

**A Time for Strength and Hope**  
**Second Sunday of Pentecost**  
**14 June 2020**

*See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. Matthew 10:16*

Jesus knew life; and he knew the world. Where we ever got this impression of him as some mild-tempered holy man, dispensing gentle wisdom divorced from everyday struggle, I don't know. He was anything but such a dreamy figure. Had he been, those rough and ready fishermen wouldn't have stayed with him a single day. And the crowds that flocked to listen to him, to hang on his every word, would have quickly deserted him had he given them only platitudes, only milk toast answers to their painful questions, pious noise in the face of fear and uncertainty.

Jesus told it like it is. And no where more so than in the sending forth of his disciples, as Matthew describes it in today's Gospel. For he knew finally that it was not enough for his followers to be good; they had also to be strong. He knew that the greatest danger to a life devoted to ministry which is the Christian's life's work in the world is not so much spiritual doubt as it is that same world's resistance to the truth we seek to bring.

Indeed, nearly every encounter Jesus has, nearly every occasion for his teaching and healing are moments marked by conflict or controversy all the way to the cross. Hardly a chapter in the gospels goes by without him being hounded and challenged and tested by those who seek his silencing and, ultimately, his destruction. But he will have none of it. He will not be dissuaded or deterred, bullied or broken in spirit. In his voice, in his touch, in his mind and heart, Jesus is the embodiment of that unshakable moral witness which he expects of each of us.

Still, it's a careful balance that he's advising, isn't it? Being strong doesn't mean adopting worldly power; it doesn't mean matching physical force with physical force, violence with violence. Nor does it mean making a stone of the heart either, becoming as hardened and as cold inside (even for a holy cause) as our would be adversaries would seek to make us. "Be as wise as serpents," is his real-life injunction to the disciples, and to us, "BUT as innocent as doves." I read that as, 'Don't let anyone or anything weaken your commitment; yet don't let anyone or anything rob you of your joy. Be as clever in the spirit as you need to be in spreading the Gospel; but never forget your inheritance, your identity as beloved children of God. Never believe that in gaining more for the kingdom, you must become less than who you are.'

That sounds like very healthy advice for any time or period; but it seems especially relevant at a moment of timely change and ferment that I believe we are now experiencing. If in fact we are at a turning point in our collective history; if we are being called finally to live out the truths of our national creed full equality, full protection, full dignity in law and practice, joined as these are to every moral creed and covenant of faith we hold then we do need such a life strategy as Jesus offers. We do need something like his missionary plan, one that keeps us committed, that keeps us strong that keeps us moving yet one that also keeps us fully attuned to the wonder and beauty, to the innocence and purity, of his message, and to the sudden, surprising grace that is alive all about us, even as it is stirring and growing in us. As Dr. King and all the saints and martyrs of our past have taught us, every great social movement blessed by God, every movement seeking peace with justice is also a movement of the Spirit. It is a redeeming effort; it is an act of Godly love.

Which means it's something we need to be a part of ourselves, in whatever way we might feel called, with whatever gifts we choose to bring. Peaceful protest on the streets of our cities is one way (although in this health crisis we must often balance the risk against the witness). Ceaselessly writing letters or emails to lawmakers demanding reform is another (it sounds old-fashioned but it works). Taking part in forums on race and anti-racism workshops is still another. Through financial donation or volunteerism making the plight of the hungry and homeless in communities around us, of the elderly and the lonely, the poor and the outcast even just a little less painful is but another way of making a difference. It's a start, at least, on the road to deeper, longer-lasting change.

But as great an effort as these is the work also of remaining hopeful. I can't say this enough. In the midst of righteous rage over ancient wrong, and in the face of daily sorrow, a further task for us is to nourish joy, joy in believing, joy in our ability to meet this moment, joy in the sheer number of our fellow citizens who have joined the fight, joy in the power of hope. And hope not as a fragile wish, but as a certain confidence, borne out of what our past has taught us and what God in Christ has offered us, right down to this very minute.

As you know, poetry is the one gift that speaks most powerfully to me, although I think its language and essence is something present in every human soul. I once thought I'd write a book entitled **The Poetry We Seek**. (I may still write it!) But in place of that, I will leave you this morning with the gift, even though it's one I may have proffered before? Perhaps it's a better time for it now? It's a poem about hope, by the great Irish bard Seamus Heaney. It's gotten some public currency lately by being quoted by the former Vice President. Regardless of how others use it, may YOU find in it something of what YOU need to start and finish each day in these desperate days to garner strength and to give praise to God, to be innocent and wise, discerning and loving, to rise up, to rejoice, and to hope. . . .

Human beings suffer.  
They torture one another.  
They get hurt and get hard.  
No poem or play or song  
Can fully right a wrong  
Inflicted and endured.

History says, Don't hope  
On this side of the grave,  
But then, once in a lifetime  
The longed for tidal wave  
Of justice can rise up  
And hope and history rhyme.

So hope for a great sea-change  
On the far side of revenge.  
Believe that a further shore  
Is reachable from here.  
Believe in miracles  
And cures and healing wells.

Call miracle self-healing,  
The utter self revealing  
Double-take of feeling.

If there's a fire on the mountain  
And lightning and storm  
And God speaks from the sky

That means someone is hearing  
The outcry and the birth-cry  
Of new life at its term.  
It means once in a lifetime  
That justice can rise up  
And hope and history rhyme.

Amen.

Blessings,  
Fr. Gordon +