

YES, IT IS US. Barbara Kidd 09/30/2012

YES, IT IS US.

Sunday, September 30, 2012

First reading: The Hangman by Maurice Ogden,

Verses 1 & 4

Stanza 1

Into our town the Hangman came, smelling of gold and blood and flame. And he paced our bricks with a diffident air. And built his frame on the courthouse square.

The scaffold stood by the courthouse side, only as wide as the door was wide; a frame as tall, or little more, than the capping sill of the courthouse door.

And we wondered, whenever we had the time, who the criminal, what the crime, that Hangman judged with the yellow twist of knotted hemp in his busy fist.

And innocent though we were, with dread we passed those eyes of buckshot lead; till one cried: "Hangman, who is he for whom you raise the gallows-tree."

Then a twinkle grew in the buckshot eye, and he gave us a riddle instead of reply: "He who serves me best," said he, "Shall earn the rope on the gallows-tree."

And he stepped down, and laid his hand on a man who came from another land and we breathed again, for another's grief at the Hangman's hand was our relief.

And the gallows-frame on the courthouse lawn by tomorrow's sun would be struck and gone. So we gave him way, and no one spoke, out of respect for his hangman's cloak.

Stanza 4

Then through the town the Hangman came and called in the empty streets my name – and I looked at the gallows soaring tall and thought: "There is no one left at all for hanging, and so he calls to me to help pull down the gallows-tree." And I went out with right good hope to the Hangman's tree and the Hangman's rope.

He smiled at me as I came down to the courthouse square through the silent town, and supple and stretched in his busy hand was the yellow twist of the hempen strand.

And he whistled his tune as he tried the trap and it sprang down with a ready snap – and then with a smile of awful command he laid his hand upon my hand.

"You tricked me, Hangman!" I shouted then. "That your scaffold was built for other men. And I no henchman of yours," I cried, "You lied to me, Hangman, foully lied!"

Then a twinkle grew in his buckshot eye: "Lied to you? Tricked you?" he said, "Not I. For I answered straight and I told you true: The scaffold was raised for none but you.

"For who has served me more faithfully than you with your coward's hope?" said he, "And where are the others that might have stood side by your side in the common good?"

"Dead," I whispered; and amiably "Murdered," the Hangman corrected me; "First the alien, then the Jew... I did no more than you let me do."

Beneath the beam that blocked the sky, none had stood so alone as I – and the Hangman strapped me, and no voice there cried "Stay" for me in the empty square.

For those of us whose hair is not yet grey nor are able to remember both a morning and an evening newspaper, the "Doonesbury" cartoon of our day featured the musings of a possum called "Pogo". In one strip in 1951, at the height of the International Communist Conspiracy, Pogo told a friend "We have met the enemy, and he is us."

I suspect that many of us would be appalled to know that members of our families were members of the Ku Klux Klan here in western Michigan, but a Brit, using materials from a Newago estate auction in the 1990's that wound up in the Clark Archives of Central Michigan University, found that if your family was in Western Michigan in the 1920's, chances are that there is a white robe in your ancestral closet.

The Brit is one Craig Fox and the book is titled "Everyday Klansfolk". It follows the rise, flower and demise of the Klan in Newago County specifically and in Western Michigan in general from 1920-1926. The book is not an easy read. It is largely a PHD thesis and therefore somewhat dense. However, there are some telling points we can take from it.

The first is that up until these records came to light, the 1920's Klan was assumed to be a group of relatively harmless blowhards. In fact, membership closely paralleled the membership of other "clubs" and civic groups from the Oddfellows to the Masons and all stripes between. Some members were laborers and farm hands, but they were also doctors, lawyers, pharmacists, teachers, ministers and other upstanding citizens in our communities.

The second point is that after the Klan in Michigan disintegrated in 1925 & 1926, popular assumption is that we all disavowed our madness, which was primarily anti-Catholic and anti-immigrant (in this case immigrants from southern and eastern Europe). I presume much of that focus was as much a matter of make-up of the population as anything else. At that time, there were few Blacks or Jews in the area and organizers had to object to SOME group that was different from the "Nordic Know Nothings" about which Clarence Darrow complained in the Sweet trial in Detroit about the same time.

The rise of the Jazz Age Klan coincided with the release in 1920 of a technically brilliant feature film, "The Birth of a Nation", based on the novel, "the Clansman", by Thomas Dixon and produced and directed by D. W. Griffith (an early Cecil B. DeMille). The film was lauded both for its technical innovations and spectacle and for its appeal to so called "American values". The technical innovations were the basis of all spectacle films for the rest of the century – cameras on booms, crowd scenes with embedded cameras, cutting from crowd to close-up, etc, etc. Even today one can spot "Birth of a Nation" footage in so called civil war documentaries, though not as I recall, in Ken Burns works.

Consequently, its influence in the years following its release was much more far reaching than might have otherwise been the case. This spectacle was the rack on which every con artist and budding adventurer hung his or her hat for everything from lesser films, to plays for community theaters, songs pitched to sheet music publishers, to ads for butchers, bakers, and candlestick makers for their 100% American wares.

One of the more popular recruiting anthems was titled "God give us men". I think you will find some of its lines surprisingly contemporary.

*"God Give Us Men! The Invisible Empire demands strong
Minds, great hearts, true faith and ready hands,
Men whom lust of office does not kill;
Men whom the spoils of office cannot buy;
Men who possess opinions and a will;
Men who have honor; Men who will not lie;
Men who can stand before a demagogue and damn his treacherous flattering without winking!
Tall men, sun crowned, who live above the fog
In public duty and private thinking;
For while the rabble, with their thumb-worn creeds,
Their large professions and little deeds
Mingle in selfish strife, Lo, freedom weeps,
Wrong rules the land, and waiting justice sleeps,
God give us men!
Men who serve not for selfish booty,
But real men, courageous, who flinch not at duty;
Men of dependable character; men of sterling worth;
Then wrongs will be redressed, and right will rule the earth.
God give us men!"*

President Woodrow Wilson had set the stage for this revival of so called patriotic fervor in his wartime speeches when he publically attacked "citizens of the United States born under other flags ...poured the poison of disloyalty....." In 1923, a Rev. Ford Ross from Battle Creek, speaking at the Fremont Community Center, "explained to those assembled that the Klan is not a political party ... but a movement, and a crusade for better Americanism... built on the principles of the Christian religion ... [and] working for real democracy in this country."

It was this anti-Catholic (as in anti-parochial school), anti-immigration fever that was the core of the KKK message here. Up until the discovery of the archives of the Newwaygo Klan, the supposition of most Michigan historians was that the West Michigan Klan was made up of disgruntled unemployed or underemployed industrial or agricultural workers. The uncovered records show a very different picture. In an age of middle class participation in Fraternal Societies, members of the Newwaygo Klan were also members of the Masons, OddFellows, Gleaners, Grange, Moose, etc. Klanswomen were also members of the Eastern Star, Rebecca Lodge, and Ladies of the Maccabee. Units of the Klan were urged to be sure that they were recruiting (in order of importance): County Officials, City Officials, District Court Officials, School Board Members, School Faculties – you get the idea.

The Klan then was a comfortable social reality in the early to mid twenties punctuated by white robed 100% American weddings, christenings and funerals. There were gatherings not unlike County Fairs across the state led off by parades of floats depicting historical patriotic events escorted by white robed Klan members and culminating in a final communal gathering featuring Klan songs, exhortations and a cross burning.

My own acquaintance with this sort of event came from my a story my mother told of her experience in Adrian in the 20,s at a Catholic boarding school that was directly across the road from the County fair grounds. The Klan gathered as the girls watched from their windows. On the Sunday night of the celebratory weekend, the Nuns kept the girls up, dressed and ready to flee since they had no idea of what might ensue following the cross burning. This was particularly the case since newspapers across the country were closely following the Ossian Sweet riot and subsequent trial in Detroit.

Nothing happened. The cross burned and the followers gathered children and left for home. The following morning a Dominican monk visited the school. For those of you not familiar with the Dominican order, the habits of both priests and nuns are white and the monk robes have hoods not unlike those of the Klan. One young woman had left her class to use the facilities and upon seeing the backs of Mother Superior and the priest walking down the hall, ran through the school screaming of a Klan invasion, thus getting everyone out of class for the rest of the morning. KKK recruitment strategy was not unlike a standard pyramid scheme. Each time a member was successful in bringing in a new member, he or she was paid a founder's fee. Once you had recruited someone, each time that person brought in another, you received a portion of the fee as well and so on.

Michigan's Klan was an expansion from Indiana in a quest for fresh funds. Indeed, the whole pyramid pretty much collapsed in 1925 because of a financial scandal and the drop in personal income in the mid 20's in rural areas that preceded the Great Crash in 1929 resulted in a great many lapsed memberships in 1925 & 26. Klan fever was over for the moment.

There was one note of common sense in all this. In 1923, probably in light of events in Detroit, the Michigan Legislature passed a law forbidding the wearing of masks at public gatherings. This law, generally referred to as the Burns Act, is credited with preventing violence at many Klan gatherings across the state. The point of all this is that for some reason, most of us find THE OTHER suspect. Calls for return to our pure patriotic past, which was often neither unique nor particularly admirable is heard rather loudly these days. The Puritans landed at Plymouth to worship in their own way and to sure that the rest of us worshipped that way too. At that time, only Roger Williams and a handful of fellow free thinkers saw no evil in being different and the battle for free thought in American, indeed in the world, has gone on in varying intensity ever since. May we hope that we never fail to speak for the victims of intolerance or for freedom of thought.

CLOSING READING

The following is the adaptation of remarks of UUA President Peter Morales at the General Assembly last June and appeared on the back page of our last U U World.

Because love cannot keep silent, we will bear witness.

Because love reaches out, we will join hands with our partners.

Because love is sacred, we will worship together.

Because love delights in friendship, we will celebrate together.

Because love opens us at the core of our being, we will learn, we will be moved, we will be changed.

Because love is strong, we will prevail.

Not today. Maybe not next week or next month.

But love is stronger than fear.

Love is stronger than hate.

Love is not afraid.

Love is tough.

Love endures.

We will prevail.