actually was, which was nothing like what it pretended to be. For John, Jesus was so clearly the real deal, so genuinely the light of the world, that in his presence all of those opposed to him were revealed for what they really were, no matter what they might have claimed to be. Almost worse in John's eyes were those who did recognize

Jesus for what he was, that being the way, the truth and the life, but who couldn't bring themselves to let go of their settled places in the world in order to become his followers, to actually walk in his footsteps and be seen in his company. They just couldn't bring themselves to do it, and like Nicodemus, they'd only come to Jesus "by night," as it were, come to him under the cover of darkness when no one could see them.

Eventually, as was inevitable, it all came to a head, and the religious authorities had to do something about Jesus if they were to maintain any credibility in the eyes of the people, and thus any authority. Which is why, in our gospel lesson this morning, Jesus says, "Now is the judgment of this world...." His presence in their midst had forced their hands, had even flushed the ruler of this world out of the shadows into the light to be revealed for what he truly is, the Prince of darkness. The Prince of hypocrisy. The Prince of lies. The enemy of all that is true and good. So it was only a matter of time, and as Jesus knew full well, it wouldn't stop with just him. They'd also turn on his followers, at least on those who took his words seriously enough to live by them. Sure enough, they did. As they still do today.

In 1845 the American poet James Russell Lowell published a poem, a quite lengthy poem, a very small portion of which is excerpted on the cover of our bulletin this morning. It was later adapted as a famous hymn that some of you may remember from older hymnals, "Once to Every Man and Nation." The title of the poem, though, was "The Present Crisis." "Crisis" is actually a Greek word which means "judgment," so that when Jesus says here in John, "Now is the *judgment* of this world....," he's literally saying, "Now is the crisis of this world..." The crisis, the moment to decide between truth and falsehood, the moment that forces your hand and compels a decision.

Lowell wrote the poem during the War with Mexico in the mid-1840's, a war that in his mind presented Americans with a moral crisis, with the need to take a stand. No doubt, Lowell was right that it was a moment to decide, but wrong that such a moment only comes once to each person and nation. For a far greater crisis came upon this nation only a few years later in the Civil War, and there have been other such moments in the years since, notably in the 1950's and 60's, when there was clearly a moment to decide, a moment to choose between truth and falsehood, especially for those who lived in parts of the country where that was the only decision that really mattered, and where that decision to stand for the truth often came at a very high cost.

Frankly, it's one of the reasons I have never held Billy Graham in particularly high regard, though I have no doubt but that he was a man of great moral rectitude and personal integrity, and who accomplished a great deal of good. But the fact is, in the years he was most active as a voice of the church, on the great moral question, the great moral crisis, then facing the nation, whether African Americans were ever to be truly regarded as citizens of this nation, Billy Graham was silent. Silent at a time when his voice could have made a great deal of difference. But in the hour of judgment, his silence, along with the silence of so many other white Christians, turned the church of Jesus Christ into just another Potemkin village.

*In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit,  
to whom be all glory and honor, now and to endless ages...*