

7 June 2020

Dear Friends of Elmwood,

Symbols matter. They're the currency of human culture. A symbol shows or speaks or enacts something larger than the symbol itself. "This is my body," said Jesus, breaking a piece bread. "With this ring, I thee wed," says one spouse to another, sliding a ring onto the fourth finger. "Here's the hundred dollars I owe you," I say, signing a cheque.

It was just a hunk of bread, a lump of metal, a piece of paper. But through speech and action, it became a symbol. 'This' now stands for 'that'. It matters, now, not for what it 'is' but for what it *means*.

"God Save the Queen" and "We the People"

You can't run a decent religion without symbols. (You can't even run an *indecent* one!) Nor can you have a working society.

Civilisation could only arise once humans recognised an 'order' governing nature. They began to imagine a governor – a god or council of gods – who establishes and maintains this natural order.

But civilisation's source is deeper still. It's our desire to go one step further, to make a *human* world out of the natural one we inherit and inhabit. This is the precarious project of 'self-government', establishing and maintaining a divine order within human affairs, so that 'good' may flourish. From this project comes civilisation's laws, customs, and practices.

Crowned in religious rites, monarchs were once the very Viceroys of God, the symbolic source of human law and authority; 'higher' than us because they were a conduit for *divine* law and authority. "Give the King thy judgments, O God," says Psalm 72. Our own 'royals' were semi-sacred symbols long before they were celebrities on the cover of "Hello!" magazine. To this day, our coinage says, "*Elizabeth II, Dei Gratia Regina*", Latin for "Elizabeth II, by the grace of God, Queen."

This mortifies democratic sensibilities, of course. The Crown may still be a remote symbol for us, yes, but we've done away with official aristocracy (though an unofficial one rules more than ever, have you noticed?). How can someone be 'better' than us by virtue of his or her birth?

It offends our secular sensibilities too. Secular governments want no religious legitimization. We've separated Church and State, though this has come to mean the Church's subordination *to* the State, alas.

Even so, a sacred residue clings to secular symbols. When some mischievous boys were caught urinating on the War Memorial in Ottawa, the rebuke was far more swift and severe than if they'd been relieving themselves in the parking lot of Canadian Tire.

Why? A memorial is more than a lump of stone. It's a potent symbol. Its value lies not in the stone itself, but in what it has come to mean. And what it means matters to society. These days, anyone who dares to burn an American flag in front of the White House had better be wearing running shoes. Those who love that flag would die for it and kill for it. In their eyes, it emanates a sacredness as potent as the reserved host in a Roman Catholic Church.

"*We the people*" – not God, not God's Monarch – is our *de facto* source of political authority in Canada too. In that sense, we're all Americans now. We take it for granted that, to be legitimate, a law must first be voted on. Law must express the *human* will, not the divine one.

"We're free. We're democratic now," says the political historian. "We no longer have to suffer under religious demagogues, royal dictators, and crazed despots."

And yet, we still have them, don't we?

"I can't breathe"

Now and then, all on its own, history coughs up symbols without our help, though I'd never discount the 'hand of providence'.

We recently witnessed two ghastly happenings in the troubled nation below ours. They're not 'isolated' incidents. They carry symbolic weight. They show something true about the society in which they happened, and beyond it.

Now, Netflix warns you about nudity, profanity, even *smoking* in the film you're about to watch. But on May 25th, there was little warning for the explicit scene of violence broadcast on the news.

George Floyd, a black man, was killed that day on a street in Minneapolis. It was recorded by a passer-by. He'd just been arrested on suspicion of using a counterfeit \$20 bill. While he was handcuffed, face down on the road, a white policeman knelt on his neck for nearly nine minutes, as if in demonic parody of Colin Kaepernick, the NFL player who 'took the knee' during the pre-game

singing of “The Star Spangled Banner”. Three more policemen kept a small crowd at bay.

It just so happened to be Memorial Day in the United States, a holy day (“holiday”) in its calendar of civil religion. That nation commemorates members of its military who’ve fought its enemies and died in its service. The deaths of soldiers have a semi-sacred meaning for that society; their ‘sacrifice’ (a religious word!) keeps the state ‘intact’ and the nation ‘free’. “Do this holiday in remembrance of them, and be thankful,” could be Memorial Day’s motto.

It’s a ghoulish irony, which ought not to be lost on Christians, that this Memorial Day death happened just days before the Feast of Pentecost. It commemorates the descent of God’s Spirit on the infant Church, a new order invading the old. That festival, too, is symbolic. For the Spirit is also the breath of life. God breathed life into Adam and breathes life into each of us.

But George Floyd’s final words were, “I can’t breathe.”

In that moment, his death became symbolic. It stands for the suffocation of body and spirit inflicted on millions of black people and others in that country. Our country too if we dare to see it. Massive protests ensued, an explosion of pent up anger and grief at the drip, drip, drip of systemic racism and the violence it visits on people. They never, never go away.

As I write, protests are still happening in over 400 cities and in every state. Social distancing has taken a back seat. The moment is too important. “There comes a time when silence is betrayal,” Martin Luther King, Jr., once said.

Hands Off Our Symbols!

The second ghastly happening was their President’s bizarre response to these legal protests. He calls protestors ‘terrorists’, ‘anarchists’, ‘losers’, ‘enemies of the state’, and ‘very bad people’. He has levelled similar insults at the press, the FBI, the CIA, judges, scientists, diplomats, military leaders, and ex-members of his own cabinet. It’s a rather large Alumni Association.

On June 1st, as peaceful, legal protests happened outside the White House – an activity guaranteed by that nation’s Constitution – militarised police wielding batons and Plexiglas shields (why? because of Covid?) fired tear gas into the crowd, or were they ‘smoke canisters’?

Then they rushed the crowd, batons swinging, dispersing them every which way. It resembled scenes from the G20 Summit held in Toronto ten years ago. It is was a mini-Tiananmen Square moment, but not lethal, thank God.

Having cleared them from his path, their President, like a Russian Czar perturbed by the sight of starving serfs, paraded unprotested across Pennsylvania Avenue to the steps of nearby St John's Episcopal Church. A priest was in the way (aren't they always?). He was forcibly removed. The State must subordinate the Church.

It was a bleak scene. The Church had been damaged in the previous night's protests, and its windows were all boarded up. Someone handed the President a Bible. He held it aloft as though it were a program listing the starting line-up and he was selling it at a baseball game.

At one point, a reporter asked, "Is that your Bible?"

He replied, "It's *a* Bible." Otherwise, he said not a word. He let the scene speak for itself. What did he mean by it?

"He was sending a very powerful message," said his latest press secretary, Kayleigh McEnany. "We will not be overcome by looting, by rioting, by burning." (What about peaceful, legal protests? Will you be overcome by them? Will you listen?) She added that if we were to seek a precedent for this President, we'd find him in Winston Churchill, who, in like manner, inspected bomb damage during the blitz.

It was a stunt worthy of this President's friends, Vladimir Putin and Kim Jong-un. He showed us what *he* thinks power looks like. It looks like tear gas, rubber bullets, police batons, suppression of dissent, slander thrown at opponents, ridicule of 'weak' people, and the telling of outright lies.

That's power, is it?

By hijacking the symbols of Christian faith, the President tried to place himself on God's side, and God on his side. "God is a powerful dictator too. God's power trumps puny protest. So, better fall in line. Or else."

When the third commandment says, "Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain", it has something like this in mind.

The Episcopal Bishop of Washington rightly fired back, but with words not rubber bullets. The President was waving a sacred book he had not read and would not understand, before a holy sanctuary he would not enter and would not know how to pray in if he did. In short, he hasn't the faintest clue what Christianity's symbols mean.

God's incarnate presence was a peasant who held no office, commanded no army, and brandished no sword. God's power bears our suffering; it does not willingly inflict it. It lures us to life; it does not suppress it.

The stewardship of Christian symbols is just what clergy are for. And that's just as well, since we're not good for much else. My special charge is to wield those symbols with great care, to teach and watch over their proper use, and to defend them from misuse. It turns out we need clergy after all.

A contagion is sweeping through the Western world, one far worse than the little Covid virus. It doesn't infect our biological bodies; it infects the body politic, and also the body of Christ, the Church. It attacks our symbols, corrupting them. It makes them do its bidding the way a corona virus corrupts a healthy cell, hijacking its machinery to replicate itself.

The repair and renewal of any society or institution grown decrepit, corrupt and (may we say it at last?) 'fascist', must come from the margins, not the centre. Top down solutions fail us. It begins with the protests of the very ones it has tried to silence; it comes through the crying of the oppressed, the victims, the sufferers. It cannot begin until we've heard their cries.

This should not surprise us. Jesus said as much.

Learning to Listen Again

My thoughts wander to a parallel symptom of intractable social illness. Once again, it's more feverish in our southern neighbour, but it's not unknown here: gun violence.

After the 'Columbine school shootings', Michael Moore made a film documenting its devastating effects on students and families, on political timidity to face real problems, and what this reveals about the systemic violence of his society. Columbine was 'symbolic' of this.

At one point he interviewed Marilyn Manson, the far-from-mainstream singer and songwriter. Solid, 'respectable' people, comfortably seated at society's centre, are liable to dismiss him as freakish and weird. Put off by his 'marginal' appearance, they may not have patience to listen to him.

Michael Moore asked him, "If you were to talk directly to the kids at Columbine or the people in that community, what would you say to them if they were here right now"

He said, "I wouldn't say a single word to them. I would listen to what they have to say, and that's what no one did."

Yours in the faith,
Andrew