Sunday January 25, 1981

"IN GOD WE TRUST" Psalm 46, I Timothy 2:1-4, Romans 12:14-21

The headlines and news stories of this past week have given us all much to think and talk about! Fifty-two Americans are no longer held hostage and will return to this country today. The 40th President of the United States has officially been sworn into office and is on the job. In the coming weeks, we'll be hearing more and more about both major events as details are filled in.

This morning let's reflect together on these two events and try to understand and respond as Christians.

1. In the case of the former hostages, as Christians and as Americans, our first response is that of thanksgiving. We are thankful that all are safe and that the return was accomplished as non-violently as possible considering the explosive nature of the situation.

In the midst of our gratitude and joy because of the return of the 52 Americans, there is also sadness. We don't want to forget the eight men who lost their lives in the rescue attempt last year.

2. Secondly, we're thankful to the Algerian government for all of its efforts in helping to bring the negotiations to a conclusion. The Algerian diplomats have been working quietly and patiently for many months and have done this difficult work with distinction. We are also grateful to a number of other nations for their support of our government and their help in arranging for the complicated transfer of Iranian assets. It's encouraging to see many different nations work toward a peaceful solution of a problem that could've exploded into major war.

3. Personally I was very proud of our country and our government these past months for the extreme patience we displayed. When dealing with a country in which it's difficult to know who's in charge and which did its best to wear out our patience, we came out the winner. I think we gained a great deal of respect in the long run with our calmness and forbearance.

4. In addition to our thanksgiving and joy, as Christians we are also to remember not to seek vengeance. In the

coming weeks, we'll be hearing much more about the bad treatment of our citizens while being held hostage. Many will want to seek revenge. Some of our leaders will try to outdo each other with their statements of condemnation. And it's difficult for all of us to handle our feelings of outrage.

St. Paul's words to the church in Rome in a similar situation will be hard for us to hear. "Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Repay no one evil for evil, but take thought of what is noble in the sight of all. . . Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God; for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.' No, if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals upon his head. Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."

I know that it sounds strange and difficult for us, but our Christian faith teaches us to pray for our enemies. In these coming days, we are all called upon to pray for the Iranians. It's now a confused and dis-organized nation. Its ultimate peace and stability will benefit us all.

More than anything else we need to keep a sense of perspective in our hate and anger. We need to beware of over-stating the case. Former President Carter said in describing the past 444 days, that never before in our history have so many prayers been made, as were offered for the hostages.

Who keeps accurate statistics on prayers said. I'm sure that during World War II, with millions of young men being sent to war, the number of prayers by wives, mothers and other family members was considerable.

And then one of the television commentators said, "I can't think of anything to compare with what the hostages have been through. Mike Royko in his column carried in the Lincoln Star noted that without taking anything away from the returned hostages, he could think of lots of things that were comparable--the Bataan Death March in World War II, the terrible brainwashing of prisoners in the Korean war, and the cruelty to prisoners in the Vietnam War.

Our Christian faith reminds us to keep a sense of perspective. Because we can now see most events immediately on television, we have a tendency to over-dramatize. A deep sense of gratitude is the best antidote to over-reaction. Praying for our enemies as well as our friends will also help.

The second major event which occupied our thoughts this week was the inauguration of the 40th president of the United States, Ronald Reagan.

As I watched the orderly and dignified transfer of power from one administration to another, I was deeply thankful for our system of government in which we can change our leaders peacefully. In too many countries even today, governments are changed mainly by brute force and bloodshed. As Christians and as citizens of this country we are thankful for the Constitution which governs us and for the traditions which support our way of governing ourselves.

In addition to thanksgiving, a second response of Christians to government is to be that of praying regularly for our leaders. In his letter to Timothy in the New Testament, St. Paul reminds us, "First of all then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions and thanksgivings be made for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life, godly and respectful in every way."

As Christians we recognize the need for orderly government. Reinhold Niebuhr said, "Man's capacity for justice makes democracy possible; man's capacity for injustice makes democracy necessary."

According to our faith, those who call themselves Christian are to take a positive attitude toward the order-creating functions of civil government because in and through them the providence of God is at work in preserving essential conditions for human life; and that the state should be kept in bounds and not be allowed to usurp the place of God. Without government of some kind, even bad government, society would fall into anarchy and the warning against anarchy is one of the most persistent themes and emphases in all Christian thinking about government.

Above all in these days when government is so much on our minds, and when we are justified in being proud of our country and our way of government, we need at the same time to remember that God is our refuge and our strength, not any government. Even our money reminds us--"In God we Trust!"

To say that we trust in God above all else is to acknowledge God's sovereignty over all things and God's judgement on our nation as well as all other nations and the whole creation.

To say, "In God we Trust," reminds us that God does not officially endorse any one kind of political or economic system, but that God uses and judges them all. God is not a captitalist, or a socialist, or a communist; nor is God a democrat or a republican; nor for that matter is God a Christian, or a Moslem, or a Jew. God is God.

To trust in God means that God transcends and judges all political and economic systems in their performance of providing liberty and justice to human beings.

To say that we trust in God is a constant reminder that we are not to make the nation or a political process, or a particular party platform our God. The first Commandment is, "I am the Lord your God, you shall have no other Gods before me." There is a sharp difference between patriotism and nationalism. Love of country is proper and to be desired. That's good patriotism. Nationalism however, is the kind of belief that one's country can never be wrong or make a mistake and that we are always better than anyone else.

To trust in God is to realize that our governmental leaders of whatever political party will make mistakes and will be influenced by self-interest and that we will never be ultimately saved by a particular political philosophy or governmental policy.

To say, "In God we Trust" is to say that there is no ultimate meaning to life or to anything if we look only to human roots and causes. God is our refuge and our strength. a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear though the earth should change.

We are called by our Christian faith not to a superficial patriotism which has as its foundation a narrow nationalism or military might, but rather as Christians, our patriotism is based on a profound sense of gratitude to God for this country and a government which is based on the consent of the governed.

Anytime a political movement or nation or political party is convinced that it has the final solution for humanity's problems and that if given power it can put that solution into effect, it has a rationalization for any ruthless or tyrannical shortcuts in order to gain power and maintain power. This very optimism about its social scheme goes with a blindness to its own temptations as a movment to misuse power and to the realities of its own corruption. This is the ultimate tragedy of Communism.

C.S. Lewis once said, "Of all tyrannies, a tyranny exercised for the good of its victims may be the most oppressive. It may be better to live under robber-barons than under omnipotent moral busy-bodies. The robber-baron's cruelty may sometimes sleep, his cupidity at some point be satiated; but those who torment us for our own good will torment us without end, for they do so with the approval of their own conscience."

In God we Trust! Abraham Lincoln humbled himself before the sovereignty of God as the Transcendent God of history, as the God of righteousness and mercy. His religion was not the worship of a God who is only on the side of one nation or on one side of a cause. His recognition that good and devout people on both sides of the civil war prayed to the same God and that the will of God was not identical with the purposes of either party or any nation meant for Lincoln, that humility and mercy need to accompany our commitment to what we believe is right.

We need that kind of God-centered focus; that vital sense of dependence upon the sustaining power and mercy of God; that vital sense of human limits and realism about human corruption, including our own, in the face of the holiness of God. To trust in God means the celebration and glorification of the Majestic Power that creates, sustains, limits and creates possibilities for all of life in creation.

Join with me now in the prayer printed on your orderof worship.