

Pastoral Message, 3 July 2019

I do not believe that any of us would exchange places with any other people or any other generation. The energy, the faith, the devotion we bring to this endeavor will light our country and all who serve it and the glow from that fire can truly light the world. (John F. Kennedy, Inaugural Address, January 20, 1961)

Patriotism, like other kinds of love, finds its true nourishment in the still places of the soul, in the hidden chambers of the heart, not in our mouths. (Donald H. Moffat, Introduction to Fair Is Our Land, 1942)

*My boundaries enclose a pleasant land;
indeed, I have a goodly heritage. (Psalm 16:6)*

My Dear Friends in Christ,

Recently, I came across an old letter an English professor had sent me following the killing of four students by National Guardsmen at Kent State University in May of 1970. I had been a freshman at Kent that spring when the anti-war protests resulting in their deaths had occurred, and was now home, not sure if I or anyone would be returning there come the fall. He and the other faculty, he told me, were being directed by the registrar to contact their students and arrange a process by which we could complete our coursework even though the school had closed down “a way to ‘receive live credit from a dead university,’” as he bitterly put it.

My professor went on to describe the eerie silence that had descended on the campus since its closing, broken only by the sound of grounds crews, in his words, “washing the blood off the sidewalks” around the commons where the shootings had taken place. Although deeply shaken by what had happened, he tried to strike a hopeful note reminding me of a poem we had discussed in class, about one who had needed emotionally and spiritually to walk away from a condition of pain and confusion in order to gain the distance and somehow acquire the wisdom to better understand it. “So, I’m walking away for a while,” he wrote; “but I plan to return and to join all of you someday again . . . wiser, I trust, and saner, and braver.”

I took his words to heart, and also ‘walked away’ for a while concentrating on my summer job, meeting with friends in the evenings, and reading books that seemed to address the political struggle and social ferment going on around me, as well as those classics that spoke of the sometimes tragic, sometimes triumphant human journey (everything from *Les Misérables* to *The Grapes of Wrath!*). In response to the many negative (and some truly vicious) articles in our local paper castigating my fellow students specifically and young people in general, I even wrote a Letter to the Editor that I titled “Silence will not do now, nor anger.” It’s true, I had the luxury to experience all of this in the security and peace of my white suburban setting; but I was grateful nonetheless for the gift of time and thought.

And at some point, I picked up the Gospels and began reading them again, but as though for the first time. Fueled by a growing love of literature, I found in Jesus' teaching, and especially in the parables, a powerful redeeming narrative of forgiveness, compassion, service and sacrifice that, if faithfully followed, might make a difference in the course of a person's life, and in the course of a nation's life. Indeed, I saw in our Lord's suffering and death, and in his Resurrection, a pattern for my own bleeding country's ultimate renewal a pathway out of hatred and division, a road leading to reconciliation and peace.

By this time, of course, many of my youthful heroes were gone, among them Martin Luther King and Bobby Kennedy. But others would take their place people like Maya Angelou and Nelson Mandela. More importantly, though, by grace I came to see my own role smaller, no doubt, and not as public as theirs as serving to advance some of the same goals they had worked for. So, I committed myself to be a teacher which in time I became. I joined others in political action (which most of the time involved the unglamorous work of knocking on doors, making phone calls, and stuffing envelopes for candidates I thought could offer healing to America). And all along I harbored the yet unfulfilled desire of bringing the truth of the Gospel I had only lately rediscovered to a world as hungry for it as I was. I'm sure it was during this period that I first imagined a calling to the priesthood.

I relate this personal history not solely for the sake of dwelling on the past, but because so much of the character and spirit of that past both in its anguish and its promise, its fears and its courage are still prevalent today in America. And, for that matter, so much of the mind and heart of that bewildered, searching young college kid is still a part of the old teacher now old pastor that he became. So, in this current era of bitter division, of social and racial strife, I find myself still hungry for the truth of the Gospel, still yearning to proclaim and share it in all its radical, joyful, transforming glory. It is what we need and should yearn for above all things, now more than ever.

Yet still the doubts remain, and the searching continues. And the questions persist. How can I be sure that the message I'm speaking is about Christ and not about me that it's truly proclamation and not just self-projection? Is what I'm saying based on my own political views and prejudices, or are my words honestly seeking to echo what I believe Jesus in fact would say? The longest walk I've ever taken is the one I take each Sunday to the pulpit, knowing what I've composed and practiced and prayed over, yet still wondering: Am I missing something?

I'm certain that I'll never be able to answer those questions completely; and even if I could it would not be to the satisfaction of all. I realize that what I've said and written on occasion has inspired and encouraged some and has hurt and angered others. Like nearly every preacher I know, I too wish my words could be greeted with unanimous approval! But, of course, they can't, and maybe it's better that they are not. As Robert Frost said, "Something has to be left to God." So my constant prayer is that the Jesus of the Gospel I love will fill in those places that I have left empty or unfinished, that he will correct those things that I have missed or misused, for your sake and for mine, and for

the sake of the Gospel. I pray that he will continue to show us the light of his countenance shining through the darkness of these times and past the boundaries of our understanding. I pray that he will make us in the end (as my English teacher had once hoped for himself) “wiser and saner and braver.”

And that is my prayer as well for our country, on this eve of our national holiday. For all of America’s flaws, for its many sins past and present, I would not (as President Kennedy observed) trade places with anyone else in the world. While by no means free of the pain and suffering that afflicts other nations and peoples, I believe this country is uniquely blessed by its ability to look beyond its own struggles, its own contradictions, and see again a vision larger and stronger than itself. Perhaps this is what is meant by the American Dream. Many, I know, will disagree. Yet is there another country on earth in which a descendant of slaves can stand before a throng of his fellow citizens, black and white, in a time of great national decision (as Dr. King did in Washington over fifty years ago) and invoke the words of a man who in his time would have kept him a slave yet words that now ring with a pure and distinct power, words that by the grace of God have long since taken on a life of their own “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men [all persons] are created equal”?

Holding on to these ageless truths, then, with both hand and heart, honoring the promise that is America all that it can be if we seek to make it so and grateful for the gifts God in his mercy and love has showered upon us, let us rightly rejoice in our celebrations tomorrow and through the weekend. But let our joy be mixed always with resolve that the same liberties we expect for ourselves, the same generosity the world admires in us, the same opportunities we have received, we will afford to all those who live and work and dream in our land.

Abundant Blessings and Happy Fourth!
Fr. Gordon +