

This past week, my personal devotions passed through the story of David's conquest of Jerusalem (2 Sam. 5). Interestingly enough, the date of 15<sup>th</sup> July during this past week was an important anniversary, for on 15<sup>th</sup> July 1099, Jerusalem fell – not to David – but to the knights of the First Crusade, continuing the seemingly endless “conflict of civilizations” between Islam and Christianity.

The short version of the First Crusade's story goes something like this: a coalition of western forces in loose alliance invaded a Middle Eastern country, relying on superior military force and technology to shock and awe a numerically superior Muslim opponent. After achieving a seemingly decisive victory, the triumphant westerners engaged in nation-building by trying to build a new country / political entity based on the prevailing western political model.

However, for almost 1,000 years after the Crusades, there was little overt interest in the Crusades in either Western Europe or in the Middle East. Western Europe was immersed in internal struggles, climaxing with the Reformation, while Muslims in the Middle East were more likely to remember the devastating impact of the much more recent the Mongol invasions. This started to change with the rise of European nationalism in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, when the crusaders came to be viewed as brave examples of Western military prowess and chivalry. In WWI, the English and German fighter pilots in their Bristol Scouts, Sopwith Pups, Hannovers and Fokkers high above the carnage of the trenches came to view themselves as knights of the air with fancy crosses painted onto their planes.

After World War I, crusader-themed nationalism and imagery was popular with the fascist parties in Europe, but lost its corresponding appeal in wider portions of Western society. It is no surprise that the crusader imagery was so popular with the fascist parties, for the Crusades had been a disaster for the Jews. Wherever the Crusades went, they were accompanied by vicious pogroms across Europe and the Middle East.

Yet, when we look at the main protagonists in the Crusades, we find lessons for ourselves today, for while the main protagonists in the Crusades had distinct religious labels - “Christian” and “Muslim,” they were also primarily Norman and Seljuq.

The Normans were an important mediaeval civilization, but no modern nation claims them as their ancestors, e.g. the Swedes have the Vikings, and the Irish have the Celts, but no nation or sports franchise is named after the Normans. The Normans were essentially Vikings who had settled in northern France (known as Normandy) in the 10<sup>th</sup> Century, settled down, learned French and converted from paganism to a ‘rough and ready’ or ‘quick and dirty’ version of Roman Catholicism before setting off to conquer England (in AD1066), Sicily, Ireland and then the Middle East.

Yet, for all their boasting of chivalry (e.g. as is captured in the famous novel, “Ivanhoe”), the Normans' image among their contemporaries had more to do with Viking barbarity than spiritual piety. In the words of one contemporary abbot, the Normans were men “more apt to destroy than to build the temples of the Lord.” In truth, the Normans showed the reality that religion, like patriotism, is often the refuge of a scoundrel.

Leading the fight against the Norman crusaders were the Seljuqs, a dynasty that entered the Islamic world as mounted warriors who rode in from the steppes of Central Asia. In AD1055, a decade before the Norman conquest of England led by William the Conqueror in AD1066, the Seljuqs seized control of Baghdad, becoming the rulers of the Abbassid Caliphate and much of the Middle East for 50 years before the Norman Crusaders headed for Jerusalem.

Like the Normans, the Seljuqs did not enjoy the best of reputations among their fellow Muslims. Consider the reported words of Ahmad ibn Fadlan. He included among the Seljuqs' vices "the shamelessness of their women, who were always unveiled, and their brazenly exposing their pudenda," their "general aversion to water and washing" and the fact that the men "never took off their garments, which became encrusted with dirt, until they frayed away and disintegrated."

As it happened, both the Normans and the Seljuqs were eager to make up for their lack of pious credentials. For the Normans, accepting Christianity, even if nominally at first, was an essential step to them being allowed to both settle in northern France and then gain wider social acceptance in western Christendom. Building huge cathedrals in centuries-long building projects became a crucial strategy to gain acceptance as a respectable part within their new society. Likewise, when the Seljuqs found themselves trying to rule the Abbassid Caliphate without any legitimate claim to descent from the Prophet Muhammad, they had to reinvent themselves as the true defenders of the Sunni faith, sponsoring conservative religious schools to bolster their image.

Some of the warriors who fought in the Crusades were probably simple hypocrites, while others were almost certainly completely convinced by their own religious rhetoric. But in either case, exploiting the rhetorical and booty-filled possibilities of a holy war fit nicely with each side's tradition of self-promotional piety.

As we reflect this week on the events of the First Crusade, and the anniversary this past week of the conquest of Jerusalem by Norman crusaders, we realize that humanity as a whole has not lost its ability to cloak base motives with religious language and self-justification. The events in the Middle East over the past few months show us that this tendency is alive today as it was 1,000 years ago.

Yet, in our own lives, we must also beware the tendency to dress up our own base motives with fancy theological justifications, religious language, and calculated self-justification. It is easy to convince ourselves that our motives are pure, that we act only out of selfless love for A N Other, yet I have learned in my own life that if I am honest with myself, I can never be completely sure of my own motivation. Sometimes I convince myself that my motives are pure, but this is often a self-deception, and when I take time to reflect, I realize the bottom line is that I cannot ultimately be sure what my true motivation is. Whether a course of action is morally defensible or not, I find that my heart deceives both myself and itself, leaving me in a quandary about my true motives and ultimately the morality of given course of action.

So, I am drawn to the writings of David, the first recorded conqueror of Jerusalem, who wrote in Ps. 139.23-24, "Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my thoughts; see if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting." Like David, I cannot read

the motions of my own heart, but God does – for only He can read the motions of a self-deceiving heart. And through this psalm, the Holy Spirit is inviting me to open myself to the cleansing and sanctifying work of God on my heart, trusting Him to lead me through all the decisions and steps of life. If I fail to give God the throne of my heart, than like Normans and Seljuqs I may find myself cloaking base motives with a religious veneer, and the inevitable result will be alienation and violence. Thus, as we reflect on the anniversary of the conquest of Jerusalem by the First Crusade, the question we must ultimately ask is not whether Norman or Seljuq sat on the throne of Jerusalem, but whether God or I sit on the throne of my heart.