

LIVING HISTORY

In speaking of the American Revolution in 1838 (fifty-five years after the last shot was fired), Abraham Lincoln recounted how every family was indelibly joined to the principles of the great struggle. He called it a “living history”.

He went on to say that living history “must fade upon the memory of the world, and grow more and more dim by the lapse of time.” Lincoln added: “In history, we hope, they will be read of, and recounted, so long as the Bible shall be read – but even granting that they will, their influence cannot be what it heretofore has been.”

Lincoln’s speech was delivered before the Young Men’s Lyceum of Springfield, Illinois on January 27, 1838. He was 28. The context for this speech was mob actions in Mississippi and St. Louis, largely targeting freed slaves and his plea was to honor the political institutions that were created to assure and protect individual liberty.

In re-visiting what is known as the Lyceum speech, I was reminded of the return of Jesus after the resurrection and the fading memory of history lived and then only studied.

You will recall that He first appeared to Mary Magdalene and then to the disciples, absent Thomas.

Later Jesus joined the disciples with Thomas present.

Thomas, you will recall, said “Unless I see in his hands the print of the nails, and place my finger in the mark of the nails, and place my hand in his side, I will not believe”.

Now, before I continue to talk about the foundation of belief and faith, let me quote from a sermon by the great Scottish Minister, George MacDonald, who C. S. Lewis called his “Master”.

MacDonald said “Now, whenever you begin to speak of anything true, divine, heavenly or super-natural, you cannot speak of it at all without speaking about it wrongly in some measure. We have no words, we have no phrases, we have no possible combination of sentences that do more than represent fragmentarily the greatness of the things that belong to the very vital being of our nature”.

I continue with McDonald’s warning, a recurring echo in my mind.

It seems to me that every several months there is a new poll inquiring whether some universe of people believe in God.

The Gallup organization has been conducting polls on religious belief since 1944. The high water mark of belief was in 1967, when 98% of those who responded said they believed in God. The 2017 poll put belief at 87%, a decline of over 13%. The universe of believers in 2017 included 64% who were convinced that God exists, 16% said He probably did and 5% believed, but had significant doubts – lets call them the 50/50 crowd.

I would suggest that just as MacDonald was concerned about his own potential errors in talking about God, that pollsters should be doubly concerned about the ultimate accuracy of their surveys. Poll results turn on a variety of circumstances, many bearing little relationship to discovering truth. My guess is that there are many “doubting Thomas’s” among the self-professed believers.

I began chairing The Trinity Forum in 2008 and retired from that position in 2013. Our mission was to convene leaders with those steeped in philosophy and theology to consider and discuss life’s great questions.

The forum also published what I choose to call faith's living history. The importance of this history, for me, was underscored by Albert Einstein's observation on the importance of transcendent values.

“Our time is distinguished by wonderful achievements in the fields of scientific understanding and the technical application of those insights. Who would not be cheered by this? But let us not forget that knowledge and skills alone cannot lead humanity to a happy and dignified life. Humanity has every reason to place the proclaimers of high moral standards and values above the discoverers of objective truth. What humanity owes to personalities like Buddha, Moses, and Jesus ranks for me higher than all the achievements of the inquiring and constructive mind. What these blessed men have given us we must guard and try to keep alive with all our strength if humanity is not to lose its dignity, the security of its existence, and its joy in living.”

Einstein understood, indeed we all understand, that liberty – the absence of restraint – when paired with our sinful nature is often corrupted. Einstein placed what he called high moral standards” above objective truth.

Adam Smith, who many believe to be the father of capitalism, wrote explicitly about the need for what he called “moral sentiments”. If you look, for example, at the yawning gap between the compensation of upper management and those who produce products and services, it is easy to see the lack of “moral sentiments”.

The need for and importance of the environmental movement results from the lack of “moral sentiments” by too many who control the wastes of production and consumption.

An examination of the political leadership of the so-called religious right is replete with examples of choosing power over the

values of faith in Jesus Christ. But, I am sure that every political leader, regardless of his hunger for power, would tell the Gallup pollsters that they believe in God.

The Church has a rich living history of witness. While living in Manhattan, I stood behind the pulpit of Redeemer Presbyterian Church one evening and recounted my faith in God. I feel no more adequate today than I felt then. Yet, I have chosen again to reflect on faith.

Einstein's deism seemed tied to what he called "a well-tuned universe". The structure of the universe, as proven by scientific inquiry, informed his mind.

Most Christians find their faith through family experience, biblical text and spiritual signals. In my own life, Sundays were religiously and culturally important during my formative years. Today, for many, Sundays are spent in the bleachers watching children and grandchildren do something with a ball.

If "living history" is an important element in belief, curiosity is essential. Lincoln's point of reference was the Revolutionary War and its aftermath. The principles for which soldiers fought and died were vivid and influential, at least to a point.

In the world in which we live, 81 generations after Jesus walked the earth, a different kind of living history must inform faith. And, belief without animating faith is hollow.

I have gained insight and strength by understanding the importance of faith in the actions of Lincoln and William Wilberforce, who led the movement to abolish slavery in the United Kingdom. And, if you want to understand the importance of faith to Martin Luther King, read his letter from the Birmingham jail.

Or read the prayers of Mother Teresa contained in a book written by my Jewish friend, Tony Stern. Or, study the life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who left Germany's state church and became a key founder of the Confessing Church. Bonhoeffer's courageous rejection of Hitler resulted in his execution.

Or, look around us at the beauty of the Catskills. Or, examine the art of Michelangelo. Or, listen to the music of Bach.

It is hard for me to understand sacrifice and beauty as being separated from intention informed by a divine force. There is light in what is often a dark world.

It is also hard to survey the extraordinary dedication of organizations like the Red Cross, Habitat for Humanity, the Young Men's and Women's Christian Associations and not believe that our soul helps inform our brain.

Returning to Abraham Lincoln's reflection on living history, let me reflect on an updated and revolutionary convergence of faith and music — more recent living history.

John Newton was born in 1725 and during the earlier part of his adult life was a profane slave trader. One night, while at the helm of his ship, he faced a terrifying storm. He later recounted that he prayed for the storm to quiet and it did.

He was certain divinity had touched him and he later expressed his conversion to Christianity in the hymn, Amazing Grace. Listen to the words:

AMAZING GRACE

Amazing grace! How sweet the sound,
That saved a wretch; like me!
I once was lost, but now am found,
Was blind, but now I see.

'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear,
And grace my fears relieved;
How precious did that grace appear
The hour I first believed!

The Lord hath promised good to me,
His word my hope secures;
He will my shield and portion be
As long as life endures.

When we've been there ten thousand
years,
Bright shining as the sun,
We've no less days to sing God's praise
Than when we first begun.

What most do not know is that the final verse was added by Harriet Beecher Stowe, who wrote Uncle Tom's Cabin. It was published in 1852 — living history four generations later. Let me repeat it:

When we've been there ten thousand years,
Bright shining as the sun,
We've no less days to sing God's praise
Than when we first begun.

Amazing Grace has been recorded over 7,000 times and was a seminal song in the civil rights movement. Mahalia Jackson's 1947 version four generations later is a legendary recording.

Amazing Grace later became an anthem in the resistance to the Vietnam War five generations later. Noteworthy recordings of that era include Judy Collins, Joan Baez and Arlo Guthrie. Living history indeed. And, of course, Newton's seminal contribution to living history remains one of faith's most important anthems.

Now one can say, if God saved John Newton's life, why doesn't he intercede to help the innocent? Why does he let bad things happen to good people? Fair questions.

My answer: I don't know! But at the risk of "speaking about it wrongly in some measure", I will offer two thoughts. First, we have been given free choice and it is often abused. If every time a wrong action was planned God interceded, freedom would not exist.

Second, we have been given hope that our soul, the essence of our spirituality, will be given a second life. I choose to believe that the innocent will have a heavenly existence.

Now let me close with two thoughts. Regardless of what we believe, we are certain in some measure to be wrong. God is in the details and in our human weaknesses we often get the details wrong.

Maybe it is my more optimistic nature that leads me to believe in a caring God and his son, Jesus Christ. I wonder who I have to thank for that! I believe I know.