

Pivoting

13TH. AFTER PENTECOST .

30-08-20.

*“Jesus turned and said to Peter, ‘Get behind me, Satan,
You are a stumbling block to me;
you do not have in mind the things of God,
but the things of men.’”
St Matthew 16:23.*

The violent unrest in the U.S state of Wisconsin, following last week’s shooting of Jacob Blake by the police, coincides with my re-reading of a book by Michael Dyson, who is an acclaimed university professor, an ordained Baptist minister; and one of America’s most respected intellectuals. The book is called “Tears We Cannot Stop.” Dyson’s book takes the form of a sermon to white America; and it argues, among other things, that following the 2016 election of Donald Trump as the President of the United States, whom the book describes as “the epitome, not only of white innocence and white privilege; but of white power, white rage, and yes, even of white supremacy”, there has been a greatly stepped-up harassment of people of colour, Muslims, and immigrants. This, says Dyson, points to a sea-change in that great nation’s tolerance for such assaults, in the illicit permission and approval granted to diabolical right-wing forces, including the Ku Klux Klan and other neo-Nazi white supremacy groups, in the USA. So Dyson’s book, which is universally described as being “brilliant”, makes an unapologetically bold plea for America to own up to its inexplicable identity anxiety and, in its pages, Dyson confronts his white audience and reaches out to them with a plea not to harm the nation’s positive racial future.

He argues for what he calls “inexplicable hope in the face of savage hopelessness” and calls on the United States to name and resist demagoguery; And, by peaceful civil rights protest, somehow defeat the dark forces that he believes threaten the very soul of that great nation. Dyson urges all Americans “not to give up even on the possibility that they can make a difference; because trying can, in itself, he says, make the difference. To not even “try”, he goes on, is to give up on the United States complicated, difficult, but victorious past.” Dyson argues that Donald J. Trump is not our final, or ultimate, problem. “The problem is, instead, allowing hopelessness to steal our joyful triumph before we work hard enough to achieve it.”

(In the passing we note that the fifty living Nobel Prize winners (or Laureates) said recently that the ignorance of political leaders was one of their greatest collective concerns for the welfare of the world; and they named President Donald J Trump as a particular problem, and the world has subsequently witnessed, and can make up its own mind, about how that has worked out.

On a much more positive note, I was also reading about Prudence Crandall. Prudence Crandall may sound like the name of a character in a Jane Austen novel, but she was a real-life force of nature in 19th century New England. Crandall started a boarding school for girls in Canterbury, Connecticut, because she was greatly impassioned to raise educated women. One day, she received an application from a young African-American girl named Sarah Harris. Crandall ultimately admitted Harris, creating the first integrated classroom in the United States, (this way before the Civil Rights Movement of the late 1950's and early 1960's. But, as Crandall accepted more and more students of colour into her school; more and more white parents pulled their children out. Local merchants refused to do business with the African-American students, and the townspeople ostracized them and plotted to pass laws that made their education difficult or impossible. Arsonists even set the school on fire, which prompted Crandall to close, for fears that the children's lives would be in danger.

Today we look back on these moments in history with a sense of clarity; we might choose to believe that Crandall, a committed Christian, was inspired by God in her resolute will to teach girls of every colour and race. And we like to believe that, if we were to find ourselves in her position, we would, of course, do the same thing. The problem with this line of thinking is that it takes Crandall's personal agency out of the mix and assumes that the path she took was always the clear and obvious one; and that she had no internal conflict about what educating her girls might cost; and that perhaps a famous composer might provide her with a triumphant soundtrack to reassure her along the way. Most of us, I think, have discovered by now that life does not play out like a Hollywood movie. I'm certain that Prudence Crandall endured many "dark nights of the soul" when she wasn't sure which way she should turn when confronted with powerful and dangerous opponents...

Likewise, God does not often appear to us in "burning bushes" as He did with Moses. When God appears to Moses, Moses has already had quite a life! Born to a Hebrew woman, Moses was left in a river for his own protection, and the Pharaoh's daughter found him and eventually took him as her son. As he grew into a young man, Moses became increasingly disturbed by the way the Egyptians treated the Hebrews and trashed their human rights!

One day, Moses saw an Egyptian beating one of the Hebrews; he intervened and, in the violent, unpredictable stramash, the Egyptian was killed!

For fear that he would be punished for what he had done on behalf of a Hebrew, Moses fled and found a new tribe, a new family.

But one day Moses is going about his business, keeping his father-in-law's flock of sheep, and the angel of the Lord appears to him in a burning bush. Moses leaves the path he is walking to explore the amazing scene, and he finds himself on holy ground.

He encounters God in this place off the path, and God reminds him of the people he left behind. *“I have observed their misery,”* God says. *“I have heard their cry...indeed, I know their sufferings...and I have come to deliver them from the Egyptians.”* Until this moment, and for a while after this moment, Moses was not a radical. When he killed the Egyptian slave-master, it wasn't a well-calculated, pre-meditated, politically-motivated action. He was not, as far as we know, protesting against the Pharaoh. Yet something stirred within Moses, even while his life was all about blending in and surviving. The stirring within him led him to deviate from his path to go where God seemed to be calling him. God met Moses in the midst of his internal conflict and called him to follow a different pathway.

The disciples had a similar encounter with God in Jesus. At some point in their three years together, Jesus starts to reveal that He expects to undergo some significant suffering at the hands of the powers that be. Jesus shares with them that He expects to be killed. His disciples probably react in some of the ways you might expect, but it is Peter who pulls Jesus to the side and rejects these grim predictions. Jesus immediately rejects Peter's resistance to reality saying, *“Get behind me, Satan!”* *“Join the path on which I am walking,”* Jesus seems to say, *“and lose the preoccupation with the way you wanted or expected things to be, and get on board with reality!”*

Sometimes we need to hear the same message, and often it needs to feel like a slap across the face to be effective. *“If you want to change the world, follow Jesus”* is a well-known old-revivalist phrase. Indeed, following Jesus has, does, and will continue to lead us on a path of personal and communal transformation. And, in these challenging days of international insecurity, stress and fear: there is never a more important time to listen through the ears and look through the eyes of our neighbour; If only to see ourselves as we are seen - because *“loving your neighbour”* assumes *“knowing your neighbour”*!

Maybe the day is coming when we will have to decide whose side we are on - the side of light, liberty and hope - or the side of darkness, despair and hopelessness? There is no escaping the changes and chances of this fleeting world; but good, fair-minded people can choose to stand together and fight for the very soul of their nation and their community. It's not we who change the world, however, but, rather, God in Christ Jesus, through the Holy Spirit, who changes us. God sneaks into our inner life and pivots, or turns around, our consciousness. God calls us out of our routines to notice the plight that weighs heavy on God's heart; and the more we follow Jesus; the more we read the gospels; the more we pray and meditate on Jesus' life; the more we will encounter those in need. Then the more the reactionary powers of darkness will feel threatened.

Not only that; the more we seek God; the more God will lead us to face our fears, and face the challenge of risking everything for Jesus' sake. This is what it means to "*take up our cross and follow*" Jesus in our day. To follow Jesus is to go to the place we would not normally go and follow a path that leads to the outsider; and to seek an encounter with the Living God. When we follow that path, we will often find ourselves in very intimidating, even dangerous circumstances; But God is with us, and where we will find ourselves will be on holy ground; and that, as children of the light, will be where we are called to stand and fight the good fight!

LET'S PRAY

Almighty and ever-living God, You are the author and giver of all good things.

*Graft in our hearts the love of Your Name, increase in us true religion,
nourish us with all goodness, and of Your great mercy keep us in the same;*

*Through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with You, Father,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit one God, in glory everlasting.*

Amen.