

MAGNANIMITY



Hebrews 10:16 "This is the covenant that I will make with (my people) after those days, says the Lord: I will put my laws in their hearts, and I will write them on their minds."

At the eleventh hour on the eleventh day of the eleventh month in the year 1918, Winston Churchill stood looking out his window toward Trafalgar Square, meditating on the cost and the consequences of the Great War that had just ended. Indeed at that very moment, the Armistice with the Kaiser was signed that concluded what we call the 'First World War', but what was known then simply as the 'Great War', or the 'War to end all Wars', a world war so terrible that more than 9 million people died in what is often considered the first of our modern military engagements, now gone are the charging calvaries with swords

raised in the air in a war that introduced new killings machines for the first time, like machine guns, armored tanks, airplanes and nerve gas, a war that lead to the fall of 4 major world imperial powers: the end of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the end of the Second Reich in Germany, the end of the Czars of Russia who had ruled for over 350 years, and the end of the Great Ottoman Empire that had lasted more than 700 years, all gone at that 11th hour on 11th day of 11th month in that year. Winston Churchill's wife arrived at that moment and proposed that they go to Downing Street to congratulate Lloyd George, the Prime Minister. Other politicians and members of the Cabinet joined them there and they began to discuss the peace terms that were being dictated to the Kaiser. The 'fallen foe,' Churchill later wrote in his memoirs, was close to starvation, so Churchill proposed immediately rushing 'a dozen great ships crammed with provisions' to the German port of Hamburg for distribution to the starving masses. His generous proposal, however, fell upon deaf ears.

At the same hour that Churchill's magnanimous suggestion was being rebuffed by his less merciful colleagues, a twice decorated German non-commissioned dispatch runner, who had been temporarily blinded during a heavy gas attack on the night of October 13th, sat in a Prussian military hospital and learnt of Germany's plight from a sobbing Lutheran chaplain there. Six

years later that soldier wrote down a description of his reaction to the news:

"I knew that all was lost," he wrote. "Only fools, liars, and criminals could hope for mercy from the enemy. In these nights hatred grew in me, hatred for those responsible for this deed . . . The more I tried to achieve clarity on the monstrous event in this hour, the more the shame of indignation and disgrace burned my brow. What was all the pain in my eyes compared to this misery? In the days that followed, my own fate became known to me . . . I resolved to go into politics."

That German soldier's name was Adolf Hitler.

I wonder what would have happened if those politicians in Downing Street on that fateful night of 1918 had been infected by the largeness of heart and magnanimity of Churchill's vision, and had indeed rushed those food ships and provisions to Hamburg. Germany might have been brought again within the fold of nations and averted the great economic and social disaster that it soon suffered. The whole history of the twentieth century might have taken a very different turn and we might have avoided the dire consequences of the Holocaust and another World War.

Indeed, after the second World War of the twentieth century, the Americans were affected by a spirit of magnanimity and conceived of the celebrated Marshall Plan for the benefit of

the defeated in Europe, for the reconstruction of the devastated cities and the recovery of nations and governments. And there has been a remarkable peace among nations in Europe ever since. A reading of history, I think, shows that time and time again, an act of magnanimity at a particularly significant moment could have stopped the unfolding drama of some great tragedy, and changed the course of history.

Magnanimity, a largeness of heart, a generosity of spirit; a forgiving nature; the kind of human sympathy that succeeds in loving its enemy as Jesus commanded us to do, and often, thereby, turns enemies into friends. Who at the end of World War II would have ever imagined that a few short years later Germany and Japan would be amongst America's strongest allies? Such is the power of magnanimity, perhaps most dramatically seen after war, and not uncommon among soldiers and athletes who struggle with each other, whereas magnanimity is, sadly I think, less commonly found among those who struggle mainly with ideas. Generals and football players are often more magnanimous than university professors or religious leaders or politicians.

Jesus, however, exemplified that spirit of magnanimity in his life, as he dined with sinners and tax-collectors, as he went about with publicans and Pharisees, as he dismissed the woman caught in adultery, or allowed the harlot to wash his feet with her tears, and at the end of his life as he bespoke those

selfless words dying upon the Cross as he was being crucified:
"Father, forgive them for they know not what they do."

Thus, these days as our recent war in Afghanistan has finally ended, I cannot help but wonder did our lack of magnanimity after the previous Afghanistan war play into this one. For the United States was more than willing to raise hell at the United Nations after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979 and to publicly boycott the Olympics in 1980. We were then more than willing to furnish military arms and advanced weaponry to the mujahedin in their battle against the Soviet forces, but when the Soviet Army withdrew from Afghanistan in 1989, we left too, we left behind a country devastated by decades of fighting which we had supported and supplied. No one rushed aid in for the poor and starving Afghan people then, no nation proposed to help them rebuild their fallen cities, or reconstruct their economy, we did not offer to help to re-establish a government from the rubble and destruction of their war with the Soviets, and from the ashes of that war rose the repressive Taliban and their support of Islamic terrorists who attacked us on 9/11. Where was the magnanimous spirit of Churchill or Marshall for this people then? Were we like those British politicians on Downing Street 113 years ago, with their deaf ears and their cold hearts? Were we more interested in victory over the Soviets than magnanimity

back then? The American philosopher George Santayana once wrote, "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it."

Magnanimity is of God, a God whose mercy has no end, who is long-suffering and slow to anger, who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who welcomes the stranger, forgives the sinner, and turns the heart of the enemy towards goodness, towards love and compassion, and thereby changes everything . . . and so I pray that this week as we celebrate 'Veterans' Day,' or as the British call it 'Remembrance Day,' or as the Europeans call it 'Armistice Day,' that we will remember our past and look to God to stir up the hearts of Americans in a spirit of magnanimity and love towards all our enemies, and especially towards the people of Afghanistan, where 22 million of them are now on the verge mass starvation. I pray that we will now be as benevolent and generous with them, and with those refugees that have fled their country, as we have been before, so that all those who died in America's longest war, will not have died in vain. May the Lord direct our hearts to the love of God and to the steadfastness of Christ. AMEN.