



Inside front cover

MEDITATION

Presbyterian Life

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THE HIGHEST CAUSE

by Alan Paton

There is no room for fear in love; perfect love banishes fear. (1 John 4:18 NEB.)

ONLY when our cause is the highest cause will all fear be conquered. For if our cause is not the highest cause, if it is a nation or a party or a movement or a church, and if it is this with which we identify ourselves, then the defeat of our cause is the defeat of ourselves. But if we believe that God is the ground of all being, we can accept defeat because in a sense we cannot be defeated.

The conquest of fear is therefore a tremendous consequence of trying to find out what God's cause is—and making it our own. But there may be another tremendous consequence also. We may come into conflict with those institutions which view with suspicion, and sometimes with active hostility, any persons who have a supreme loyalty that is above their loyalty to party or movement or state or church, even though each of these bodies may call itself Christian. There is many a nation in the world (or more accurately, there is many a national government in the world) that regards it as traitorous for a person to have a cause higher than that of the nation. If this nation calls itself Christian, it will argue that loyalty to God and loyalty to the nation are one and the same thing; and it will invent a Christian nationalism in which one may have the best of both worlds. It will propound the proposition that only by being armed to the teeth can Christian civilization preserve itself. It may propound the even more extraordinary proposition that self-preservation must be the first law of a Christian, for if Christians do not preserve themselves, how can Christianity be preserved?

I live in a country where most of the white citizens

would claim to be Christians, feel it to be their supreme duty to preserve their Christian civilization, and sometimes, in moments of stress, they would call it "white civilization." Many of them believe that God placed them in southern Africa to carry out a "civilizing mission." Most of them hold firmly the belief that this civilizing mission can only be carried out by the separation from one another of all racial groups—residentially, educationally, culturally, politically, even religiously. I, for example, would have to receive a permit from the authorities if I wished to worship in a church which is situated in an African township or reserve, and this would only be granted for some special occasion. If I wished to worship there more often, it is almost certain that permission would be denied. Any Christian in South Africa who tried to break down the "middle wall of partition" between racial groups, or between persons of different racial groups, would find himself under suspicion; and this suspicion would vary directly as his zeal. Any Christian, or any other person, who tried to break down the political wall of partition would not only find himself under suspicion but might find himself house-arrested, or banned from attending any meeting, or limited to some small area, or banished to some remote area, or detained without trial for a period that might be extended for ever.

I write these words not with the trivial aim of bringing my government into disrepute, but with the aim of showing that if a Christian takes seriously the commandment to love his neighbor as himself, he may incur the active hostility of state and church. And we should remember that Jesus did exactly that, and that he told his disciples that this might happen to them also. These sayings of Jesus should be taken seriously. Our Christian cause could well bring us into conflict with authority, and the only way in which we can overcome the fear of such a prospect is to believe that we are the instruments of God's peace, which means of course that we are the instruments of God's love; and because we are used by it, because it dwells in us, we have no cause for fear.

GIVE us courage, O Lord, to stand up and be counted, to stand up for those who cannot stand up for themselves, to stand up for ourselves when it is needful for us to do. Let us fear nothing more than we fear thee. Let us love nothing more than we love thee, for thus we shall fear nothing also.

Let us have no other god before thee, whether nation or party or state or church. Let us seek no other peace but the peace which is thine, and make us its instruments, opening our eyes and our ears and our hearts, so that we should know always what work of peace we may do for thee.

This meditation is adapted from a chapter in a new book by Alan Paton, the well-known South African writer. The book is called *Instrument of Thy Peace* and draws upon the life and prayers of St. Francis of Assisi as a source of inspiration. The Seabury Press, New York, is the publisher.