

## Forming the Conscience to see the Truth

Last week on February 12th marked 211 years since the birth of Abraham Lincoln.

Known for his leadership in the Civil War, and playing a major role in the end of slavery, a closer look reveals that slavery was something that took time for Lincoln to see the evils of.

In 1837, when he was in the Illinois state legislature, he spoke of how slavery was founded on injustice. He would leave politics until 1854, when he was drawn back into it in part because of the Kansas-Nebraska Act, which would allow new territories to vote by majority as to whether or not they should have slaves. On this issue, he said: "Near eighty years ago we began by declaring that all men are created equal; but now from that beginning we have run down to the other declaration, that for some men to enslave others is a 'sacred right of self-government.'...Let us return to the position our fathers gave it...Let us re-adopt the Declaration of Independence. We shall have so saved [the Union], that the succeeding millions of free happy people, the world over, shall rise up, and call us blessed, to the latest generations...Slavery is founded in the selfishness of man's nature-opposition to it is in his love of justice...repeal all past history, you still cannot repeal human nature."

A few years later in 1860, he became the first Republican elected president, and he focused initially on trying to keep the Union together, not expanding slavery but having it allowed where it already was. But this, of course, changed. In a private letter to Illinois Senator Lyman Trumbull, he wrote we can't compromise on this issue. The Civil War broke out shortly thereafter, and while Lincoln's focus was on saving the Union, he would go on to issue the Emancipation Proclamation, freeing slaves, and in a letter to Major General John Mcclernand, said that he couldn't have it both ways any longer. In his words, "I have issued the emancipation proclamation, and I cannot retract it. After the commencement of hostilities I struggled nearly a year and a half to get along with touching the 'institution'; and when finally I conditionally determined to touch it, I gave a hundred days fair notice of my purpose, to all the States and people, within which time they could have turned it wholly aside, by simply again becoming good citizens of the United States. They chose to disregard it, and I made the peremptory proclamation on what appeared to me to be a military necessity. And being made, it must stand..." In the Gettysburg Address, he would say that the work of making sure freedom prevails is "for us the living... to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us - that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion--that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain--that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom--and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth." As the war was winding down, he issued the Proclamation of Amnesty and Reconstruction, banning slavery in returning states, and fought hard for the passage of the 13th Amendment, which prohibited slavery so that the Emancipation Proclamation could not be just seen as some temporary war measure. Time and time again, while he was focused on keeping the country together, he knew that he could not ignore the

slavery issue and had to do something about it which would upset a sizable portion of the people who were voting.

In 1776, the Founding Fathers gathered in Philadelphia to declare our freedom as a new nation, with Thomas Jefferson writing that “all men are created equal” was a self-evident truth; meaning it’s simply something we should know by the virtue of being human. Jefferson, himself a slave-owner though, didn’t quite see the full truth behind these words; it took years of reflection for more people to see that there was no asterisk to men, and that the term was more than a white man who owned property, but all human beings. Of course, we are still working on embracing the meaning of those words, for while we have made great strides, there is still plenty of work to do.

In our first reading this week from Sirach, we hear the words “If you choose you can keep the commandments.” The problem is as humans, we sometimes can have a very hard time seeing the truth. President Lincoln however carefully thought about what truth meant, and what it meant that all were created equal. So how can we think about our faith too to make sure we are choosing to keep the commandments?

For one, we can examine our conscience and ask ourselves the hard questions. What have we done, what have we failed to do? Rather than minimize sin or ignore it, what’s going in our lives that needs fixing? And even if its been something we’ve struggled with a long time, we must listen to our conscience and not ignore it or give up on the struggle.

Second, we can pray. Lincoln prayed often. And when we pray, we can open ourselves up more to the will of God, and grow closer to Him.

Third, we can remember to trust the Church. The Church was created by Jesus, and the Holy Spirit has guided our Church to teach in matters of faith and morals. She has done this by growing in understanding of the faith through the years; it’s why today for instance we can say slavery is wrong, whereas in the time of the Apostles slavery would have been seen as common and not given a second thought. So hopefully we look to our Church for guidance, and challenge ourselves both on the choices that we make for ourselves, and the choices that impact the greater world.

Fourth, related to that, when we struggle with a teaching of our faith, it’s important to pray and think about it. Stubbornness can be a major obstacle to spiritual growth. But if we think about the reasoning behind a teaching, we can come to see it’s logic and importance. You’ll find the catechism doesn’t just say “this is what we believe” but has the “why” behind it too. Hopefully like Lincoln, and our Church, we grow in our understanding of the faith through our lives.

Fifth, we must strive to form the consciences of others. This is so important in a world where so many embrace relativism, or “I’m OK, You’re OK.” There is right and wrong, there are universal moral truth. President Lincoln came to understand this, and wasn’t afraid to be hated. Neither can we.

The great news in all of this: we are not alone. God is there to guide us, and after we die, the entire faith we believe will be made clear and we will see perfectly through God's wisdom. Until that day we are in heaven though, let's make sure we aren't "cafeteria" Catholics, but rather as a people God, may we be a people who strive for sainthood by coming to know God's law, following it, and proclaiming it.

Have a great week!

Fr. Paul