

Wishing Matters were Simpler
May 28, 2006

If it were only that simple! So many things: making decisions; choosing from among many; picking one over another; knowing right from wrong. Any number of things.

The Book of Acts begins, and this is no real surprise, with the selection of a disciple to replace Judas. You would think that this might be a simple matter. Not the case! Apparently there are two candidates and only one opening. Joseph, called Barsabbas, and also known as Justus is one. Let me say for the record that I would have ruled him out immediately. Anyone having three names would just serve to confuse things. The other is Matthias. How to decide? Peter and the other remaining disciples pray to the Lord. You would think that might resolve things, but apparently not. Just goes to show prayer, right from the beginning of the church, is no easy matter either. So they cast lots and Matthias gets the luck of the draw.

We know so little about either Joseph called Barsabbas and known as Justus, or Matthias that it really doesn't matter an iota to us. However, as is the case with so many matters of life and faith and politics, things turn out to be much more difficult than they might seem at first.

Which brings us to The DaVinci Code. Well, not really, but I did have to work that in somehow. I do plan on seeing the movie and after reading the book am looking forward to it. As far as the controversy goes, here is a perfect example of something which I think is pretty clear cut, but has been blown way out of proportion. I love the ad I have heard on the radio, author Dan Brown himself, wondering how an author in New Hampshire could have somehow undermined the Christian Church, built on centuries of theological discourse. I have no trouble resolving in one word the dispute that has been going on—fiction! The book is good fun and I assume the movie will be too. It may even get us thinking about Jesus and his humanity, but it is clearly spelled out (I checked as recently as last night) that “All the characters and events in this book are fictitious.” So, if you want to know, I probably am not going to give a sermon on the movie. But if you want to go, I urge you to go, have fun and not make The DaVinci Code too big a deal.

Now the plain truth is that while we tend to scrutinize so many things that are really not all that complicated, I do think there are matters that, though we might wish them to be simpler, prove very difficult. Today, for me, is one of those days. Memorial Day. A day set aside since shortly after the Civil War to honor those who have given their lives in conflict, in service to their country. Veterans.

Memorial Day becomes complicated by such factors as patriotism, the ethics of war, our feelings about war and our allegiance and support of those we have known who have gone to war for their country. A whole slew of things go into our feelings toward Memorial Day. What I want to do here, in a short period of time, is try to simplify a bit. To suggest that we can surely agree on many things concerning this day; and that we might simply want to agree to disagree on other matters...at least for today.

First, our respect should be given wholeheartedly to those who have died in warfare, veterans that have returned as well as those who are currently serving their country, no matter what our feelings about the conflict. Tom Brokaw really didn't have to argue about the honor we should bestow upon those who fought in World War II. He called them the “Greatest Generation” and I daresay no one disputed his claim. Most of us also remember the Vietnam War and the way soldiers were scorned, even upon their return...many spit upon by protesters as they reentered at airports. I think people have learned that no matter the conflict, it behooves us to recognize the sacrifice of the military who serve and the pain felt by families who lose loved ones. On this basic level, today is simple – we show respect for those who died and for Veterans.

Second, I believe our respect must go deeper than the handshaking done by welcoming committees at Bangor International as soldiers return home or tomorrow's parades with much display of flag waving. I learned when living in West Lebanon, across the river from the VA Hospital in White River Junction, that our

support of Veterans is indeed fickle. I don't know how many times while I lived there, the VA was threatened with cutbacks. Indeed other VA hospitals throughout the country were closed. The VA in White River simply had existing space eliminated. The number of physicians was reduced. Operating rooms. Patient care. Many Veterans were sent to other hospitals further away, making travel difficult and family visitation impossible. I have been acquainted with many of the Chaplains at the VA over the years. You would think the mental state of the patients would be of the utmost concern, their spiritual recovery and well-being. But when a Chaplain left, it was always a time to go through a lengthy hiring process, leaving the chaplains remaining overburdened with too large a client load. I think this second matter is pretty clear cut and simple as well – we cannot let the government shortchange those who have been sent into battle. It is a justice issue. If we commission people to serve; we must advocate for their care.

Third, and this is a more difficult matter, often a point of contention if you will. Because we protest a war, this in no way means we are showing disrespect for those who are currently serving. The patriotism of the protester should not be questioned. This is a non-issue! Now this is one of those points that we may need to agree to disagree on, because our opinions are pretty deep rooted at this point. Surely if you think of a sporting event, you root for your team. You don't encourage them by booing. Yet, war is not a game, not even a contest. It is a dilemma and a struggle and count me as one who would insist that every conflict be challenged on some level, simply because people in the service are sacrificing their lives and civilians, even more tragically, are always caught in the crossfire. Such concern for the loss of life is not a lack of patriotism; it is a call to uplift humanitarian concerns. As Christians, it is the struggle to acknowledge the sanctity of all life. A few days ago, Condoleezza Rice drew protests because many saw her as an advocate of war. They questioned how Boston College -a good catholic school - could therefore honor her. The dissent was not an insult to those in harm's way; it was part of the ongoing debate, weighing the legitimacy of warfare in advancing freedom. It is imperative for faithful people to enter into such moral and ethical discussions and to do so with passion and conviction.

Finally, I think on a day like Memorial Day it is good to keep things in their proper perspective. Indeed, this is perhaps a more difficult age in which we live, this day when we battle terrorism in its many forms and configurations. Without a doubt the struggle is arduous and demanding. However, our Christian tradition honors the concept of Shalom – that there will one day be a time of peace and prosperity among the nations of the world. We cannot be disciples if we betray this ultimate vision.

I came across a song written by Steve Earle in 2002, just as the war against terrorism was getting under way. A rock and country western singer, Earle has long been the writer of protest songs, several of which have threatened to hurt him with his audience. But I see nothing harmful in his song “Jerusalem.” In fact I see it as a reminder of the Biblical mandate to seek shalom. In this song, Jerusalem is not just a city; nor even a mid-eastern local – it stands for the world torn with age-old strife. Earle sings:

I woke up this mornin' and none of the news was good
And death machines were rumblin' 'cross the ground where Jesus stood
And the man on my TV told me that it had always been that way
And there was nothin' anyone could do or say

And I almost listened to him
Yeah, I almost lost my mind
Then I regained my senses again
And looked into my heart to find

That I believe that one fine day all the children of Abraham
Will lay down their swords forever in Jerusalem

Well maybe I'm only dreamin' and maybe I'm just a fool
But I don't remember learnin' how to hate in Sunday school
But somewhere along the way I strayed and I never looked back again
But I still find some comfort now and then

Then the storm comes rumblin' in
And I can't lay me down
And the drums are drummin' again
And I can't stand the sound

But I believe there'll come a day when the lion and the lamb
Will lie down in peace together in Jerusalem

If Jerusalem can stand for our world and remind us of the Cradle of Civilization, and if we can identify and recall all the many lives that have been lost over history by this continual conflict of heart and mind and learn from this Memorial Day exercise of respectful remembrance, we surely should be able to see the Christ figure standing alone on the battlefield of violence and scorn, and lamenting over the human condition. But never losing hope!

Let us honor those who have served; but let us never forget the dream which is God-given:

And there'll be no barricades then
There'll be no wire or walls
And we can wash all this blood from our hands
And all this hatred from our souls

And I believe that on that day all the children of Abraham
Will lay down their swords forever in Jerusalem.