

From the Rector; Thursday, February 5, 2009
Reflection

Had Lincoln practiced politics in our day, he would have felt more comfortable with the discourse of “principles” than that of “values”. “Principles”, in my view, stem from observation and the use of reason, while “values” derive from intimacy with God, access to the divine Word. Lincoln advocated for a secular religion of devotion to law and reason, and the “principles” this religion engenders were his meat and potatoes.

Until the issue of slavery came to a head. The middle ground narrowed into non-existence, and an apocalyptic struggle loomed. As he presided over that struggle, and took the nation’s suffering into his own person, Isaiah’s words may have come into Lincoln’s mind: “My thoughts are higher than your thoughts, says the Lord, and my ways higher than your ways.” In any case, we hear Isaiah’s insight in the Second Inaugural: “The Almighty has His own purposes”, different from ours.

Talk of “values” might have made Lincoln squeamish under any circumstances, given his reticence about claiming any sort of intimacy with God, and he never lost his loyalty to reason and principle. But he came to understand that these guiding lights of the human enterprise are not, in themselves, sufficient. God’s mysterious providence must complete their work. Sometimes it even destroys the fruits of reason and principle, that something new might come to birth, Lincoln believed he saw something like this “creative destruction”, so characteristic of God’s ways with us, in the blood and fire of the Civil War.

From the Rector; Thursday, February 12, 2009
Reflection

Cain slew Abel for no reason, The Bible says he did it because God favored Abel’s offering over his, but this sounds less like a judgment by the Almighty than a pretext or rationalization devised by Cain himself. Violent impulses beset Cain and, out in the field with his brother and no one else, he could not or would not resist them.

The military historian von Clausewitz says violence, in the form of warfare, is a last resort: “the continuation of politics by other means”, undertaken only when political means fail. His paradigm, in my view, cannot account for Cain’s eruption.

A later historian of warfare, John Keegan, disagrees with von Clausewitz. His writings insist that violence is a primary human impulse, a first resort. We know, instinctively, that Keegan is right, and labor mightily to constrain the impulse he identifies. We number institutions, laws, the arts, and religion among the fruits born by this unwelcome knowledge, and the sometimes desperate labor it engenders. Genesis records that the civilization-building impulse kicked into high gear after Cain murdered his brother.

Civil War combat made the deepest of impressions on Abraham Lincoln. Called to service by their leaders, Americans maimed and killed each other with shocking savagery. Lincoln’s cherished “religion of reason and law” could not constrain the primordial impulse to violence that the war had unleashed. Only a goal admitting of no compromise, no negotiated settlement, no search for common ground, could redeem this bloody struggle. From this recognition came the Emancipation Proclamation, which set the war effort and the nation on a trajectory toward the abolition of slavery. Once the Proclamation was promulgated, the war ceased to be a continuation of politics by other

means, and became a revolutionary and apocalyptic struggle. Perhaps only a leader possessed of a tragic, even Biblical understanding of the human capacity for violence, and therefore a deep antipathy to this sort of struggle, has the moral stature to lead one. One sees in Lincoln's face, as its contours were recorded during his Presidency, that he was just this sort of leader.

From the Rector; Thursday, February 19, 2009

Reflection

Lincoln believed that slavery, though confined to certain states, was not a sectional but a national problem. No part of the country could hold itself at arm's length from this scourge.

We recognize Lincoln's reasoning in the issues facing communities much smaller than a nation. One family member's problem is, by definition, every family member's problem, especially if the family lives under one roof and, often, even if it doesn't. The hard question is this one: when is someone else's problem not only my problem, but my business? For a long time, Lincoln thought Southern slavery both implicated and affected the North, but did not call for Northern intervention. The Constitution, he believed, had set slavery on a course of extinction, and the North should limit its expansion but not seek to extirpate it where it existed. With the move to expand slavery gaining momentum in the 1850's, though, Lincoln started to reconsider his position. By the midpoint of the Civil War, he had changed his mind.

This change cannot have come easily. We all know how hard it is to conclude that someone else's issue not only affects or even implicates me, but also requires me to intervene, to make it my business, and how fraught with danger this decision is. Lincoln's slowness in coming to such a conclusion doesn't evidence a tolerant attitude toward slavery, but a humble wisdom about human affairs that's worthy of study and emulation.

From the Rector; Thursday, February 26, 2009

Reflection

Abraham Lincoln, eminently practical and suspicious of religious excess, believed we do things because doing them serves our interest. He issued the Emancipation Proclamation because it served the national interest, making freed slaves part of the Union war effort and keeping the British at bay.

Still, Lincoln came to believe that interest alone could not see the country through its time of trial. His First Inaugural invoked the "mystic chords of memory" and appealed to the "better angels of our nature". The Emancipation Proclamation declared those emancipated to be "thence, thenceforward and forever free". Bound together by the sacrifices that gave it birth, called to advance human freedom, the republic must serve a cause higher than its own interest, or dissolve.

We stick together in part because it serves our interest to do so. But times of trial reveal that interest is not enough. We belong to each other in ways that transcend the calculation of interest. We might call this belief mystical, or (excessively?) religious. Yet our greatest president, utterly devoted to hardheaded realism, found his nation's salvation in just such a belief.