

*This is a reflection I placed in our parish bulletin over two years ago. There was not much going on in the parish at that time, so I filled our bulletin with short essays. I thought perhaps it would be timely to bring it out again. Peace.*

Reflection – June 5, 2020

When Is Enough, Enough?

In 1963, President John F. Kennedy addressed his nation through a televised speech with these words, “We face, therefore, a moral crisis as a country and as a people. It cannot be met by repressive police action. It cannot be left to increased demonstrations in the streets. It cannot be quieted by token moves or talk. It is time to act in the Congress, in your state and local legislative body and, above all, in all of our daily lives.” Changing people’s behavior is a tricky business, as the president acknowledged that night. That same year, President Kennedy would be assassinated. For the better part of the 1960’s, in the USA and throughout the world, saw a great awakening among the people asking, demanding, for a change to take place in their counties that would reflect a society of genuine inclusivity and equality. President Kennedy acknowledged that “Law alone cannot make men see right.” But, if the law cannot change a man’s soul, perhaps at least it can help rein in his evil intentions. Perhaps.

It is however important to keep in mind, that Kennedy came late to the equal rights movement. It was only at the continual and persistent action of Martin Luther King Jr. and countless thousands of men and women, helped to educate him and others to be open to a change of heart and mind. In line with Kennedy, Martin Luther King Jr. knew that you could not legislate morals. This had to be a real change within the person. King once said, “It may be true that the laws can’t make a man love me, but it can keep him from lynching me, and I think that’s pretty important, also.” He knew that the law was as good as those who would live by it. For this reason, he did not, nor would he place his trust solely in the law, nor in the good will of liberally minded white men and women. Change required change. Martin Luther King Jr. would address the American people in churches, auditoriums, and on the street with a singular message: equality for all, through peaceful means, for lasting peace, for all people. Five of his most memorable and inspiring speeches/letters, protests were:

“I Have a Dream” – Washington, D.C., August 28, 1963,

“Our God is Marching On” – Selma, Alabama, March 25, 1965,

“Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break the Silence” – Riverside Church in New York City, April 4, 1967,

“The Other America” – Stanford University, April 14, 1967,

“I’ve been to the Mountaintop” – Memphis, Tennessee, April 3, 1968

If you have not read them, do so, allowing the words to ring deeply in your souls.

The very next day following his speech “I’ve been to the Mountaintop”, Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated. The struggle, the work, the hopes, and the dreams of equality to bring about the end of racism, bigotry, and all forms of repressive regimes, did not die or end with him. The vision of equality

would be picked up by many, both in the US and throughout the world. To some degree things have changed, somewhat better for some people, but here we find ourselves 57 years later, and racism and bigotry are still with us. It is no longer lurking in the shadows, but is becoming ever more prevalent, despite the laws. The words of Kennedy and King stand as a testimony to the fact that until the minds and hearts of men, women, and children everywhere, change, reflecting a true and genuine respect for the other, then we can expect the continuation and likely proliferation of the degradation and the humiliation of others.

As frightening and revolting as the images of the blatant murder of George Floyd may have been, we forced ourselves to watch. But what may be as equally disheartening, is that within a month or so, most people will have become de-sensitized to what had taken place, because we all want to get back to 'normal'. My dear friends, if normal means we actively choose to no longer be disturbed by what we saw and heard, but instead attempt to return to a practice of distracting ourselves with the mundane so we can get on with living, how could this ever be considered normal?

Let us put aside for a moment, that we may be people of a religious or faith tradition and instead recognize that what we hold in common is the basic fact that we are all human beings. If we would but make the effort to truly appreciate the implications of this fact, perhaps our focus would shift from what divides us, to instead that which we hold in common, realizing that this is in greater abundance. The result would be that anything that would contribute to the inhumane treatment of another, would become repulsive to us. In turn, we would no longer tolerate within ourselves, a state of denial and ignorance regarding the hateful treatment of another person. What must come to an end is our preference for a life that prefers insular safety by turning a blind eye.

We are instead to become informed and confronted with our own level of bigotry, racism, and prejudice so that we may be moved to action. It was Edmund Burke who once wrote, "The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men [and women] to do nothing" (my parenthesis). Doing nothing is something. Our silence and inaction are giving consent. It was Dietrich Bonhoeffer who wrote while living under the Nazi regime in Germany that, "Silence in the face of evil is itself evil: God will not hold us guiltless. Not to speak is to speak. Not to act is to act." We are long past the time for making excuses. It is now for us to be mindful and to make intentional deliberation as to what we truly value. These values are to inform our beliefs, which must in due season, come to fruition in our daily living.

Pity and helplessness, however, are allowed to exist in societies that settle for mediocrity and apathy. We come to believe and accept, that this is as good as it gets, or that it has always been this way. We may even go so far as to allow ourselves to feel fortunate, that these tragedies are not happening in our own backyard. The world is our backyard. The disenfranchised, belittled and victims of any and all forms of poverty and violence are our neighbour. The muzzled voices and shackled limbs of those victimized by hatred, are our sisters, brothers, and children. When we can move from the "us and them" mindset to accepting that we are all one, and that when one suffers, we all suffer, together. It is then in that moment that change becomes a possibility. What is also essential is to abandon the disempowering mindset that the problem is too big, or 'what can one person possibly do to bring about change?'

I am reminded of a song by Peter Gabriel, “Biko”, which recalls the true story of a black, South African man, Steven Biko, who challenged the Apartheid Regime. He was brutally tortured and murdered for the sole crime of speaking out against injustice. In this song, we are reminded that the efforts of one person may be what it takes to begin the undoing of an evil:

*“You can blow out a candle  
But you can't blow out a fire  
Once the flames begin to catch  
The wind will blow it higher ...  
And the eyes of the world are watching now, watching now” (Peter Gabriel)*

The eyes of the world are not just watching those who have committed such crimes against humanity. They are also watching those of us who remain idle. Let us take to heart the words of Mahatma Gandhi “be the change you wish to see in the world.” The time is now. Let the fire of justice and mercy rise up within us all – you may silence a person, but you cannot silence truth. The more we accept this truth within our hearts, this fire will catch on, and more of us will stand united, in love and mutual respect for all people, everywhere. To the degree we incarnate this love and mutual respect in all of our daily lives, then the change has begun. Let us not lose hope but persevere.

pah