

Proper 28, Pentecost 23, Year C
November 13, 2022
Church of the Mediator, Harbert, MI
Luke 21:5-19

The Rev. Richard S. M. Emrich

The first Jewish-Roman war, in which the Romans suppressed a revolt by Jews against Roman rule, was fought from 66 AD to 73 AD. In the course of that long war, the Roman general and future emperor, Titus, laid siege to the City of Jerusalem for seven long months in the year 70 AD. When they finally breached the city walls, the Romans destroyed Jerusalem and demolished the Second Temple itself, slaughtering thousands upon thousands of its inhabitants, some of whom were followers of Jesus.

I was thinking that there may be some Ukrainians who have thought about this.

Because of this passage from the 21st chapter of Luke that we heard this morning, the scholars have been able to date Luke's Gospel to a period shortly after this happened, probably within ten years, when the memory of the destruction of city and temple, and of the terrible carnage were fresh in the minds of the Church. Christians would have clearly understood references to wars, insurrections, kingdom against kingdom, famine, plagues, arrests, persecutions, betrayals. The horrors of war against the overwhelming might and pitiless cruelty of Rome.

The bravery of the Jewish rebels is legendary, but the Romans were a military state: much larger, better organized, more disciplined and much better armed. And as attackers, the Romans had time on their side.

And here in this passage, St. Luke the Evangelist preserves words of the Lord Jesus in which the Lord describes the deplorable circumstances in which Jerusalem found itself, and Jesus says that by enduring these things, by remaining faithful, his followers will save their souls. And for every one of us, even in peacetime, this is a good reminder that when the hard times come, when temptation in one of its many forms, knocks at our door, we are all members of an ancient and very wonderful fellowship of people who remain faithful when we are tested.

A month or two ago Mother Darlene asked me to officiate today, and then some time later she mentioned that in this service we'd be honoring Indigenous Americans. That surprised me because Indigenous Peoples' Day in the United States was in October. October 10. And in her home country of Canada, Indigenous Peoples are honored on June 21, on the Summer Solstice. For some reason I just wasn't aware that in the United States, the entire month of November is American Indian Heritage Month. I didn't know that.

But I doubt that I'm alone in not having known that. In this Country we designate days for memorializing things, and then often we forget about it, or we just take the day off. In this case the month of November honors and memorializes Native American history, but then, I think most of us would agree that in American public life there's very little, if any, particular recognition of the indigenous peoples - their greatness, their different cultures, their courage - at least that I'm aware of. At least not around here.

And I ask myself, why would that be? Is it because most of us are so busy with other things? My guess is that in part it has something to do with guilt, with a deep national, historical sense of shame. We can't honestly recount the history of Indigenous American peoples without remembering our part in their history - our dark, shameful part.

And yet we ought never for a moment to forget that we are the Church. And we should think like the Church and speak like the Church. So, what should the Church say in American Indian Heritage Month about our brothers and sisters, the Indigenous Peoples? What can we say that would please Jesus our Lord, who is the guiding star for what we do in the Church, and who loves them as well as us?

I think one would have to begin by acknowledging the facts, the truth, and by saying that

the story of the European conquest and settlement of North America, and the treatment of the people who already lived here must have brought tears to the eyes of our Savior. And in some ways, I think, the Indigenous People of this continent must have experienced the invasion of the Europeans the way the Jews experienced the Roman siege in the First Jewish-Roman War to which today's Gospel makes reference, facing as they did, a people who were better organized, and better armed, people who were contemptuous of them, rapacious, merciless. People who approached them with a sense that they were entitled to whatever they could take from them.

So, if I'm right that guilt has something to do with our failure to celebrate this holiday with the respect we give to some other national holidays, then as the Church, it seems that the next thing we should say is that we're sorry, and we should let the other things proceed from that. We should repent the sins of our fathers which caused so much death and suffering, and from which we have so prodigiously benefitted. We should ask for pardon from the indigenous peoples and from God our Father.

The slaughter of Indigenous Peoples in the Americas is referred to by historians as the Indigenous Holocaust. One scholar has written that what the Europeans brought to America was possibly the

greatest disaster in the history of the world. Millions died at the hand of Europeans. One estimate is a hundred million who called this continent home.

In what is now the continental United States, whole populations were swept away. People. Cultures. Customs. Communities. Territories. In the Continental United States alone there were over 56 language groups, and over 2,000 different languages. The peoples who lived here already, whom we call Indians, had lived here for at least 15,000 years, possibly much longer than that.

The story of what happened to them as a result of Columbus' voyage, Columbus and the Pilgrims, and the others, is so sad that it's hard to talk about. The Europeans came and just took everything from them, and killed them if they objected, and justified doing it in all sorts of ways, by reference to a supposed right of conquest, often by labeling the people who lived here as culturally and biologically, and intellectually and morally inferior to Europeans. By violence, treachery, diseases they brought with them, they took away the land and its riches. And then to their shame, they also justified it by the Bible, by reference to the conquering of Canaan by the Israelites, which the Bible justifies by asserting that God had promised Canaan to them. The Promised Land. And when you think about it, that's another

very sad story.

We think of ourselves as the greatest nation on earth. And for all our faults, I think we are. But it's good for the soul never to forget that we truly are sinners, and so were our ancestors, and theirs, and theirs, and to pray that God will forgive us if we repent.

Today, in this Country, indigenous people seem all but invisible to non indigenous people. Twenty-two percent live on reservations. The remaining seventy-eight percent are more or less ubiquitous, integrated into the population. For the most part, they participate fully in every aspect of American life.

Perhaps the small recognition we Christian people in our church could give them in American Indian Heritage Month is to take notice of their presence here in Michigan, to take an interest in their presence and their history in some non-intrusive way, so we are aware of them as they are, as our neighbors, and our brothers and sisters.

Here are a few very basic facts. In Michigan today there are three large tribal groups, and it would be a good thing if we knew who they are. They are the Ojibwa, the Ottawa and the Potawatami. These three tribal groups form an ancient partnership that bears the historic name of the Three Fires. If you

travel around the state you'll sometimes see that name: The Three Fires. That's who they are.

There are five other significant tribal groups in Michigan. The Huron, the Menominee, the Fox, the Miami and the Sauk. It's a very good and respectful thing to know their names and maybe to inform ourselves a little about their life and traditions, to take an interest in them.

And it would also be a very fine thing in American Indian History Month, and always, to remember, as Christians, that our calling is to kindness, to sympathy, to respect, to love for others, to decency, to forgiveness, to generosity. We are called as the Church, and as Christians, to display as best we can the qualities that God displays to us in Jesus.

And here's something that some of us may not have known - that Ruth Merrifield has American Indian heritage, and so she is going to close out this service with a prayer connected with American Indian Heritage Month. That will be a good thing.