

Sins of the Government, Sins of the Nation;

Or, A Discourse for the Fast, appointed on April 19, 1793.

by Anna Laetitia Barbauld

My Brethren,

We are called upon by high authority to separate, for religious purposes, this portion of our common time. The shops are shut; the artisan is summoned from his loom, and the husbandman from his plough; the whole nation, in the midst of its business, its pleasures, and its pursuits, makes a sudden stop, and wears the semblance, at least, of seriousness and concern. It is natural for you to inquire, What is the purport of all this? -- the answer is in the words of my text: "*Ye stand this day, all of you, before the face of the Lord.*" -- Deuteronomy, xxxix. 10. You stand all of you, that is, you stand here as a nation, and you stand for the declared purpose of confessing your sins, and humbling yourselves before the Supreme Being.

Every individual, my brethren, who has a sense of religion, and a desire of conforming his conduct to its precepts, will frequently retire into himself to discover his faults; and having discovered, to repent of, -- and having repented of, to amend them. Nations have likewise their faults to repent of, their conduct to examine; and it is therefore no less becoming and salutary, that they, from time to time, should engage in the same duty. Those sins which we have to repent of as individuals, belong to such transactions as relate to our private concerns, and are executed by us in our private capacity; such as buying, selling, the management of our family economy, differences arising from jarring interests and interfering claims between us and our neighbours, &c. Those sins which, as a nation, we have to repent of, belong to national acts.

We act as a nation, when, through the organ of the legislative power, which speaks the will of the nation, and by means of the executive power which does the will of the nation, we enact laws, form alliances, make war or peace, dispose of the public money, or do any of those things which belong to us in our collective capacity. As, comparatively, few individuals have any immediate share in these public acts, we might be tempted to forget the responsibility which attaches to the nation at large with regard to them, did not the wisdom and piety of the governing powers, by thus calling us together on every public emergency, remind us that they are all our own acts; and that, for every violation of integrity, justice, or humanity in public affairs, it is incumbent upon every one of us to humble himself personally before the tribunal of Almighty God.

That this is the true and only rational interpretation of the solemnities of this day, is evident from hence, that we are never enjoined to confess the sins of other people; but our own sins. To take upon ourselves the faults of others, savours of presumption rather than humility. There would be an absurd mockery in pretending to humble ourselves before God for misdeeds which we have neither committed, nor have any power to amend. Those evils which we could not help, and in which we have had no share, are subjects of grief indeed, but not of remorse. If an oppressive law, or a destructive war, were of the nature of a volcano or a hurricane, proceeding from causes totally independent of our operations, -- all we should have to do would be to bow our heads in silent submission, and to bear their ravages with a manly patience. We do not repent of a dangerous disorder or a sickly constitution, because these are things which do not depend upon our own efforts. If, therefore, the nation at large had nothing to do in the affairs of the nation, the piety of our rulers would have led them to fast and pray by themselves alone, without inviting us to concur in this salutary work. But we are called upon to repent of national sins, because we can help them, and because we ought to help them. We are not fondly to imagine we can make of kings, or of lawgivers, the scapegoats to answer for our follies and our crimes: by the services of this day they call upon us to answer for them; they throw the blame where it ought ultimately to rest. It were trifling with our consciences to endeavour to separate the acts of governors sanctioned by the nation, from the acts of the nation; for, in every transaction the principal is answerable for the conduct of the agents he employs to transact it. If the maxim that the king can do no wrong throws upon ministers the responsibility, because without ministers no wrong could be done, the same reason throws it from them upon the people, without whom ministers could do no wrong.

The language of the Proclamation then may be thus interpreted: -- People! who in your individual capacities are rich and poor, high and low, governors and governed, assemble yourselves in the unity of your public existence; rest from your ordinary occupations, give a different direction to the exercises of your public worship, confess -- not every man his own sins, but all the sins of all. We, your appointed rulers, before we allow ourselves to go on in executing your will in a conjuncture so important, force you to make a pause, that you may be constrained to reflect, that you may bring this will, paramount every thing else, into the sacred presence of God; that you may there examine it, and see whether it be agreeable to his will, and to the eternal obligations of virtue and good morals. If not, the guilt be upon your own heads; we disclaim the awful responsibility.

Supposing that you are now prepared by proper views of the subject, I shall go on to investigate those sins which a nation is most apt to be betrayed

into, leaving it to each of you to determine whether, and how far, any one of them ought to make a part of our humiliation on this day.

Societies being composed of individuals, the faults of societies proceed from the same bad passions, the same pride, selfishness, and thirst of gain, by which individuals are led to transgress the rules of duty; they require therefore the same curb to restrain them, and hence the necessity of a national religion. You will probably assert, that most nations have one: but, by a national religion, I do not mean the burning a few wretches twice or thrice in a year in honour of God, nor yet the exacting subscription to some obscure tenets, believed by few, and understood by none; nor yet the investing a certain order of men dressed in a particular habit, with civil privileges and secular emolument; -- by national religion I understand, the extending to those affairs in which we act in common, and as a body, that regard to religion, by which, when we act singly, we all profess to be guided. Nothing seems more obvious; and yet there are men who appear not insensible to the rules of morality as they respect individuals, and who unaccountably disclaim them with respect to nations. They will not cheat their opposite neighbour, but they will take pride in overreaching a neighbouring state; they would scorn to foment dissensions in the family of an acquaintance, but they will do so by a community without scruple; they would not join with a gang of housebreakers to plunder a private dwelling, but they have no principle which prevents them from joining with a confederacy of princes to plunder a province. As private individuals, they think it right to pass by little injuries, but as a people they think they cannot carry too high a principle of proud defiance and sanguinary revenge. This sufficiently shows, that whatever rule they may acknowledge for their private conduct, they have nothing that can be properly called national religion; and indeed, it is very much to be suspected, that their religion in the former case is very much assisted by the contemplation of those pains and penalties which society has provided against the crimes of individuals. But the united will of a whole people cannot make wrong right, or sanction one act of rapacity, injustice, or breach of faith. The first principle, therefore, we must lay down is, that we are to submit our public conduct to the same rules by which we are to regulate our private actions: a nation that does this is, as a nation, religious; a nation that does it not, though it should fast, and pray, and wear sackcloth, and pay tithes, and build churches, is, as a nation, profligate and unprincipled.

The vices of nations may be divided into those which relate to their own internal proceedings, or to their relations with other states. With regard to the first, the causes for humiliation are various. Many nations are guilty of the crime of permitting oppressive laws and bad governments to remain amongst them, by which the poor are crushed, and the lives of the innocent are laid at the mercy of wicked and arbitrary men. This is a national sin of the deepest dye, as it involves in it most others. It is painful to reflect how many atrocious

governments there are in the world; and how little even they who enjoy good ones seem to understand their true nature. We are apt to speak of the happiness of living under an indulgent climate; and when we thank God for it, we rank it with the blessings of the air and of the soil; whereas we ought to thank God for the wisdom and virtue of living under a good government; for a good government is the first of national duties. It is indeed a happiness, and one which demands our most grateful thanks, to be born under one which spares us the trouble and hazard of changing it: but a people born under a good government will probably not die under one, if they conceive of it as of an indolent and passive happiness, to be left for its preservation to fortunate conjunctures, and the floating and variable chances of incalculable events; -- our second duty is to keep it good.

We shall not be able to fulfil either of these duties, except we cultivate in our hearts the requisite dispositions. One of the most fruitful sources of evil in the transaction of national affairs is a spirit of insubordination. Without a quiet subordination to lawful authority, peace, order, and the ends of good government, can never be attained. To fix this subordination on its proper basis, it is only necessary to establish in our minds this plain principle, -- that the will of the minority should ever yield to that of the majority. By this simple axiom, founded on those common principles of justice which all men understand, the largest society may be held together with equal ease as the smallest, provided only some well-contrived and orderly method be established for ascertaining that will. It is the immediate extinction of all faction, sedition, and tyranny. It supersedes the necessity of governing by systems of blinding or terrifying the people. It puts an end equally to the cabinet cabal, and the muffled conspiracy, and occasions every thing to go on smoothly, openly, and fairly; whereas, if the minority attempt to impose their will upon the majority, so unnatural a state of things will not be submitted to without constant struggles on the one side, and constant jealousies on the other. There are two descriptions of men who are in danger of forgetting this excellent rule; public functionaries, and reformers. Public functionaries, being intrusted with large powers for managing the affairs of their fellow-citizens, -- which management, from the nature of things, must necessarily be in the hands of a few, -- are the governing will; they require, therefore, to be observed with a wholesome suspicion, and to be frequently reminded of the nature and limits of their office. Reformers, conceiving of themselves as of a more enlightened class than the bulk of mankind, are likewise apt to forget the deference due to them. Stimulated by newly discovered truths, of which they feel the full force, they are not willing to wait for the gradual spread of knowledge, the subsiding of passion, and the undermining of prejudices. They too condemn a *swinish multitude*, and aim at an aristocracy of talents. It is indeed their business to attack the prejudices, and to rectify, if they can, the systems of their

countrymen, but, in the mean time, to acquiesce in them. It is their business to sow the seed, and let it lie patiently in the bosom of the proud, -- perhaps for ages, -- to prepare, not to bring about revolutions. The public is not always in the wrong for not giving in to their views, even where they have the appearance of reason; for their plans are often crude and premature, their ideas too refined for real life, and influenced by their own particular cast of thinking: they want people to be happy their way; whereas every one must be happy his own way. Freedom is a good thing; but if a nation is not disposed to accept of it, it is not to be presented to them on the point of a bayonet. Freedom is a valuable blessing; but if even a nation that has enjoyed that blessing evidently chooses to give it up, the voice of the people ought to prevail: men of more liberal minds should warn them indeed what they are about; but having done that, they should acquiesce. If the established religion, in any country, is absurd and superstitions in the eyes of thinking men, so long as it is the religion of the generality it ought to prevail, and the minority should not even wish to supplant it. The endeavouring to overthrow any system before it is given up by the majority is faction; the endeavouring to keep it after it is given up by them is tyranny; both are equally wrong, and both proceed from the same cause, -- the want of a principle of due subordination.

If we find reason to be satisfied with the general sketch and outline of government, and with that basis of subordination on which we have placed it, it becomes us next to examine, whether the filling up of the plan be equally unexceptionable. Our laws, are they mild, equal, and perspicuous; free from burdensome forms and unnecessary delays; not a succession of expedients growing out of temporary exigencies, but a compact whole; not adapted to local prejudices, but founded on the broad basis of universal jurisprudence? -- Are they accessible to rich and poor, sparing of human blood, calculated rather to check and set bounds to the inequality of fortunes than to increase them, rather to prevent and reform crimes than to punish them? -- If good, are they well administered? -- Is the lenity of the laws shown in the moderation of the penalties, or in the facility of evasion and the frequency of escape? -- Do we profit from greater degrees of instruction and longer experience, and from time to time clear away the trash and refuse of past ages? What all are bound to observe, are they so framed as that all may understand? -- Is there any provision for instructing the people in the various arbitrary obligations that are laid upon them, or are they supposed to understand them by intuition, because they are too intricate to be explained methodically? -- Are punishments proportioned to crimes, and rewards to services; or have we two sets of officers, the one to do the work, the other to be paid without doing it? -- Have we any locusts in the land, any who devour the labours of the husbandman without contributing any thing to the good of society by their labours of body or of mind? -- Is the name of God, and the awfulness of religious sanctions,

profaned among us by frequent, unnecessary, and ensnaring oaths, which lie like stumbling blocks in every path of business and preferment, tending to corrupt the singleness of truth, and wear away the delicacy of conscience; entangling even the innocence and inexperience of children? -- Have we calculated the false oaths which, in the space of one sun, the accusing angle has to carry up from our custom-houses, our various courts, our hustings, our offices of taxation, and -- from our altars? -- Are they such as a tear, if we do shed tears on a day such as this, will blot out? -- Have we calculated the mischief which is done to the ingenuous mind, when the virgin dignity of his soul is first violated by a falsehood? -- Have we calculated the wound which is given to the peace of good man, the thorns that are strewn upon his pillow, when, through hard necessity, he complies with what his soul abhors? Have we calculated the harm done to the morals of a nation by the established necessity of perjury? We shall do well, being now by the command of our rulers before the Lord, to reflect on these things; and if we want food for our national penitence, perhaps we may here find it.

Extravagance is a fault, to which nations, as well as private persons, are very prone, and the consequences to both are exactly similar. If a private man lives beyond his income, the consequence will be loss of independence, disgraceful perplexity, and in the end certain ruin. The catastrophes of states are slower in ripening, but like causes must in the end produce like effects. If you are acquainted with any individual, who, from inattention to his affairs, misplaced confidence, foolish law-suits, anticipation of his rents, and profusion in his family expenses, has involved himself in debts that eat away his income, -- what would you say to such a one? Would you not tell him, Contract your expenses; look yourself into your affairs; insist upon exact accounts from your steward and bailiffs; keep no servants for mere show and parade; mind only your own affairs, and keep at peace with your neighbours; set religiously apart an annual sum for discharging the mortgages on your estate. -- If this be good advice for one man, it is good advice for nine millions of men. If this individual should persist in his course of unthriftly profusion, saying to himself, The ruin will not come in my time; the misery will not fall upon me; let posterity take care of itself! would you not pronounce him at once very weak and very selfish? My friends, a nation that should pursue the same conduct, would be equally reprehensible.

Pride is a vice in individuals; it cannot, therefore, be a virtue in that number of individuals called a nation. A disposition to prefer to every other our own habits of life, our own management, our own systems, to suppose that we are admired and looked up to by others -- something of this perhaps is natural, and may be pardoned as a weakness, but it can never be exalted into a duty; it is a disposition we ought to check, and not to cultivate: there is neither patriotism nor good sense in fostering an extravagant opinion of ourselves and

our own institutions, in being attached even to our faults, because they are ours, and because they have been ours from generation to generation. An exclusive admiration of ourselves is generally founded on extreme ignorance, and it is not likely to produce any thing of a more liberal or better stamp.

Amongst our national faults, have we any instances of cruelty or oppression to repent of? Can we look round from sea to sea, and from east to west, and say, that our brother hath not aught against us? If such instances do not exist under our immediate eye, do they exist any where under our influence and jurisdiction? There are some, whose nerves, rather than whose principles, cannot bear cruelty -- like other nuisances, they would not choose it in sight, but they can be well content to know it exists, and that they are indebted for it to the increase of their income, and the luxuries of their table. Are there not some darker-coloured children of the same family, over whom we assume a hard and unjust controul? And have not these our brethren aught against us? If we suspect they have, would it not become us anxiously to inquire into the truth, that we may deliver our souls; but if we know it, and cannot help knowing it, if such enormities have been pressed and forced upon our notice, till they are become flat and stale in the public ear, from fulness and repetition, and satiety of proof; and if they are still sanctioned by our legislature, defended by our princes -- deep indeed is the colour of our guilt. And do we appoint fasts, and make pretences to religion? Do we pretend to be shocked at the principles or the practices of neighbouring nations, and start with affected horror at the name of Atheist? Are our con-sciences so tender, and our hearts so hard? Is it possible we should meet as a nation, and knowing ourselves to be guilty of these things, have the confidence to implore the blessing of God upon our commerce and our colonies: preface with prayer our legislative meetings, and then deliberate how long we shall continue human sacrifices? Rather let us Never pray more, abandon all remorse.

Let us lay aside the grimace of hypocrisy, and stand up for what we are, and boldly profess, like the emperor of old, that every thing is sweet from which money is extracted, and that we know better than to deprive ourselves of a gain for the sake of a fellow-creature.

I next invite you, my friends, to consider your conduct with regard to other states. Different communities are neighbours, living together in a state of nature; that is, without any common tribunal to which they may carry their differences; but they are not the less bound to all the duties of neighbours, -- to mutual sincerity, justice, and kind offices.

First, to sincerity. It is imagined, I know not why, that transactions between states cannot be carried on without a great deal of intrigue and dissimulation. But I am apt to think the nation that should venture to disclaim this narrow and crooked policy, and should act and speak with a noble frankness, would lose nothing by the proceeding: honest intentions will bear to

be told in plain language: if our views upon each other are for our mutual advantage, the whole mystery of them may be unfolded without danger; and if they are not, they will soon be detected by practitioners as cunning and dextrous as ourselves.

Secondly, we are bound to justice -- not only in executing our engagements, but in cultivating a spirit of moderation in our very wishes. Most contrary to this is a species of patriotism, which consists in inverting the natural course of our feelings, in being afraid of our neighbour's prosperity, and rejoicing at his misfortunes. We should be ashamed to say, My neighbour's house was burnt down last night, I am glad of it; I shall have more custom to my shop. My neighbour, thank God, has broken his arm, I shall be sent for to attend the families in which he was employed; -- but we are not ashamed to say, Our neighbours are weakening themselves by a cruel war, we shall rise upon their ruins. We must act in opposition to the peacemakers; we must hinder them from being reconciled, and blow the coals of discord, otherwise their commerce will revive, and goods may remain in our crammed warehouses. Our neighbours have bad laws and a weak government: Heaven forbid they should change them! for then they might be more flourishing than ourselves. We have tracts of territory which we cannot people for ages, but we must take great care that our neighbour does not get any footing there, for he would soon make them very useful to him. -- Thus do we extend our grasping hands from east to west, from pole to pole; and in our selfish monopolizing spirit are almost angry that the sun should ripen any productions but for our markets, or the ocean bear any vessels but our own upon its broad bosom. We are not ashamed to use that solecism in terms *natural enemies*; as if nature, and not our own bad passions, made us enemies; as if that relation, from which, in private life, flows confidence, affection, endearing intercourse, were in nations only a signal for mutual slaughter; and we were like animals of prey, solitarily ferocious, who look with a jealous eye on every rival that intrudes within their range of devastation -- and yet this language is heard in a christian country, and these detestable maxims veil themselves under the semblance of virtue and public spirit. We have a golden rule, if we will but apply it: it will measure great things as well as small; it will measure as true at the Antipodes, or on the coast of Guinea, as in our native fields. It is that universal standard of weights and measures which alone will simplify all business: Do to others, as ye would that others should do unto you.

There is a notion which has a direct tendency to make us unjust, because it tends to make us think God so; I mean the idea which most nations have entertained, that they are the peculiar favourites of Heaven. We nourish our pride by fondly fancying that we are the only nation for whom the providence of God exerts itself; the only nation whose form of worship is agreeable to him; the only nation whom he has endowed with a competent share of wisdom

to frame wise laws and rational governments. Each nation is to itself the fleece of Gideon, and drinks exclusively the dew of science: but as God is no respecter of persons, so neither is he of nations; he has not, like earthly monarchs, his favourites. There is a great deal even in our thanksgivings which is exceptionable on this account: "God, we thank thee, that we are not like other nations;" -- yet we freely load ourselves with every degree of guilt; but then we like to consider ourselves as a child that is chidden, and others as outcasts.

When the workings of these bad passions are swelled to their height by mutual animosity and opposition, war ensues. War is a state in which all our feelings and our duties suffer a total and strange inversion; a state in which Life dies, Death lives, and Nature breeds Perverse, all monstrous, all prodigious things.

A state in which it becomes our business to hurt and annoy our neighbour by every possible means; instead of cultivating, to destroy; instead of building, to pull down; instead of peopling, to depopulate: a state in which we drink the tears, and feed upon the misery of our fellow-creatures. Such a state, therefore, requires the extremest necessity to justify it; it ought not to be the common and usual state of society. As both parties cannot be in the right, there is always an equal chance at least, to either of them, of being in the wrong; but as both parties may be to blame, and most commonly are, the chance is very great indeed against its being entered into from any adequate cause; yet war may be said to be, with regard to nations, the sin which most easily besets them. We, my friends, in common with other nations, have much guilt to repent of from this cause, and it ought to make a large part of our humiliations on this day. When we carry our eyes back through the long records of our history, we see wars of plunder, wars of conquest, wars of religion, wars of pride, wars of succession, wars of idle speculation, wars of unjust interference; and hardly among them one war of necessary self-defence in any of our essential or very important interests. Of late years, indeed, we have known none of the calamities of war in our own country but the wasteful expense of it; and sitting aloof from those circumstance of personal provocation, which in some measure might excuse its fury, we have calmly voted slaughter and merchandized destruction -- so much blood and tears for so many rupees, or dollars, or ingots. Our wars have been wars of cool calculating interest, as free from hatred as from love of mankind; the passions which stir the blood have had no share in them. We devote a certain number of men to perish on land and sea, and the rest of us sleep sound, and, protected in our usual occupations, talk of the events of war as what diversifies the flat uniformity of life.

We should, therefore, do well to translate this word war into language more intelligible to us. When we pay our army and our navy estimates, let us set down -- so much for killing, so much for maiming, so much for making

windows and orphans, so much for bringing famine upon a district, so much for corrupting citizens and subjects into spies and traitors, so much for ruining industrious tradesmen and making bankrupts (of that species of distress at least, we can form an idea), so much for letting loose the dæmons of fury rapine and lust within the fold of cultivated society, and giving to the brutal ferocity of the most ferocious, its full scope and range of invention. We shall by this means know what we have paid our money for, whether we have made a good bargain, and whether the account is likely to pass -- elsewhere. We must take in too, all those concomitant circumstances which make war, considered as battle, the least part of itself, *pars minima sui*. We must fix our eyes, not on the hero returning with conquest, nor yet on the gallant officer dying in the bed of honour, -- the subject of picture and of song, -- but on the private soldier, forced into the service, exhausted by camp-sickness and fatigue; pale, emaciated, crawling to an hospital with the prospect of life, perhaps a long life, blasted, useless and suffering. We must think of the uncounted tears of her who weeps alone, because the only being who shared her sentiments is taken from her; no martial music sounds in unison with her feelings; the long day passes, and he returns not. She does not shed her sorrows over his grave, for she has never learnt whether he ever had one. If he had returned, his exertions would not have been remembered individually, for he only made a small imperceptible part of human machine, called a regiment. We must take in the long sickness, which no glory soothes, occasioned by distress of mind, anxiety and ruined fortunes. These are not fancy-pictures; and if you please to heighten them, you can every one of you do it for yourselves. We must take in the consequences, felt perhaps for ages, before a country which has been completely desolated, lifts its head again; like a torrent of lava, its worst mischief is not the first overwhelming ruin of towns and palaces, but the long sterility to which it condemns the tract it has covered with its stream. Add the danger to regular governments which are changed by war, sometimes to anarchy, and sometimes to despotism. Add all these, and then let us think when a general performing these exploits, is saluted with "Well done, good and faithful servant," whether the plaudit is likely to be echoed in another place.

In this guilty business there is a circumstance which greatly aggravates its guilt, and that is the impiety of calling upon the Divine Being to assist us in it. Almost all nations have been in the habit of mixing with their bad passions a show of religion, and of prefacing these their murders with prayers and the solemnities of worship. When they send out their armies to desolate a country and destroy the fair face of nature, they have the presumption to hope that the Sovereign of the Universe will condescend to be their auxiliary, and to enter into their petty and despicable contests. Their prayer, if put into plain language, would run thus: God of love, father of all the families of the earth, we are going to tear in pieces our brethren of mankind, but our strength is not equal to

our fury, we beseech thee to assist us in the work of slaughter. Go out, we pray thee, with our fleets and armies; we call them christian, and we have interwoven in our banners and the decorations of our arms the symbols of a suffering religion, that we may fight under the cross upon which our Saviour died. Whatever mischief we do, we shall do it in they name; we hope, therefore, thou wilt protect us in it. Thou, who hast made of one blood all the dwellers upon the earth, we trust thou wilt view us alone with partial favour, and enable us to bring misery upon every other quarter of the globe. -- Now if we really expect such prayers to be answered, we are the weakest, if not, we are the most hypocritical of beings.

Formerly, this business was managed better, and had in it more show of reason and probability. When mankind conceived of their gods as partaking of like passions with themselves, they made a fair bargain with them on these occasions. Their chieftains, they knew, were influenced by such motives, and they thought their gods might well be so too. Go out with us, and you shall have a share of the spoil. Your altars shall stream with the blood of so many noble captives; or you shall have a hecatomb of fat oxen, or a golden tripod. Have we any thing of this kind to propose? Can we make any thing like a handsome offer to the Almighty, to tempt him to enlist himself on our side? Such things have been done before now in the christian world. Churches have been promised, and church lands, -- aye, and honestly paid too; at other times silver shrines, incense, vestments, tapers, according to the occasion. Oh how justly may the awful text be here applied! "He that sitteth in the heavens shall laugh, the Lord shall have them in derision." Christians! I shudder, lest in the earnestness of my heart I may have sinned, in suffering such impious propositions to escape my lips. In short, while we must be perfectly conscious in our own minds, that the generality of our wars are the offspring of mere worldly ambition and interest, let us, if we must have wars, carry them on as other such things are carried on; and not think of making a prayer to be used before murder, any more than of composing prayers to be used before we enter a gambling-house, or a place of licentious entertainment. Bad actions are made worse by hypocrisy: an unjust war is in itself so bad a thing, that there is only one way of making it worse, -- and that is, by mixing religion with it.

These, my friends, are some of the topics on which, standing as a nation this day before the Lord, it will be proper that we should examine ourselves. There yet remains a serious question: How far, as individuals, are we really answerable for the guilt of national sins? For his own sins, it is evident, every man is wholly answerable; for those of aggregate body, it is as evident he can be only answerable in part; and that portion and measure of iniquity, which falls to his share, will be more or less, according as he has been more or less deeply engaged in those transactions which are polluted with it. There is an active and passive concurrence. We give our active concurrence to any

measure, when we support it by any voluntary exertion, or bestow on it any mark of approbation; when, especially, we are the persons for whose sake, and for whose emolument, systems of injustice or cruelty are carried on. The man of wealth and influence, who feeds and fattens upon the miseries of his fellow-creatures; the man in power, who plans abuses, or prevents their being swept away, is the very Jonas of the ship, and ought this day to stand foremost in the rank of national penitents. But there is also a passive concurrence; and this, in common cases, the community appears to have a right to expect from us.

Society could not exist, if every individual took it upon himself not only to judge, but to act from his own judgement in those things in which a nation acts collectively. The law, therefore, which is the expression of the general will, seems to be a sufficient sanction for us, when, in obedience to its authority, we pay taxes, and comply with injunctions, in support of measures which we believe to be hurtful, and even iniquitous; and this, not because the guilt of a bad action, as some fondly imagine, is diluted and washed away in the guilt of a multitude; but because it is a necessary condition of political union, that private will should be yielded up to the will of the public. We shall do well, however, to bear in mind the principle on which we comply, that we may not go a step beyond it.

There are, indeed, cases of such atrocity, that even this concurrence would be criminal. What these are, it is impossible to specify; every man must draw the line for himself. -- I suppose no one will pretend, that any maxims of military subordination could justify the officers of Herod in the slaughter of the children of Bethlehem; and certainly the orders of Louvois, in the Palatinate, and of Catherine de' Medici, on the day of St. Bartholomew, were not less cruel. In our own country, it has been the official duty of magistrates to burn alive quiet and innocent subjects, who differed from them in opinion. Rather than fulfill such duties, a man of integrity will prepare himself to suffer, and a christian knows where such sufferings will be rewarded. -- The honourable delinquency of those who have submitted to be the victims, rather than the instruments of injustice, has ever been held worthy of praise and admiration.

But though, for the sake of peace and order, we ought, in general cases, to give our passive concurrence to measure which we may think wrong, peace and order do not require us to give them the sanction of our approbation. On the contrary, the more strictly we are bound to acquiesce, the more it is incumbent on us to remonstrate. Every good man owes it to his country and to his own character, to lift his voice against a ruinous war, an unequal tax, or an edict of persecution; and to oppose them, temperately, but firmly, by all the means in his power: and indeed this is the only way reformations can ever be brought about, or that government can enjoy the advantage of general opinion.

This general opinion has, on a recent occasion, been sedulously called for, and most of you have complied with the requisition. You, who have on this

occasion given warm and unqualified declarations of attachment to the existing systems, you have done well -- You, who have denounced abuses, and declared your wishes for reform, you have done well likewise, provided each of you has acted from the sincere, unbiassed conviction of his own mind. But if you have done it lightly, and without judgement, worse: if, by any improper influence, you have interfered with the liberty of your neighbour, or your dependent, and caused him to act against his judgement and his conscience -- worse still. If the ferment of party has stirred up a spirit of rancour and animosity among friends and townsmen, or introduced the poison of distrust amidst the freedom and security of social life, we stand this day before the Lord; and if our brother hath ought against us, "let us go first, and be reconciled to our brother, and then come and offer our gift."

If any of us have disturbed or misled weaker minds by exaggerated danger and affected alarm, and, practising on their credulity or their ignorance, have raised passions which it would have better become us to have moderated -- or if, on the other hand, we have cried, "Peace, peace, where there is no peace" -- we are this day before the Lord, let shame and remorse for these practices make a distinguished part of our national humiliation.

Repent this day, not only of the actual evil you have done, but of the evil of which your actions have been the cause. -- If you slander a good man, you are answerable for all the violence of which that slander may be the remote cause; if you raise undue prejudices against any particular class or description of citizens, and they suffer through the bad passions your misrepresentations have worked up against them, you are answerable for the injury, though you have not wielded the bludgeon, or applied the firebrand; if you place power in improper hands, you are answerable for the abuse of that power; if you oppose conciliatory measures, you are answerable for the distress which more violent ones may produce. If you use intemperate invectives and inflammatory declamation, you are answerable if others shed blood. It is not sufficient, even if our intentions are pure; we must weigh the tendencies of our actions, for we are answerable, in a degree at least, for those remote consequences which, though we did not intend, we might have foreseen. If we inculcate the plausible doctrine of unlimited confidence, we draw upon ourselves the responsibility of all the future measures which that confidence may sanction. If we introduce tenets leaning towards arbitrary power, the generations to come will have a right to curse the folly of their forefathers, when they are reaping the bitter fruits of them in future star-chambers, and courts of inquisitorial jurisdiction. If the precious sands of our liberty are, perhaps, of themselves running out, how shall we be justified to ourselves or to posterity, if, with a rash hand, we shake the glass.

If, on the other hand, through vanity, a childish love of novelty, a spirit of perverse opposition, or any motive still more sordidly selfish, we are

precipitated into measures which ought to be the result of the most serious consideration -- if by "foolish talking or jestings, which are not convenient," we have lessened the reverence due to constituted authorities, or slackened the bonds which hold society together; ours is the blame, when the hurricane is abroad in the world, and doing its work of mischief.

The course of events in this country has now, for a number of generations, for a long reach, as it were, or the stream of time, run smooth, and our political duties have been proportionally easy; but it may not always be so. A sudden bend may change the direction of the current, and open scenes less calm. It becomes every man, therefore, to examine his principles, whether they are of that firmness and texture as suits the occasion he may have for them. If we want a light gondola to float upon a summer lake, we look at the form and gliding; but if a vessel to steer through storms, we examine the strength of the timbers, and the soundness of the bottom. We want principles, not to figure in a book of ethics, or to delight us with "grand and swelling sentiments;" but principles by which we may act and by which we may suffer. Principles of benevolence, to dispose us to real sacrifices; political principles, of practical utility; principles of religion, to comfort and support us under all the trying vicissitudes we see around us, and which we have not security that we shall be long exempt from. How many are there now suffering under such overwhelming distress, as, a short time ago, we should have thought it was hardly within the verge of possibility that they should experience! Above all, let us keep our hearts pure, and our hands clean. Whatever part we take in public affairs, much will undoubtedly happen which we could by no means foresee, and much which we shall not be able to justify; the only way, therefore, by which we can avoid deep remorse, is to act with simplicity and singleness of intention, and not to suffer ourselves to be warped, though by ever so little, from the path which honour and conscience approve.

Principles, such as I have been recommending, are not the work of a day; they are not to be acquired by any formal act of worship, or manual of devotion adapted to the exigency; and it will little avail us, that we have stood here, as a nation, before the Lord, if, individually, we do not remember that we are always so.

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