

Rector's Reflection 13 February 2019

My Dear Friends in Christ,

To me, among the saddest, most poignant words written by nineteenth-century American statesman Frederick Douglass are those that open Ken Burns' 1990 documentary of the Civil War:

"In thinking of America, I sometimes find myself admiring her bright blue sky, her grand old woods, her fertile fields, her beautiful rivers, her mighty lakes and star-crowned mountains. But my rapture is soon checked when I remember that all is cursed with the infernal spirit of slaveholding and wrong. When I remember that with the waters of her noblest rivers, the tears of my brethren are borne to the ocean, disregarded and forgotten; that her most fertile fields drink daily of the warm blood of my outraged sisters, I am filled with unutterable loathing."

When I consider this passage and the imagery it evokes, my mind goes back to my own early awakening to the beauty of nature and to my place in God's created world. As a boy living as I did in harmonic white middle-class seclusion, never fearing what the next day would bring, never anticipating the next threatening look or word, I could bask in my youthful love with a sense of serenity and peace. It never occurred to me that there were others who might have enjoyed or could be enjoying similar pleasures to mine; but because of the color of their skin, and the cultural and economic circumstances that derived from that fact, were daily denied access to the full joy of life that God desires for all his children.

It's not that my love was misplaced or misguided; it was that circumstances prevented many children my age from sharing in such feelings, a condition that would persist into their adulthood and throughout their lives. So too with Frederick Douglass' attraction to his native land: his genuine affection would always be tempered by the knowledge that America's glories were maintained through the oppression of other human beings. Added to the occupational horrors of slavery was the perpetual exclusion of the slave from the emotional and aesthetic enjoyment of the treasures of God's earth. While much progress has been made since Douglass' time, we know that conditions of exclusion and oppression, and systemic racism itself, still mar the prospect of what should be a mutual, abiding joy.

Remarkably, though indeed, miraculously African-Americans have returned gifts of their own to a nation that has consistently demeaned and rejected them. In the diverse fields of science, medicine, literature, music, entertainment, and athletic achievement, in all areas of endeavor Americans of color against enormous odds and confronting often savage resistance have contributed to the welfare, beauty, and prosperity of this country. And as military men and women serving in every American conflict since the Revolution, they have sought to preserve the freedom of their countrymen even when their own freedom has remained imperiled.

February is African-American history month a time devoted to the celebration of the achievements of citizens of color who have labored with devotion and skill in the service of humankind and for the good of all. As we honor their courageous work, let us also remember the immense cost of their labors, in lives that perished under the weight of a brutal history lives whose achievements we might also be celebrating this month but that were denied the chance to make a difference. And so let us pledge ourselves to the unfinished task of healing those racial wounds that beset and divide us, of insisting that all have an opportunity to rise and succeed, of doing all such things that will bring us closer to fulfillment of the American Dream, closer to the Kingdom of God's love on earth.

Frederick Douglass wrote: "The life of the nation is secure only while the nation is honest, truthful, and virtuous." With God's help, let us strive daily toward those high ideals, while seeking peace with each other and justice for our time.

Many Blessings,
Fr. Gordon +