No Cost Too Dear

By Paul Gounelle

What I am inviting you to see today is “the Desert,” a gathering of Huguenots (French Protestants of the 16th to 18th centuries), poor hunted people, persecuted for their faith, who having no church, have come to worship God in the silence of nature, to sing their psalms under the stars. Such meetings were forbidden. Those who risked attending them were in danger of prison, the galleys or death. Nearly all were held at night.

On the arrival of some wandering preacher, on whose head a price had often been fixed, messages were sent about the country secretly, to the scattered farmhouses, calling the faithful together. Some had to travel thirty or forty kilometers, over twisting and rude roads. When they passed near villages they extinguished their lanterns and took off their iron-studded shoes, so as to make no noise. The wheels of the carts that bore the old and the sick to the meetings were muffled with cloths. They traveled singly so as not to attract attention.

In the designated places they sat in rows on the grass or on stones, pine torches giving them light. An improvised stand was hastily erected on which the preacher preached in robe and bands. Sentinels on hilltops gave the alarm at the least suspicious noise, for too often the king’s dragoons, conducted by some spy, attacked these assemblies, striking right and left, killing or dragging the pitiable company before cruel judges.

Yet in spite of all, these gatherings were often very numerous according to statements of the time, up to 1,200, 2,000 and even more listeners. And they were held during a whole century, until the Edict of Tolerance of 1787.

How solemn were the preacher’s descriptions of the riches of God’s salvation and the splendors of the heavenly land to these poor people deprived of earthly rights and property. These assemblies represented a piety with danger and they accepted the danger. We content ourselves too often with an easy faith, one costing little.

“If anyone will come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross” (Luke 9:23). Our Huguenots understood that! According to a saying by Pascal, “Nothing was too dear for them when Eternity was in question.” “No peril,” said one of them, “is too great compared with the soul and its growth in grace.”

There were old men in these meetings whose sons had been taken from them, women whose husbands were in the galleys and whose sisters were in the dungeons of the Tour de Constance. A reward of 500 livres, more that 10,000 francs, fell to any betraying them.

It was just this dangerous fidelity which made so living this wilderness worship. If in those days you were after true piety, you would not find it in the sermons of court preachers, in the brilliant and worldly ceremonies of the official churches, but in those proscribed gatherings of

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humble Christians ready to die for their faith, whose prayers and sobs rose in the night and whose psalms, echoing in the rocky ravines, set forth before God their joy and their grief.

These meetings teach us that no power on earth can reduce a living piety to silence. Forests took the place of destroyed churches. Faithful laymen filled with the Spirit, replaced exiled pastors. The Church of the Reformation, from which they thought to take away all possibility of continuance, grew, re-established its meetings, celebrated marriages, baptisms and the Communion.

And what love for the Bible those meetings exhibited! The sermons they listened to constantly quoted it. They loved it, spoke its inspired language, knew no other wisdom of eloquence.

More than one old Bible, preserved in some Cevenol farmhouse, especially worn at the Psalms, the Prophets, the Apocalypse, still retain on certain pages the marks of rain – or of tears! They had been carried to the desert meetings.

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