

The Evangelical Mind

A Politician as a Nursing Father

By Richard Mouw

The political leader must be a "nursing father." That was a surprising image that I ran across a few years ago, when I was studying the political views of 17th-century Scottish Presbyterian theologians.

What caught me off guard was not only the striking imagery but also the context in which it appeared. These Calvinist writers were not especially fond of gentle formulations. They certainly did not seem otherwise given to the language of nurture. They were pretty stern folks who did not go out of their way to use words that evoked pictures of intimate relationships. And yet in this one instance, they employed the language of tenderness in describing the duties of political leadership.

Presidential inauguration ceremonies in the United States are also good opportunities for a change of tone. Even if the shift of mood is only temporary, it is healthy to declare a "time out" in order to remind ourselves of the larger purposes that we serve as a nation. In our election campaigns, we devote much energy to the give-and-take of partisan politics. This is the stuff--for all of its obvious excesses--on which a democracy thrives. But it is also necessary on occasion to step back and look at the bigger picture, to reflect together on the ways in which our patterns of governance can promote our common good. It is especially fitting that we do this after what we have experienced as a nation in recent months.

The period of Scottish history that I was studying was a time of much turmoil. My Calvinist writers were involved in major disputes with Roman Catholics and Anglicans--and even with other Presbyterians!--and the arguments often took the form of quite violent struggles for political power. Any form of political compromise was, as one of the Presbyterians put it, "an abomination." In his scheme of things, toleration was...well, it was intolerable.

These folks liked the Old Testament, and they drew heavily from its pages in expressing their political views. Their God was a divine Ruler who wanted his chosen people, his "new Israel," to conform to standards not unlike those that he required of the ancient Israelites. If the Scottish nation did not live up to those standards, then the country was in deep trouble. Thus the revealing title of one of the works that I read: "The Causes of God's Wrath Against Scotland."

But then, in the midst of all of this harsh rhetoric, there were these occasional references to breast-feeding in political life. One writer, for example, criticized a particular king because he failed to be a "nursing father." And another insisted that God requires kings to serve their nations as "fathers, nurses, protectors, [and] guides."

Here, too, these Presbyterian divines were showing that they took their Old Testament loyalties very seriously. They were drawing on some obscure imagery that is used on only a few occasions in the King James Version of the Old Testament. The breast-feeding image is applied to royalty twice in the book of Isaiah, and these Calvinist writers undoubtedly had these references in mind: "And kings shall be thy nursing fathers, and their queens thy nursing mothers" (49:23); "Thou...shalt suck the breast of kings" (60:16).

This is not the kind of imagery that most preachers these days would choose to feature in their sermon titles. But it is not a bad idea to keep it in mind when we see the very public ceremonies of leadership transition in the United States. On this one point at least, we can learn something from the political instincts of these old Presbyterian writers. Here is the basic point: God wants political leaders to be nurturers.

Psalm 72 uses a slightly different nurturing image. The description here is of a righteous king: "He shall come down like rain upon the mown grass: as showers that water the earth" (v. 6). This is said in a context where the psalm writer is celebrating the reign of a king who cares about the poor and wants to "save the children of the needy" (v. 4).

The United States is not a monarchy. To draw the proper parallel from the Old Testament texts to our own context is to think of our three branches of national government--the president and his Cabinet, the Congress, the courts--collectively as the "king" who is obligated to "feed" the nation. This is not about food handouts, of course--although that may be required in some circumstances. The feeding here is a nurturing spirit that cares about the well-being of all the people, with special attention to "the needy." Governments are obliged by God to foster a climate of peace and righteousness for all the people.

Obviously, there is much to debate here about what this means in terms of practical policy. Those are good debates to have. I have changed my mind on policy matters many times in my adult life--and I continue to argue these matters, not only with other people, but even in my own mind and heart. The issues of public peace and righteousness are complex ones. And unlike many of my Calvinist ancestors, I know that I have to cultivate a healthy spirit of tolerance in the pluralistic society in which I live.

But I do want governments to nurture, to promote a caring spirit, and to call all of us to recognize the need to work for a common good. The ceremonies of national transition are good occasions for reminding ourselves of this need. In a democracy, we are all part of the government. Our national ceremonies remind us of fundamental obligations as citizens. As we inaugurate a new leadership team, the nursing-parent image is a good one for "we, the people," to keep in mind.