

Memorial Day Weekend – 7th Sunday of Easter – May 27/28, 2017 – Reflection

"In days to come the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains ... and all the nations shall stream to it. For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. He shall judge between the nations and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more ... there shall be no more harm or ruin on all God's holy mountain." - From the Prophet Isaiah

When I was a very little boy, I lived in northern Virginia, in Arlington but my first real memory of that beautiful ground that overlooks the Potomac and the marbled monuments of America's capital city beyond came in November of 1963. I watched on TV with millions of other Americans as the horse-drawn caisson carried our young president's body over Memorial Bridge to the hills of Arlington and its National Cemetery. I remember his widow, veiled in black, his two little kids, his brothers and sisters, his mother, the Boston Cardinal, taps and then, nothing ... silence ... sadness.

The following spring at Easter, I as a ten-year-old joined crowds that wound their way through the cherry trees and dogwoods, up hills that were impossibly green, dotted with gleaming white markers as far as my eye could see. People were quiet, lost in their own thoughts. I

remember hearing the song of birds and feeling the warm sun on my back as the breeze soughed through the trees. And then, on the hillside, beneath the Custis-Lee Mansion, there it was: a simple grave and the graves of his two little babies, a little white picket fence, and a flame that burned day and night as if to say hope lives on.

Arlington National Cemetery with its rolling hills and green grass, great oaks and maples, spectacular sunrises and gorgeous sunsets, is one of the most peaceful, beautiful places I have ever walked. Its serenity belies its origins during the Civil War when brother turned gun against brother; when battles were fought that left thousands dead in but a few hours. There was no time to prepare each fallen soldier to go back to the churchyard and the family plot on the farm in Tennessee or the village in New England. They were buried where they fell, Blue and Grey together. After the war, folk erected markers to honor the fallen and decorated the graves with flags and flowers so that their sacrifices would never be forgotten.

Today, Memorial Day bids us remember the sacrifices of the boys and, now, girls who paid the ultimate price that freedom might ring. Our parades and speeches, flags and bugles remind us to never take freedom, human rights, and peace for granted. And this day stands to call every soul in our country to pause and whisper a prayer of gratitude for the last full measure of devotion these honored dead so bravely gave. But do we owe them only a day each year, only a flag on a grave, only a ceremony of pomp and precision? We owe them much more than that. We pray, "May they rest in peace." That's what we owe them ... we owe them the world they died to create. We owe them the peaceable Kingdom of Isaiah, we owe them what the song we raise hopes: "Let there be peace on earth, and let it begin with me." We owe

them our work for peace, a peace they died to build. We owe them civil discourse in the public arena. We owe them a respectful listening more than a belligerent bombast. We owe them a digging for common ground more than a rattling of sabers. We owe them a willingness to carry my brother more than an eye for an eye.

Brothers and sisters, it is not so hard to raise Cain ... people have been doing that since the Garden. But, it is hard work to protect Abel; hard work to prepare a bed so that the lion might lie down with the lamb; hard work to build a peace when I hold the power wipe my enemy off the face of the earth.

What do we owe our hallowed dead? We owe them what Abraham Lincoln said to a house divided as he spoke from the Capitol, as he faced Arlington's graves at his Second Inaugural:

"With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation's wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations."

Yes, let there be peace on earth, but Dear God, let it begin with me, let it begin with me.