

Chariots of Fire: Reflections on Elections, Politics & Spiritual Transformation

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Written and Posted 11-20-06

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*And did those feet in ancient time
Walk upon England's mountain green?
And was the holy Lamb of God
On England's pleasant pastures seen?*

*And did the Countenance Divine
Shine forth upon our clouded hills?
And was Jerusalem builded here
Among these dark Satanic mills?*

*Bring me my bow of burning gold!
Bring me my arrows of desire!
Bring me my spear! O clouds, unfold!
Bring me my chariot of fire!*

*I will not cease from mental fight,
Nor shall my sword sleep in my hand
Till we have built Jerusalem
In England's green and pleasant land.
("Jerusalem," by William Blake - 1804)*

You must officially be over the age of 25 to remember the Best Picture for 1981. I was in my third year of Seminary in Denver when my wife and I went to see "Chariots of Fire". Directed by an unknown director (Hugh Hudson), filmed with virtually unknown actors on a shoestring of a budget with a sound track created by one fellow on a moog synthesizer, the movie was the surprise winner of four Academy Awards (Best Picture, Best Original Screenplay, Best Original Score -who the heck was Vangelis, anyway? - and Best Costume Design). It was particularly surprising given the story line. The movie is based on the true story of two British athletes competing in the 1924 Summer Olympics in Paris. Englishman Harold Abrahams, who is Jewish, overcomes anti-Semitism and class prejudice in order to compete against Eric Liddell, a strong Christian and missionary-in-training known as "the Flying Scotsman," in the 100 meter race. But Liddell drops out of the event because his Christian convictions prevent him from running on the Sabbath (Sunday). Liddell is allowed to compete in the 400 metre race instead. The story compares the two men and their vastly different characters and reactions to adversity.

But Eric Liddell's biggest achievement lay outside the world of athletics. After the 1924 Olympics Liddell deliberately walked away from the fame and glory that could have been his in Britain. Instead, following in the footsteps of his father and elder brother, he joined the London Missionary Society and went to China as a missionary. During a visit home in 1932 he married Florence Mackenzie, the daughter of Canadian missionaries. When the Japanese invaded China, Liddell arranged for his wife and two children to leave the country, planning to follow some months later. Safely in Canada, Florence gave birth to their third daughter, whom Eric never saw. Before he could get away, he was interned in a Japanese prison camp. He was appointed math teacher and supervisor of a sports program at the camp. He arose early each morning to study his Bible and talk with God. But his health deteriorated rapidly. A brain tumor ravaged his body with severe headaches. Shortly after his forty-third birthday in January 1945, Liddell collapsed and died. Upon learning of Liddell's death, all of Scotland mourned. Harold Abrahams, on the other hand, retired from athletic competition in 1925 (due to an injury) and went on to a career as a sports journalist. He died in 1978.

The title of the movie came from the poem "Jerusalem" written in 1804 by one of England's great mystical poets, William Blake. The poem was set to music in 1916 by composer Hubert Parry and is featured as part of the movie's sound track. But the makers of "Chariots of Fire" were not the only ones to turn to William Blake and "Jerusalem" for inspiration, and therein lies a story of two competing views of transformation, and

a lesson for all of us regarding politics and spiritual transformation.

At the end of World War 2, in July of 1945, Great Britain held its first general election since 1935. The Conservative Party Candidate for Prime Minister was war-time leader Winston Churchill who hoped to turn his war-time popularity into another term of office for himself and the Conservative Party. His opponent was Labor Party Candidate and avowed socialist Clement Atlee. Atlee campaigned to the war-weary British public on a platform of sharing the benefits of peace with those who had endured the hardships of war, promising to create full employment, a tax funded universal National Health Service, and a cradle-to-grave welfare state. I once watched a documentary on the 1945 election and heard Clement Atlee appeal to voters by quoting the last stanza of William Blake's "Jerusalem." The British public listened and in a stunning defeat for Churchill and the Conservatives, embraced the vision of a socialist millennium, an economic "Jerusalem" here on earth. The socialist millennium of Atlee was soon and rudely interrupted by the advent of the Cold War, the Korean War (long story there of Atlee's coziness with the Soviets, selling them state-of-the-art jet engines which Russia reproduced, put in North Korean jet fighters and sent to fight against American forces in the Korean War), the Suez Crisis of 1956, confiscatory taxes which drove wealth & capital overseas, the worldwide inflation of the post-WW2 environment, the collapse of the Bretton-Woods monetary system . . . in other words, REALITY. The promised transformations of socialist (or "political") utopias have traditionally run aground on the shoals of reality. Or as I like to say, gravity is a harsh mistress to those who would seek to cheat on her.

O.K., nice history lesson, you say, but what's that got to do with elections, politics & spiritual transformation? Well, as my daughter used to say when we were translating Greek together and I would get impatient (Maurice, impatient, say it ain't so!), "Wait for it, dad, wait for it!" Allow me to 'splain it to you.

First, consider the two competing paradigms of transformation presented thus far. On the one hand, is there anyone who, with a straight face, wants to seriously argue that a social, economic or political "Jerusalem" has been established in the past 50 years in Great Britain or anywhere else on earth (including Jerusalem, I might add)? To the contrary, Great Britain, along with most of the Post-Christian West, seems lost in a Narnia-like winter of Postmodern nihilism (O.K. I explain all of this in Module 2 of our Equipping Workbook which you may still be able to order from House2house.com) while being locked in a life-and-death struggle with a radical Islam which suffers from no such self-doubt. On the other hand, look at the seed sown by Eric Liddell and a host of other un-named believers who denied themselves, took up their crosses and followed the Holy Spirit to China. Today, China, despite its ruthless and repressive Communist (i.e., socialist, in case you missed it) government, is home to the largest and fastest growing Christian movement in the history of the Church, a movement which seriously talks about and intends to take the gospel "back to Jerusalem" (i.e., the one in Israel, not Great Britain, in case you were wondering).

Second, (and thanks for waiting) there is a lesson here in the wake of the recent political landslide which has sent many an Evangelical into outer darkness "where there is now weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth." Well, I'll put it this way: the 44% of evangelicals who voted for "the other guy" in 2000 are now dancing in the aisles, while the other 47% are now shopping for camel hair shirts and sackcloth at the local Bible book store - although I hear rumor that Christianbooks.com is offering a special "wailing package" for only \$24.95, with free shipping on all orders over \$30!. Allow me to be lovingly blunt. In my past (I won't say when) I have served as a precinct captain, as a delegate to county and state conventions and have even been asked to chair & manage a couple of legislative campaigns. But at the end of the day, any Christian who places his (or her) hope in any political party to create Jerusalem on earth is seriously misguided (hey, the Kadema Party can't even do that, and they live there!). The Lord's Prayer says "Thy Kingdom Come, Thy will be done," not "Thy Party Come, Thy Platform be done." 19th Century American preacher Henry Ward Beecher once observed that if God were to answer the Lord's Prayer and cause His will to be done in earth is it is in heaven, there were streets in New York which would be wrecked as if they had been struck by a tornado. The same should probably be said of Washington, D.C. and both major political parties.

That spiritual transformation which we seek, and for which Jesus taught His disciples to pray, begins in the heart and in the home, not in the halls of Congress or any other political body. So it should come as no surprise that in this season God is raising up and blessing a vehicle appropriate to the task: house church. I should like to think that if Eric Liddell were alive and working in China today, he would be part of the

underground house church movement there, shepherding the River of God as it flows through people and homes, and encouraging believers to indeed take the gospel all the way "back to Jerusalem." Yep, the one in Israel, not Great Britain. I think Eric would understand the difference. Do we?