

I would also pray, Lord, that your reputation is involved in all that happens between now and November, because there are millions of people around this world praying to their god — whether it's Hindu, Buddha, Allah — that his opponent wins, for a variety of reasons. And Lord, I pray that you would guard your own reputation, because they're going to think that their god is bigger than you, if that happens. So I pray that you will step forward and honor your own name with all that happens between now and Election Day.

-The Rev. Arnold Conrad
Invocation at a McCain rally

“God is on our side,” was the battle-cry of World War I, of the wars of the 20th century as we went to war with other Christians. “Praise the Lord and pass the ammunition!” And I suppose we need to repent of our tendency to think that ultimately we have advanced much beyond that era. The partisanship we see so brazenly displayed by both sides is ultimately theological in that behind all the attacks and the proposed policy solutions is a narrative, a story about the world and God’s purpose for it and role in it.

Embedded in the invocation this Iowa Pastor offered to begin a McCain rally is the assumption that God, like John McCain, is on the ropes, an underdog who needs to watch out for the polls, for how he is regarded. Here is a god who is only God insofar as his people actually believe in him, if they vote for him. This god depends on the praises of his people; he is in rivalry or competition with the “gods” of other religions.

Now my assumption from the rhetorical style of this prayer, is that the pastor is a conservative evangelical, a fundamentalist. But for such a one who we can no doubt claim eternal truth for his exclusive theological orthodoxy, this conception of God is remarkably temporal. It is technically “fideistic,” that is depending on the faith of human beings. Fideism is a kind of wishful thinking, more appropriate to political campaigns than to calling on God, better known as “denial.” In the words of the great Anglican J.B. Phillips to all such presumption: “Your God is too Small.”

It represents the “my god can beat up your god” stage of the development of the Judeo-Christian tradition where the god of this people vied with the god of the Hebrews for hegemony. Elaine made reference last week to the god of Egypt who the newly liberated Israelites imitated in their fabrication of an Egyptian fertility goddess in the desert while Moses was up on the mountain receiving the 10 words from Yahweh. And you’ll remember that Yahweh’s reputation was very much at issue in Moses’ argument to save the people from Yahweh’s anger, “Why should the Egyptians say you brought them out into the desert to destroy them. I can see they attack add now.”

Jesus is very clear about the nature of reputation. In John’s Gospel he confronts the Pharisees, “You give each other honor but I do not care for my reputation in your eyes.” It’s like

that great AA saying, “what you think of me is none of my business.” But the world is always caught up in honor and glory, reputation and esteem. In fact Jesus prays to his father when he about to be arrested and led through torture and humiliation to the death of the cross: “Father now glorify me as I have glorified you.” It’s clear that what he means in seeking glory is not exaltation but the ignominy of the cross. God’s glory and man’s glory are different. God tends to hang out with the losers rather than the winners.

So when Jesus here in Matthew is approached by a delegation of Herodians, intent on tripping him up so he’ll become liable for arrest, they reveal how caught up they are in the world’s game by flattering him: “we know that you are sincere. . . and show deference to no one, for you do not regard people with partiality” The literal Greek here is revealing: “you are looking into the face of no one.” It’s a wonderful expression: you’re not picking up the cues or reading the signs in facial expressions of whether you are popular. They’re saying, “we notice that you don’t care what other people think . . . you don’t read the polls.”

Now the very fact that Jesus replies to them by calling them “hypocrites” may simply mean that he sees through their feigned admiration. They’re flattering him in order to soften him up for their next question: “Now tell us, is it lawful to give taxes to Caesar or not.” A “yes” will cause the Pharisees and much of the radical zealot crowd to stone him as a blasphemer or, like so many fickle swing voters, to walk away and find another candidate. If he says “no,” well then he stands to be arrested by the Romans for inciting insurrection. By I think it means more than that.

The word “hypocrite” is from the Greek and it means literally “standing under a crisis.” It’s a very familiar concept to us. I often hear it as an excuse for not coming to Church. In fact I just heard it last weekend in San Quentin. One of the prisoners when the question of church attendance came up said he used to go but then he saw some guys he’d worshipped with acting mean to others out on the yard. Unfortunately, we didn’t get a chance to talk about it but what I would have said is something like this. “The unfortunate truth is that all of us are hypocrites. In fact that’s why we need church. As someone has said, “the Church is a hospital for sinners, not a country club for saints.” This is certainly not to excuse sinful behavior, but simply to acknowledge that the one qualification we all have for belonging to this community of faith is our sinfulness, something we are all working together to leave behind.

If we’re honest, which of us can say we do not know—first hand—the experience of being a “hypocrite?” All of us under whatever our current crisis may be—it could certainly be the assets on which we live that are falling in value. It could be our children who so often hold up for us in their anxiety and acting out the very stresses we try so hard to shield them from—all of us, find ourselves behaving in ways dictated by our fears or our anxieties. Sometimes we even turn to God in desperation to fix our problems, praying to change that person or to punish those people, on whom we fix blame. We too often fail to recognize that we are the cause of our own problems and God is not our fixer but calls us to imitate him. Instead, in crises we tend to become fixated and look to the world for models of behavior to praise and imitate or to blame and vilify.

In the conflict portrayed in the gospels opposing sides escalate their competition for the approval of the crowd until the threat of uncontrolled violence draws them to turn together on Jesus. When He says, “Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s and to To

God the things that are God's," far from setting out some great division between business and faith, as it is often interpreted, Jesus is wiggling free of the grasp of his enemies. It's like when he says "let the one who is without sin cast the first stone;" but it heightens their frustration, ratchets up the stress. It ultimately leads to what Paul calls "the wrath that is to come," not God's wrath poured out on humanity, but human wrath and violence swirling chaotically.

Our political process has this same structure. We choose our savior/scapegoat every four years. Much in our economic situation will be calmed down once the election takes place, as long as the conflict ends with the election. But the only thing that will finally calm down our cyclical anxiety and stress is if we learn to imitate Christ, who "for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame," if we learn to keep our eyes focused on the reign of God where we stop making distinctions between good and bad, but recognize we are all one and that we share responsibility for each other.