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Reflections on the Hostage Ordeal

The events of this past week have been momentous. The thoughts and feelings of most of us have been completely absorbed in the return of the hostages from Iran and the inauguration of a new U.S. President. In most places of the world, and certainly in the government of the United States, these events are being reflected upon and thoroughly examined. They have far-reaching, almost ultimate significance for the future of life on this planet. They affect profoundly the issues of life and death. Hence it seems to me that Christians gathered together ~~today~~ for worship must also reflect upon these events, always in the light of the saving Gospel of Jesus Christ. So I ask you to reflect with me as I share with you some thoughts.

-I-

My first reflection is, I must admit, darkened by the heaviness of rage. I am angry that these 52 Americans had to spend over 444 days in cruel captivity.

Knowing that there are many legitimate grievances in the world, and realizing that the Iranians may very well have authentic grievances against us, I am still outraged when innocent people are kidnapped, imprisoned and brutally treated and terrorized. There is no excuse for this happening among people who call themselves civilized and who invoke the name of the Almighty to sanction their deeds.

I have read and heard with mounting anger the accounts of how these hostages were brutalized, demeaned and ~~terrorized~~ terrorized. I am not sure that my feelings are in any sense Christian, but I am appalled and ~~xxx~~ angry. Indeed, humanity's inhumanity to other human beings is outrageous and I want to cry out against it.

Early on Wednesday morning I sat before my television and listened as Richard Queens, the hostage who had been released earlier only because he he was suffering severely from multiple sclerosis, told about one of his

nights of terror. Roughly awakened after midnight, he was savagely confronted by a group of men wearing white ~~mask masks~~ masks who drove him and other hostages into another room. There they were lined up against <sup>the wall</sup> and ordered to take the classic stance, feet spread, arms up on the wall. Behind them were the masked men, each wielding an automatic rifle. Queens said the only sound he heard was the harsh metallic click of the guns, the bolts of the weapons apparently being shoved into firing position. At that moment Queens said ~~that~~ he thought he was going to die. He started to give himself the last ~~rites~~. He prayed the Lord's Prayer. Because of his multiple sclerosis he could not keep <sup>one</sup> ~~his~~ arm up on the wall, and his tormentors shouted at him, nonetheless, to do so. This turned out to be a mock execution, but it was a clear act of brutal terror.

When I hear about the other acts of terror and brutality, of infested food and lies being told about the deaths of loved ones, and when I know that some of these human beings have returned from this ordeal deeply scarred and psychically wounded, I can scarcely control my rage.

## -II-

But then that feeling of rage becomes flooded by an overwhelming experience of sorrow. Sorrow and grief.

One contemplates these scenes of torture and terror and he just wants to weep - great, heaving sobs of sorrow for the human race in which human beings, the creations of God, can be despoiled and degraded, by other human beings, in this way. Believing in the Great God of the Universe, one feels certain that he must be grieving, too. To see the human souls of God's creatures being crushed down by cruelty just makes one want to weep.

## -III-

But after the raging and the grieving one struggles to regain the rational process. He <sup>begins</sup> ~~being~~ to reflect on human beings and their fanaticisms, yes, their ~~xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx~~ presumptions of the power of God, their pretensions to absolute righteousness and infallible knowledge of right and wrong. Once ~~again~~ again, one realizes that fundamentalism,

be it political or religious, can be terribly dangerous and tragically wrong.

Make sure that I do not want to deprecate the kinds of Christian fundamentalists who are marked by loving spirits and who have a sensitivity to justice. But there are fundamentalists proclaiming their frightening doctrines these days who are <sup>Generating</sup> ~~blowing up~~ terrifying storms. Mind you, some of the ayatollahs and mullahs of Iran, operate strictly from a fundamentalist point of view. They are absolutely convinced that they are right. They believe that God has spoken to them and that the actions they take against other human beings, however cruel and destructive, are in fulfillment of God's commands. So they order firing squads to execute their enemies and those who have sinned. Without mercy they move against their opponents, and in taking hostages and screaming bloody epithets against their adversaries they believe passionately that they are acting righteously and with divine sanctions. That other leaders of their same religious faith denounce their deeds and proclaim that they are twisting and torturing religious principles, <sup>leaves them unmoved.</sup> ~~they continue unheeded in/ what they are doing.~~ They have no doubts that they are <sup>right.</sup> ~~wrong.~~

Fundamentalism of this sort is ominous and oppressive. Some - mind you some fundamentalists of the Christian faith, can be just as fanatical and just as free of doubt. So the President of the largest Protestant body in our nation can loudly declare that God does not hear the prayers of Jews. He seems to have no feeling for these people who have suffered unspeakable horrors in holocausts and pogroms. He has no respect for the sacred Bible which shows Jews to have been the chosen people of God. He has no feeling for their anguish and their agony upon hearing his pronouncements. Now that is the kind of fundamentalism which <sup>believes</sup> ~~believes~~ that it is so right that all other human souls are ticketed for hell.

It is not shameful for Christians of goodwill, with a love of Christ in their hearts, to recall what the great Justice Learned Hand once cited as ~~the~~ the key to his over-all philosophy. This was Oliver Cromwell's plea just before the Battle of Dunbar: "I beseech ye in the bowels of Christ, thank that ye may be mistaken." It was said that Justice Hand would like to



have written "over the portals of every church, every courthouse and at every crossroads in the nation." (The Spirit of Liberty - Papers and Addresses of Learned Hand, collected by Irving Dillard, p.xxiv and xxv)

The Ayotollah Khomeini, and other Iranian Religious fundamentalists, have spoken and acted as though they thought they were God. No one can doubt that they have legitimate grievances against the United States and the modern world, but when someone acts so menacingly without any self-doubts human beings are endangered and terror stalks the earth.

-IV-

Still another reflection: in <sup>the</sup> ~~this~~ highly volatile and almost epochal events we have witnessed this week, I think we Americans must be restrained, and constrained, to believe, that our best response is in showing our nation to be at its best. Like all other nations we are flawed and sinful, and we stand under the judgment of Almighty God. But this past week that which is best about us - our orderly and peaceful transfer of Presidential power - <sup>was seen as</sup> ~~is~~ our greatest witness to the watching world.

When we can pass through the <sup>heat</sup> ~~fire~~ of an inflammatory and often bitter political campaign for the presidency, and <sup>see</sup> ~~have~~ the victor and the vanquished treat each other with graciousness and magnanimity, ~~this~~ our witness to a brutal and terrorized world <sup>shines</sup>.

Surely the thousands of Iranian students, including a great number here at the University of Wisconsin in Madison, were watching this spectacle of our inauguration. Perhaps we should again recall the words of our greatest President, Abraham Lincoln, who in his Second Inaugural, standing before a broken <sup>and</sup> bleeding nation, was able to say, thinking of both sides of a Civil War: "Both read the same Bible, and pray to the same God; and each invokes His aid against the other . . . .but let us judge not, that we be not judged. The prayers of both could not be answered - that of neither has been answered fully. The Almighty has His own purposes."

That is our best witness in a troubled world. Let us make it quietly, humbly, and in penitence before Almighty God. Let us sing so the whole world

can hear:

O beautiful for pilgrim feet,  
Whose stern, impassioned stress  
A thoroughfare for freedom beat  
Across the wilderness!  
America! America!  
God mend thine every flaw,  
Confirm thy soul in self-control,  
Thy liberty in law.

-V-

And still another reflection. In the Bible there is, perhaps, an amazing parallel, certainly a spiritual lesson. The Hebrew people understood that God had used Cyrus, the founder of Persia, for his own purposes, and that it was Cyrus who finally released them from their captivity in Bayblon around 540 B.C.. Now it is striking, almost stunning, to realize that Persia is same country known as Iran in the twentieth century.

~~Cyrus~~ Cyrus was a king and a conqueror and he held many peoples captive. We have no reason to believe that he was a kindly monarch. He may have been every inch the tyrant. But the Hebrew people perceived that God had made Persia and Cyrus his agents in revealing his will to Israel. They believed that God was so powerful that he could use whomever he chose to do his will. So when they finally received their freedom to return to their Holy Land they saw in Cyrus and Persia the hand of God in their own affairs.

R. Blake Michael, an assistant professor of comparative religion at Ohio Wesleyan University, has written most stimulatingly about this modern parallel:

In order to learn from these events, it is not necessary that we be fond of the Ayatollah Khomeini; it is not necessary that we support the taking of innocent hostages; it is not necessary that we defend the illegalities, the persecutions or the racial and sexual chauvinisms of the Iranian regime. Neither, however, was it necessary that ancient Israel like Cyrus or approve of all that he did.

All that is necessary is that, like ancient Israel, we put aside our anger, our disgust and, most of all, our self-righteous nationalistic pride. If we can put these aside, then perhaps we can learn in these painful events to listen to God's message to us, even when that message is hidden behind the beard of a scowling Ayatollah. (The Circuit Rider, Jan. 1981, p. 10)



## -VI-

All of which brings me to a final reflection. Here, let me tell you, I wince, boggle and shrink back. But somehow this reflection intrudes against my will upon my mind and soul. I must again take a look at the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It is certainly not my Gospel. I would never have tolerated it, I could never have uttered it. It does, in fact, make me sick. But it is the Gospel, and this is what I read: "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of ~~God~~ heaven. Blessed are you when men shall revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so men persecuted the prophets who were before (Matth. 5:10-12, RSV) You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven (Matt. 5:43,45, RSV)

Now that makes me sick. How does God expect me to act like that? I can't act like that. There is a deep angry cry in me that bellows, "Damn those Iranians! Make them pay for their dirty deeds! Make them suffer as they made our hostages suffer! Rub their noses in the dirt, humiliate them as they humiliated us! If this is the Gospel it is absurd and impossible, and it is not for me!"

But then I look at this huge cross in our sanctuary. It looms there before us. I see the figure of a man suffering agony on that cross. There is a great gash in his side, a crown of cruel thorns <sup>piercing</sup> ~~on~~ his head, whip marks all over his body. His head is bowed, ~~xxxxxxxxxxx~~ and he is looking down on his tormentors. His lips are moving and I catch his words: "Father, forgive them, they know not what they do."

Don't look at me, God, and don't expect me to act like that. I can't do it. I can repeat those words to this congregation, for they are your Words. I know that the Gospel is something other than the way I feel. But let me go home now, God. There is a football game I have to watch this afternoon. But God, I promise you that I will think about what you have said, and I will come back next Sunday, and perhaps by your grace, I can give you an answer.