

*Sermon for the Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Year A, 18.ix.2005, 10:30 a.m.
Commemoration of Dag Hammarskjöld, Peacemaker, 1961
Evangelical Lutheran Church of Saint James the Apostle / Chanceford Twp., York Co.,
Pennsylvania
Service of Word & Prayer, WOV
Jonah 3:10-4:11; Psalm 145:1-8; Philippians 1:21-30; Matthew 20:1-16*

J. J. !

Grace to you and peace, from Him Who is and Who was and Who is to come! ✠ Amen.

We hear again the concluding verse of today's Gospel:

"So the last will be first, and the first last."

--Matthew 20:16

And, on this day of commemoration of the life, witness and death of Dag Hammarskjöld, Peacemaker, let us also hear the witness of Saint Matthew, Apostle and Evangelist, to Our Lord's words to His Disciples and the multitudes from the mountainside:

*"Blessed are the poor in spirit [lit. 'the spat-upon'],
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
Blessed are those who mourn,
for they will be comforted.
Blessed are the meek,*

*for they will inherit the earth.
Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for
righteousness,
for they will be filled.
Blessed are the merciful,
for they will receive mercy.
Blessed are the pure in heart,
for they will see God.
Blessed are the peacemakers,
for they will be called children of God.
Blessed are those who are persecuted for
righteousness sake,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
Blessed are you when people 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 in
the same way they persecuted the prophets
who were before you."*

-- Matthew 5:1-14

Today's First Reading is taken from what some scholars consider to be perhaps the earliest novel, the Book of Jonah. The central character, Jonah, is a righteous Hebrew but an unwilling prophet. He is especially unwilling to allow himself to be sent by God to, of all places, *Nineveh*. In fact, Jonah caught the next boat sailing *away* from Nineveh. If you know the story of Jonah—a real whopper of a fish story—you will know also that Jonah was unsuccessful in this attempt.

Nineveh today is a province of northern Iraq in which the majority of Iraq's Christians live. In Old Testament times, however, it was the capital of the terrible Assyrian Empire, the sworn enemy of Israel and Judah, and to God's Covenant People it was an evil empire indeed. There is no historical record that Nineveh, its king and people ever repented and dedicated themselves to the LORD and God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, but in the story of Jonah they do. The great Assyrian king hears Jonah's prophecy and orders all his subjects, even the animals, to repent in sackcloth and ashes and to worship and serve the LORD. The really odd thing about the story is that Jonah is not at all happy about this. He had hoped that, as *anyone* could have predicted, the Ninevites would *not* have repented and that he, Jonah, who had been through so much terror and travail on their account, would

have had the satisfaction of seeing Nineveh burnt to a crisp by the wrath of the living God. How, after all, could those who had *never* served the LORD now suddenly become God's people? God's own ways did not make sense to Jonah, so far were they from what *anyone* would have expected.

In today's Gospel, Jesus tells a parable about work and pay and the Kingdom of God that may also not make sense to us. It simply seems so *unfair* that those who had worked and truly *toiled* the whole day at backbreaking labor would have been paid the same as those workers the Landowner had chosen only at the last hour of the workday. That the *need* of *all* the workers, late-comers included, would have been approximately the same, to be paid in order to be able to eat and to support their families, was quite beside the point for those who had worked all day long. But

the Lord of the Estate makes it clear that, just as the land itself is His, so, too, it is His to give compensation for labor done for Him, not according to the worker's *merit*, but according to *the Landowner's kindness and generosity*. The Lord of the Estate is, of course, God the LORD of all. The Land is *His Kingdom*, and the wages He gives to all alike represents God's *merciful grace*. This parable sets the scene for the drama in next Sunday's Gospel—Jesus' conflict with those custodians of God's Covenant with Israel who think that God's grace is their birthright, while it is the birthright of the rest of humanity to live in fear and only to wonder about a God Who might love them and care about them in the midst of this world of jealousy, violence and warfare.

Last Sunday I mentioned that it was the commemoration date for the Lutheran pastor, theologian, musician, scholar and missionary physician,

Albert Schweitzer, though the Gospel text for the day really did not permit us to focus on the incredible witness of that life poured out in reverence for life and in the radical following of Christ, in the face of doubt. Albert Schweitzer and his wife deliberately dedicated their lives to people who are still among the most suffering and destitute of the brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ, the native peoples of Equatorial Africa. Despite the considerable progress Schweitzer and Western aid workers were able to make against diseases endemic to the region, many of them still plague the African people, and to their sorrow has been added in our own era the scourge of HIV and AIDS. They still remain 'the last,' 'the spat-upon,' the 'poor in spirit' who shall inherit the Kingdom of Heaven whom we are all called to accept and to serve as such if we are to inherit that Kingdom as well.

Those who suffer from the scourge of war—the train of mourners which so often brings with it disease and famine—are also among those ‘last’ whom Christ demands to be seen, accepted and served as brothers and sisters to whom belongs God’s promise of comfort. Dag Hammarskjöld, son of the Prime Minister of Sweden, highly educated and trained in the fields of law, economics and foreign affairs, served the government of his country both at home and in its delegation to the newly formed United Nations before he was elected the second Secretary General of the UN in 1953. Hammarskjöld was reelected to this position, thus enabling him to see the UN and the world through some of the most difficult years of the end of European colonialism and the Cold War. He died carrying out his office on this date in September of 1961. I remember hearing the news report of his death

on the radio and asking my mother who he was. All she knew was that he was a Swede who headed up the UN and that he was trying to make peace in Africa.

That was all most people knew about Dag Hammarskjöld until after his death, a death that completed his life in a way that would only be understood later. His friend, Leif Sjöberg, and the English poet, W. H. Auden, edited a spiritual journal Hammarskjöld had kept which they now published in English under the title, *Markings*. These meditations and poems reveal a Christian who struggled with his faith but whose faith was deepened through that struggle.

It was a faith he never spoke of in public, or even to close friends, and so it should not surprise you to know that he was a *Lutheran*, through and through. Dag Hammarskjöld wanted to be known, above all, as a *realist*, in order to forge a new reality of peace out of

the chaos of war. As a political leader, his job was to argue for the possibility of peace, wherever it could be achieved and however limited it might be in duration.

The reality of peace in which he *believed* was eternal and was not limited at all by the mind or will of mankind. As a Christian, Hammarskjöld believed that the peace *of God* was at the core of all things, that God had overcome all division and jealousy, all conflict and enmity and mutual suspicion, in short *all* of the causes of war that always threaten peace. All this God had done *in Jesus Christ*, Who, Saint Paul says in his Letter to the Ephesians, “. . . is our peace; in His flesh He has made both groups [i.e., Jews and Gentiles] *one* and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us” (Ephesians 2:14). Living out this peace is the task and calling of the Christian life. According to Dag Hammarskjöld, “In our era, the road

to holiness necessarily passes through the world of action.”

Living as Dag Hammarskjöld lived, in a world and torn by war, and on top of that, natural catastrophe, the path of holiness and the following of Christ for us must also ‘pass through the world of action.’ The new constitution for our congregation which we will consider for approval today seeks to insure the basic conditions so that we, as a Christian community, may respond in a disciplined and effective way to the need for such action, whether it is in our own community, in the storm-torn regions of our own country or to address the crying needs of those meek and spat-upon who are still the ‘last’ in the scale of priorities of this world but first and dearest of all to the heart of Christ. Let us conclude our reflection on God’s Word today as we hear and pray words that came from Dag

Hammar skjöld's own passage through this world of action by faith in the One in Whom all enmity and division has already been overcome:

*"Thou Who art over us,
Thou Who art one of us,
Thou Who art—
Also within us,
May all see Thee—in me also,
May I prepare the way for Thee,
May I thank Thee for all that shall fall to my lot,
May I also not forget the need of others,
Keep me in Thy love
As Thou wouldest that all should be kept in mine.
May everything in this my being be directed to Thy glory
And may I never despair,
For I am under Thy hand, and in Thee is all power and goodness.
Give me a pure heart—that I may see Thee,
A humble heart—that I may hear Thee,
A heart of love—that I may serve Thee,
A heart of faith—that I may abide in Thee."*

--Markings, from an entry in 1954.

✠ Amen.



Now to Him Who loves us and has freed us from our sins by His blood, and has made of us a kingdom, priests to our God and Father, to Him be glory and dominion with the Father and the Holy Spirit, both now and forever. ✠

Amen.

S. D. G. !