

**“WHAT CHRIST MIGHT SAY TO BARACK OBAMA –
ON HIS INAGURATION DAY.”**

**Text: Solomon said, "Give me now wisdom and courage
and knowledge to go out and come in before this
people, for no one can rule so great a number, as
many as the dust of the earth."**

II Chronicles 1:10

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Throughout my years of preaching, I have usually taken the Inauguration of a new President as an opportunity to share a sermonic word with our new leader. The people of the parish and others are invited to listen in. Today I share with President-Elect Obama some thoughts of what I think Christ might say to him on his Inauguration Day come Tuesday. Notice at the start: it is not what I would want to say to the new President; I am seeking to share what Christ might say.

I know it might sound a trifle arrogant for a retired preacher in Charlotte to dare tell a bright and dashing young President what to do, and even more brash to suggest that he could speak in behalf of Jesus Christ. I admit it rings a bit haughty, but then I am old enough that I can blame it on the dotage of my years. Yet honestly, I jest - I am not afraid - partly because the posture is aligned with the prophets of old in the Bible and that is good company to be in. They were not reluctant to speak to the Judges, Priests and Kings, especially to remind them of their first duty to the Lord.

We must be faithful to the Lord God first. Then we are called to care for his people, especially the young and poor and weak, for the rich and powerful can usually take care of themselves. Jesus, quoting from the Shema in Deuteronomy 6:4-5, told us that the First and greatest Commandment is to “Love the Lord with all your heart and soul and strength and mind.” The second is like unto it: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” (Mark 12: 29-32)

Those two commandments apply to each and all of us, but they belong quintessentially to President of the United States of America! Much has changed since 1776, but our reliance upon the Guidance and the Power of God should still stand in the center of our way of life. It is how we got to be the people that we are. I get impatient with the persistent critics who insist that we must keep an open mind to include all religions. Of course I know that times have changed and that one secret to surviving in the 21st Century is to try to understand what other religions teach. Yet, I add, “Sure keep an open mind, but (as Confucius added) don’t let your brains fall out.” You need to drop anchor somewhere or you will bob up and down in the harbor forever, and then drift away in the rising tides of tomorrow. Tolerance is still a luxury when things begin to matter. I don’t know what you think about the faith of President Elect Obama; I don’t know what worries or reservations you might have. We all have much to learn about him. But to me, he is a committed Christian who believes in the God who is revealed in Jesus Christ, and he wants to be a faithful servant of the Lord.

But I was speaking about me and the prophets. The famous Isaiah was on friendly terms with several Kings, a kind of ancient Billy Graham. One time, it seems, he was even asked to deliver an Inaugural Day kind of sermon. 2000 years before that, Moses marched down to Pharaoh to tell him to let God's people go. Elijah shouted at Ahab and his fanciful Jezebel, reminding them of their sin. Samuel insisted that first Saul, then King David be faithful to the Creator God. Later, the prophet Nathan stormed into the royal palace and following his little parable of the man with a single lamb which his Kingly neighbor stole away, pointed to King David and declared: "You're the man! ("Thou art the man!" in the old King James.) You are the one who has sinned!" The prophets often rose to clarify the word of God, and they never apologized for what they had to say. The preacher, or any of the rest of us who love the Lord, should never be reluctant to speak our mind – assuming of course that fell convicted that we have the word of God.

Our Biblical text concerns a visit of the Lord to the new King Solomon about three thousand years ago. It is recorded in the often overlooked book of II Chronicles, Chapter 1, verse 10. Let me give you the background. King David had ruled for 40 years; then he "died in a good old age, full of days and riches and honor." (Wouldn't we all love to do that?) His son Solomon was selected to rule in his stead. Solomon went up to Gibeon for his Inauguration, the sacred spot where David had taken the Ark of the Covenant which Moses had carried through the wilderness.

God appeared to him the night before his Inauguration and made him a spectacular offer. "Solomon, ask for anything you want and I will give it to you." Period, ask and it's yours! Now there is an offer you would want to listen to: What would you like to have from God? Pretend, if you could ask for anything you wanted, what would it be? God told Solomon to make his choice, anything. Jesus said the same by the way: "Ask anything you want in my name, and I will give it to you." Ponder deeply what you want, for God might come to visit you in this Sanctuary or tonight in your home and direct the question at you. "Do you know what you want most in life?"

Solomon was ready. He replied immediately: "Lord, this is an enormous job. The people I am to rule are as many as the dust of the earth." (In our case 305 million.) The possibilities of failure are legion. As he came to the throne, there were endless extravagances within the nation

Oh, dear, I digress for a moment. It brings tears to my eyes when I think about what some people I know have asked for. "All I ever wanted," the bewildered father said to me, "was a happy home. Look at us now!" "What I wanted was to see my mother just one more time, but I was too far away

when the call came and I did not get to say goodbye." A teenaged girl wrote to me a while ago, having heard one of my recorded sermons on human weakness, she said, "All I want is for my father to stop drinking!" ... "All I want is a job that will pay me enough to take care of my wife and children," the unemployed husband said. "I want my father to get better," she whispered; or it could be my wife, daughter, husband, partner or friend. A thousand times I hear, "Lord, give me back my good health, or at least give me the courage to face what has come." Too many have pinned their hopes on financial gain: "Lord I want to be rich." Another said, "I want a revival of our nation; we have lost our way!"

There were the gravest of dangers for Solomon without. Just peek ahead six verses and read that while Solomon was planning to build a Temple for the Lord, the first thing he had to do the next day was gather 1400 chariots and 12,000 horsemen to protect the nation.

When God ask him what he wanted as a special gift, he replied without hesitation: "Give me wisdom and knowledge to go out and come in before these many people. Help me to rule them wisely and well. Please stand by my side, never desert me." That would be a perfect prayer for President Obama when he takes Office on Tuesday. By the way, do you recall God's answer to Solomon? He said, "Because you asked for wisdom and knowledge and did not ask for honor and success and riches, I will give you all of those as well." Or as Jesus said it, "Seek first the Kingdom of God and all the rest will be added unto you."

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Our topic though is "What Christ Might Say to Obama..." Let's move on to that – in six parts. Number One. I think the first thing Christ would say to Barak Obama is "Congratulations. I really did not think that they would ever vote you in as their President. There was so much to worry about in the interminable and costly presidential campaigns which American insists on running. It seemed certain that one or the other of the miscues and accusations which appeared almost daily in the news would topple your candidacy. First, there was a well known woman to contend with, wife of an ex-President. It is not idle to repeat the obvious that since no woman has ever been President, it surely seemed her time. The women of the land, at least, would all vote for her. Then came a dozen Governors and Senators, all vying for the post. Then they kept saying that you were a political puppy: all you ever did was go to Harvard, organize some communities and turn up for

some roll calls in the Senate. Then it was said that you had ties to some old subversives. Others muttered that you would not know how to answer the telephone if it rang in the middle of the night. Finally there was a bona fide war hero to contend with: prisoner of war, a national hero, a first class patriot, a seasoned Senator. Surely they would choose him over you.

And all the while, arching itself above the whole process, there was the matter of race and prejudice. You are a recent, modern African-American, and removed from the long fought battles in recent history. Some jealous civil rights warriors of the past half century reminded us of that. They had fought and won the battles; now you were taking the spoils. Then, you had to quit your church when your Pastor insisted on shouting away on matters inappropriate to a presidential campaign. But the band of brothers and sisters kept on playing.

People in polite company do not like to talk about race out loud, and they always pretend to be kind and fair. But it was speculated by some seasoned sociological pundits that whatever the people said in public, when the good old American boys and girls got into the privacy of the Voting Booth, they still vote for the one who looked like them. But it obviously did not happen.

You would never have been elected if only the African-Americans and other minorities had voted for you. The unspoken issue was swirling everywhere. But somehow you managed to stay above it all. You never played the old race card, though others tried furiously to insert it. It seemed that while most other people thought about you as an African- America, you were thinking of yourself as a man, an American and a child of God. You told them we had to change the way things were being done. Critics kept asking, what kind of change you wanted. You kept answering that you wanted us to return to what American was supposed to be, first and final.

You appealed to the young, even naïve dreamers who blindly accepted you or were told by others that they should vote for you. You organized the voter registration process and told each one that one vote mattered. You mastered the Internet as the place to contact the rising generations. You have an extravagant flare for the dramatic. You touched the heartstrings of those who wanted war to cease when you said that you could bring the troops back home before the other fellow would. You told the poor and disheartened that they could have a piece of the American Pie if they worked at it; and that you would find a way for them to access good health care and a future for their children. You offered them work, not a dole, and everybody listened. You appealed to the aging

reformers too, and old ladies in the vast company of those who were weary, worn out and discouraged. They wanted change too. You hot dogged it around a little, but it sounded like you could help a nation about to lose its bearings to find its way again, and they believed it.

Not everybody felt that, but you spoke with honest candor and you caught the imagination of those who believe with all their hearts in the American dream. You said you were dedicated to the proposition that we are all created equal and endowed by the Creator with certain inalienable rights, like life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Familiar campaign promises, to be sure: we have heard it all before; but somehow this time the nation trusted that you meant what you said. So far you have been true to your word.

I think that Christ would say to Obama, “I am proud of you; but I am also proud of the American people.” Maybe they are not as narrow minded and opinionated as they are sometimes made out to be. Oh sure, there is a mother-load of prejudice and the inequality of slavery swirls through the history of our corporate hearts and hopes. But, by now, it seems that most good people might be ready to tip toe around that boundary, at least the public one, and find some common ground to stand upon. We can’t keep fighting and ignoring each other until the end of time. The future of the world does not seem to belong to one race anymore, or even another. Perhaps the day has come when we can begin to judge people not by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. That’s what Martin said, and they killed him for it. And sure, we are not on the mountain-top yet on the anniversary of his birth, but we are a huge step closer to where we ought to be, and it is a little easier to see over into the Promised Land. We are trying to find a way that all men and women can dream together. That’s first: Congratulations Barak, your Grandmother would be proud of you!

II.

The second thing I think Christ would say to Obama is more formal: As President, fulfill your first responsibility “To Preserve, Protect and Defend the Constitution of the United States of America.” That vow is the most sacred vow you will ever take. The Constitution is an enduring document, prepared by long ago patriots who fought to win a certain freedom of their own. Without them we would not be here. They were not perfect either, but they were devoted to the cause of a nation which would eventually allow all men and women and children to have an equal chance. Written by no less a man than Thomas Jefferson, in a social climate far different from our own, it was

refined by the opening Bill of Rights and later by individual Amendments, now totaling just 27 of them in 233 years, the last of which was added in 1992. Oddly, most of those Amendments have to do with individual rights. And the nation fought a Civil War to spread the circle wider.

The Constitution is the unifying force which holds our 50 States together. It lifts us up above the other nations of the earth. It is the binding and the Bible of our operating principles. It guarantees equality for our people. It enunciates the meaning of our rights. It has been our guiding star since 1776. Many through the years, even some Presidents we will not mention here, have tried to skirt its directives. Many others have winked at it in the way many good "religious" people wink at the Ten Commandments or the instructions of Jesus and St. Paul. Some have openly defied it. But, if the President does not preserve, protect and defend that Constitution, we will fall down into the pits and our Nation will not long endure.

The Preamble to the Constitution sets forth the goals of every elected official in the land: to establish justice, to provide for the common defense, to promote the general welfare, and to secure the blessings of liberty for all. A President does not have to wing it, nor adapt his thoughts and actions to adjust to whatever wind is blowing. As the Bible is the constant to a preacher, so is the Constitution a constant to all of us. Protect and defend the Constitution.

III.

Thirdly, I think Christ would ask Obama to protect and defend all the people of the land, to be President not just to the ones who have power and skills, but to all of those who need a lift. Acknowledge the diversity of the nation and let each person know that you want every last one of them to become a part and to be involved not to obtain their booty, but to sacrifice, to touch the lives around them with a magic civility. Protect us from the favored and special interest crowds.

Speaking of special interests, I read a recent survey about what Americans expected of the new President. It was amazing. The farmers wanted better prices, even artificial props for grain ethanol production. Small businessmen wanted easier loans for small businesses. Auto dealers and steel makers wanted protection and financial bail-outs. Minorities wanted benefits for their own minority. Women's rights groups wanted legislation for Women's Rights. Abortion opponents wanted legislation outlawing abortion. The handicapped wanted legislation to put them on a level

playing field. Corporate executives wanted tax cuts and incentives to protect their products. Environmentalists wanted harsher laws for the preservation of the environment. Are you with me? Each one wanted something, but almost nobody, no, not one, wanted an increase of taxes to pay for any of it. As my Dad used to say, "Who kiddeth whom?" Protect, defend and challenge all the people of the nation to look beyond themselves into the promised land.

IV.

More especially, fourth, I think Christ would ask the new President to take care of the little people of the land and around the globe. Be gentle to those with needs of body, mind or soul. The big bright people can take care of themselves. But, there is no one else to take care of the precious little ones. By little I mean the infants, the unborn and all the children of the nation and the world. I mean the child in Africa dying of hunger and disease. I mean the young women in Asia who are being kidnapped for personal pleasure in prostitution rings. I mean children of those who are dying of Aids. I mean the multitudes in our city streets who have no where to turn but into trouble, who have lost hope and common sense. Look out for those who feel cornered, who are worried and afraid, those who are gullible and who have stretched too far and now have fallen down. I mean those from broken homes and lives, the poor, the deserted the hungry and abused. Provide the chance of an equal education for all: good schools and trained, dedicated teachers.

And take care of the other figurative little people, those without power or skills or courage: the handicapped, the infirmed, the old, the tired, the emotionally troubled, the mentally disturbed, those who wander around the Alzheimer's units all across the land; the veterans confined to inferior places, or worse those who live in the streets and parks and under bridges in the cold.

Protect the immigrants, the lost, the sick, the lonely, those in alternate life styles and all the huddled masses yearning to breathe free. They are not evil; they are mainly down on their luck. They are different in these difficult times. They do not have the skills or savvy to compete in this fast moving "go-gettum" society. Look into their eyes and see the pain. There but for the grace of God goes each one of us. Sure it will cost money, perhaps too much; and we must never topple the nation into bankruptcy by our generosity. But it will still be less a financial burden than the total of the recent and coming Tarp funds to rescue our banks and brokerages from stupidity and greed, or the amount we spend of guns and international strife.

We have had enough of harshness and bully talk and torture and treating fellow human beings like they are rabbits, like deer or elk in season, or like a marauding pack of wolves in the woods of Texas, Arkansas, or Idaho, who must be hunted down and shot to death. War is sometimes necessary; the war on terror surely is; but war is also hell and a last resort for civilized societies. You will have to be tough to fight the enemies of America, Mr. President. You must protect and defend the nation and its image too; but God wants all of his children, all, to live as brothers and sisters in his world, and we need to get much closer than we are.

V.

The fifth thing Christ might say to Obama is: Stay wedded to moral and religious integrity. It is good to have a believer in the White House. It always has been. But America does not want you to be as rigid as those who closed the door to truth, and refused to listen to anything other than their own vaunted ideologies. Other good men have been in your office that have been arrogant and deceitful, and behaved so poorly they violated the trust of the people who brought them there. Be humble, even in the oval office. It's hard to be humble when you are the most powerful man on earth; so watch out for Lord Acton: power can corrupt!

A stalwart Southern member reminded me one day - I think because he heard me quote Abraham Lincoln once too often – that tomorrow, the 19th of January, is the birth date of Robert Edward Lee, born 202 years ago at Stratford Hall, up in the northern neck of Virginia,. Robert E. Lee was a man of great principle and honor, a leader and a gentleman.

He was so genuinely humble that while clearly the best candidate, he did not feel worthy to become Commander of the Army of Northern Virginia, less later, a full General of the Army. In his acceptance speech he finally said that he would accept the post but only in that he would (1) trust in Almighty God, (2) rely on his own approving conscience, and (3) he would seek the aid and counsel of his fellow-citizens. Three essential tenets of success, for sure. Lee did it. He was surely one of the most revered Americans of all time.

Later, while he was President of Washington and Lee University after the War, a young student asked him about the required code of behavior for the college. Lee replied, "There is no code. We have no

rules like that. We simply ask every student be a gentleman." The student, seeking more, asked what Lee meant by so general a statement. He replied, (Are you listening?) "The manner in which an individual enjoys a certain advantage over others is the test of a true gentleman; how he uses power when he has it, is the final test. When the true gentleman of honor leads he will feel humbled by his responsibility and it will show." He will. Lee did. Presidents should, so should the rest of us.

I think Christ would say: Barak, get above it all. Live your private and public life in such a way that America will know they have a President they can trust, with whom they might disagree at times, but who is faithful to his promises, who has integrity, who will not deceive the people. Be faithful to what you believe and the nation and the world will benefit from your faithfulness.

VI.

Finally, last, please take care of yourself and your family. The Presidency has often been hard on the men who served in that office. I own a set of photographs of President Lincoln, one taken each year he was in office. You can see the stress and strain and the price which leadership demanded. The other night I came across a photograph of George W. Bush taken 8 years ago. While all of us have changed since 2001, he looks more weary and gray and older than the most of us. Woodrow Wilson once spoke of how lonely it was in the White House. Nixon called it, "A life without relaxing." President Bush said the other night that he has awakened every single morning of his life since 9/11/01, devoted and determined to keep the people of America safe from harm and danger. Lyndon Johnson said, "The Presidency has made every man, however small, a little larger, and however large, not big enough for the demands of the office."

Years ago I clipped a cartoon, which lightly says it all. It is a picture of a little boy saying his Good Night Prayers. He prayed, "God Bless Mommy and Daddy and Grandma and Pop Pop and everyone else in the whole wide world. But please, please take care of yourself, God, because if anything ever happens to you, we'd all be done for! Amen." We would.

I was a shiny new young pastor when President John F. Kennedy was assassinated in 1963. It was awful. A whole new generation was ready to accept the Torch which was being passed from those born in the 19th Century to the 20th. We were all fired up with the future of the world in front of us, with the Charter to change it in our hands. A new spirit of hope and enthusiasm and service rose

all across the land. Then it all came to an ugly end on a Boulevard in Dallas, Texas on the 22nd day of November. I think the hearts of the young were broken, and all the music died and a patented civility was stopped dead in its tracks. And my reading of history is that the awful decade and more of protests which followed, and the gunfire and hopelessness and the ridiculous turmoil were a direct outcome of that fateful day. Protect and defend the Constitution and the nation and the little people and the military, but also protect and defend yourself, your charming wife and your two lovely daughters.

Conclusion

I began with Solomon's prayer on the eve of his Inauguration. I will end the same. "Lord, give me wisdom and knowledge to go out and come in before all the people around me. Help me to judge the fairly and to use my power before them wisely and well. Please stand by my side and never desert me." Good enough for a new President, and good enough for the rest of us. When he enters the Oval Office come Tuesday, I hope he repeats something like it. And so should we, each and all of us who love the Lord and seek to follow Jesus Christ.

What Christ might say to President Obama is one thing, the other one is what he might say to you and me. If he were to come today or tomorrow and ask you what one thing you wanted, for yourself, your family, the nation, your Church, or the world, what would you ask? Answer, but be careful: Christ might just be listening and God might decide to give it to you. Ask for wisdom and knowledge and faith and forgiveness and humility and Love - For now and forever more, Amen.