

IS GOD A YANKEE FAN?

Bicentennial Service

May 2, 1976

Pilgrim Church, Duluth

Royal F. Shepard, Jr.

"Know therefore that the Lord your God is God, the faithful God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments, to a thousand generations." Deuteronomy 7:9.

One day when I was nine years old - which is to say, in the early days of the Revolution - I was standing in line at school. Standing in line was mainly how we occupied our time at that school. Even if we learned nothing else, we received this preparation for a line-standing society.

On this particular occasion the boy next to me in line turned to me and asked:

"Who you for, the Yankees or the Giants?"

The fact was that I had not given this matter much consideration. Now I saw that the World Series was at hand and that my hour of decision had arrived. I stood there looking toward the door marked, "Boys," much as the ancient Israelites stood beside the golden calf. And now the voice thundered from the mountain:

"Who is on the Lord's side?"

"The Yankees," I said.

That is how I became a Yankee fan and in that allegiance I continued firm for the next twenty-odd years.

It is always humbling to recall the casual and even accidental ways in which so many of our major allegiances come about. In the case of our family, our church, and our country most of us make no initial decision at all. We simply are born into these relationships. There was a time when this used to bother me. I felt that no allegiance meant anything at all unless it was preceded by a definite decision, well-informed and passionately embraced.

Today I am still troubled about the casual way in which people form allegiances. But I am much less concerned about how such connections begin. What matters more to me now is how people follow through on them.

When it came to being a Yankee fan I think I may say without vainglory that I followed through rather well. I never became an aficionado of the sport, but I followed the standings faithfully in the newspapers every day. In time I found that my allegiance was sorely tested, that it took considerable courage and fortitude to be a Yankee fan.

"How can you be for a team that wins all the time?" people demanded to know.

"You want I should be for a team that loses all the time?" I replied.

"But the Yankees have too much money. They buy all the best players."

"That is no longer true," I insisted. "The Red Sox have more money. Why don't the Red Sox win then? The fact is that at this point in history - it was now around 1950 - the Yankees are mainly a team of broken down old men. They don't win because of money. They don't win because they have the fastest, strongest, healthiest players. They win because of a certain spiritual quality, because as the sports writers put it, they have 'class'."

But, of course, nobody would listen to me. As time went on it was clear that nobody of any intelligence, moral sensitivity, social vision or cultural refinement could be a Yankee fan. Nobody who voted for Adlai Stevenson was ever a Yankee fan. When I went to Union Seminary in New York, the Dodgers met the Yankees in the World Series. A television set was installed in one of the larger classrooms. There the students gathered to cheer and stomp their feet for the Dodgers and to jeer and boo the Yankees. It was obvious to me that nobody could go out and save the world in the name of Karl Barth or Reinhold Niebuhr and be a Yankee fan.

Still I remained steadfast. In defense of the Yankees I said a lot of nasty things about Dodger fans. I accused them of trying to be effete, Eastern Establishment snobs. I said that rooting for 'dem bums' was a kind of slumming indulged in by people who didn't know Flatbush from Toledo, Ohio.

People told me there were no other Yankee fans. But I told them where they could find one. I said, "He is a middle-aged man in an undershirt sitting on a fire escape on 226th Street. You can hear his radio in the room behind him, and the voice on that radio is not the voice of Red Barber, the Dodger announcer, it is the voice of Mel Allen. This man can tell you Bill Dickey's batting average way back in 1932. This man broke down and cried when Babe Ruth's cancer-devastated voice sounded over the public address system in Yankee Stadium for the last time. This man believes in the incomparable grace of the Yankee Clipper and looks with hope to Mickey Mantle. And when he comes home on a hot July day from cutting cloth in the garment district or washing windows on the 87th floor of the Empire State Building, he does not seek solace in the crudities of Brooklyn. He looks for that one touch of class in his hot, sooty universe. This man is your Yankee fan."

Later still I moved to southern Wisconsin. There was a team there, newly imported from Boston, called the Braves. When the Yankees came to play Milwaukee in the World Series, the home folks made so much unseemly commotion that Casey Stengel called them "Bush League." That sent the whole State of Wisconsin wild. I knew I had to keep quiet or I would lose my job. Sitting in front of my television set I tried to root for the Braves. But I just couldn't do it. My agony over the Yankees was like the agony of the Lord when he cried out:

"How can I give you up, O Ephraim!"

That thought leads me to another question. Might God too be a Yankee fan? I do not mean the New York Yankees; it goes without saying that God is a supporter of theirs. I mean is God a fan of the people in red, white and blue? If he is, then like me in former years, he must be very lonely. Outside the home stadium there are not many Yankee fans left today.

Is God a fan of the United States of America? Well, I doubt that he is sitting somewhere under an American flag in a reserved box, shouting "We're number one!"

more money.
nt in history"
broken down
cause they
cause of a
t, they have

Mel Allen, the "voice of the Yankees" used to respond to criticism by saying that he was "partisan but not partial." By that he meant that while he cheered for the Yankees, he tried to call the game fairly. A lot of Giant and Dodger fans claimed that they could not grasp the distinction, at least, not when Allen was doing the announcing. In God's case we don't need to worry about the distinction. He is neither partisan nor partial.

on it was
al vision
d for Adlai
in New York,
set was in-
thered to
the Yankees.
d in the

We Americans confront some very powerful temptations at this point. From the very beginning we have had the feeling that we were a people marked out by providence for a special mission. The first European settlers saw this continent as a new start for humanity. Here was a new opportunity to fulfill the prophetic vision, to build a Christian society, to construct the ideal state. Successive generations have been moved by that same impulse, that same sense that God has selected us for a very special project in human history.

aid a lot
be effete,
was a kind
Toledo, Ohio.

"The God of Israel is among us.....We shall be a city upon a hill", declared Governor John Winthrop to his fellow Congregationalists in 1630. A generation later, William Penn saw himself arranging for what he called "A Holy Experiment" among the Quakers in Pennsylvania. At the end of the Revolution President Ezra Stiles of Yale addressed the Connecticut legislature on the theme, "The Future Glory of the United States." Without apology he took his text from Deuteronomy 21:19:

them where
ershirt
o in the
Red Barber,
tell you
own and
public ad-
ves in
to Mickey
oth in the
re State
He looks
is your

"And to make thee high above all nations which hath made, in praise, and in name, and in honor; and that thou mayest be an holy people unto thy Lord."

there,
came to
seemly
the
uld lose
the
like

In the course of that sermon Stiles quoted enthusiastically a statement by our ambassador in Europe, John Adams,

"The progress of society will be accelerated by centuries by this Revolution.....Light spreads from the day-spring in the West; and may it shine more and more until the perfect day."

Now I say such grand rhetoric expressing such a sense of special destiny holds powerful temptations. A people may give thanks as the Pilgrims did for safe arrival in a new land, for a bountiful harvest and a developing community. Yet such gratitude easily turns to self-congratulation, to windy boasting about the national standard of living.

A people may believe that God summons them to build a free and just society that will serve as an inspiration to people everywhere. Yet such a sense of vocation may turn into an attitude of condescending superiority. It may become what Senator Fulbright calls "the arrogance of power" prompting a nation to try to make over all other nations "in its own shining image."

a Yankee
hat God
d, white
lonely.

A people may print "In God We Trust" on the coin of the realm. Yet such a pious phrase may lead to a self-serving identification of a national way of life with the will of the Lord. It is that danger to which Senator Hatfield pointed when he warned a national prayer breakfast against that "misplaced allegiance" which results when we "fail to distinguish between the God of an American civil religion and the God who reveals himself in the holy scriptures and in Jesus Christ."

The temptation is to confuse the special opportunities that God has given us with the notions of special virtue and special privilege. Is God a Yankee fan? Not if we think that means he sits eternally on our side of the stadium.

But perhaps God is a Yankee fan in some other way. I think that God is a Yankee fan in that he keeps faithful covenant with us in our own commitment to all that is best in the American dream. In days of old God chose Israel not because Israel was a great nation, but because Israel was a poor, enslaved people to whom his love held out a great promise. So it is with us. God did not choose our ancestors for the new land because they were the high and mighty. Rather he chose them because they fit the description on the Statue of Liberty:

"Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses, yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore,"

That is our heritage. And God, the Yankee fan, will always remind us of our calling to "preach good news to the poor" and "proclaim liberty in all the land."

There are fundamentally two ways in which God keeps covenant with us. One way is by prophetic criticism. As he spoke through Amos and Jeremiah, raising sharp questions about Israel's keeping of the covenant, so he speaks through our prophets concerning our proclamation of liberty.

"Was it liberty," he asks, "when you drove the Indian peoples from their lands and fenced them into reservations?"

"Was it liberty when you brought people over on slave ships and put them up for sale in the market place?"

"Was it liberty when you put little children to work in the mills fourteen hours a day at starvation wages?"

"Was it liberty when you opened the mail, tapped the telephones, searched the homes and harassed the persons of American citizens?"

One way that God keeps covenant with us is by that unrelenting critique which enables us to bring our practice more into line with our ideals.

The other way is by continually renewing and stretching that vision of freedom and justice with which we began. The God of Abraham and of Moses, of Lincoln and of Martin Luther King is not just a God of sacred remembrance. He is a God of promise and of hope. The possibilities he holds out to us are not stated in all their final detail in the records of the past. Deuteronomy does not say it all, nor does the Declaration of Independence, nor the Constitution. In our day, too, there can be "a new birth of freedom" of a sort that our forebears may not have understood. A pilgrim people, a pioneering people do not live only out of their heritage. They also live out of their vision of the future. The God who keeps covenant with us is not only the God of what was, he is the God of the not yet.

Nothing is more evident than that we are living at one of the turning points of history. We are a generation to whom it is given to bear the

the acute anxiety
society will be
all of its aspects
break down into
gave meaning to
that a new human
tion both possible
We fear the breakdown
vironment, the
harmonies with
in our relationship
allegiance.

Whether
ness to go forward

God stands
he is always
this of the I
that there is
look like much
man is an American
heritage is
hold us eternally
that man's destiny

I must
fan. New man
Then something

But the
us to himself
the covenant
generations

the acute anxiety of a world in transition. We do not know what tomorrow's society will be like; but we do know that it will be vastly different in all of its aspects from that of today. We all fear that civilization will break down into general chaos, that everything we once held dear and which gave meaning to our lives will disintegrate into nothingness. We all hope that a new humanity will emerge which will bring to much fuller realization both possibilities of individual liberty and of social justice. We fear the breakdown of relationships, the spoilation of the natural environment, the collapse of religion. We hope for the establishment of new harmonies within the human world, between us and our fellow creatures and in our relationship with that mystery which lays ultimate claim to our allegiance.

Whether or not our hopes triumph over our fears depends on our readiness to go forward with the God who leads into "the not yet."

God stands with us in our pursuit of the American dream. In that sense he is always a Yankee fan. Whatever else may happen, I think we may say this of the Lord and of his covenant with us. He will never let us forget that there is a man sitting on a fire escape on 226th Street. He doesn't look like much. He doesn't earn much. He doesn't know very much. But that man is an American. He is heir to the welcome on the statue. The American heritage is his heritage. The American dream is his dream. The Lord will hold us eternally to account for our stewardship of that man's heritage and that man's dream.

I must confess that there came a time when I ceased to be a Yankee fan. New management took over and fired Casey Stengel and Mel Allen. Then something broke within me. I switched to the Mets.

But the God who is God, does not switch allegiances. He has bound us to himself in a covenant of freedom. No matter how many times we break the covenant he will not let us go. He will prove faithful to a thousand generations.