Free Synagogue Pulpit

ABRAHAM LINCOLN: MAN AND AMERICAN

BY

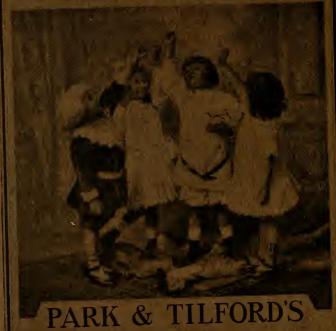
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ARE THE BEST

Lincoln: Man and American*

The honoring invitation to give the address of tonight came to me as I was feasting upon the glad beauty of far-distant Venice. On the same day I had gone to one of the beautiful old churches facing St. Mark's and the Doge's palace across the Grand Canal. And there I looked at the grave of the great Doge or Duke Michael, for whom one of the two matchless columns of the Piazza of St. Mark had been erected. On the tomb are written the words: "Here lies the terror of the Greeks. soever thou art who comes to behold this tomb of his, bow thyself down before God because of him." As I stood this day at the tomb of Lincoln, those words recurred to my memory. But Lincoln was not the terror of the Greeks nor terror to any man. Yet we do well to bow ourselves down to God because of him, God's choicest gift to the American nation. America's first commoner.

This is the centenary of another great American, preacher and prophet, Henry Ward Beecher, and therefore I may fittingly refer to the words which he spoke at the death of Lincoln. Beecher said

^{*}Address delivered by Dr. Wise at the one hundred and fifth anniversary of the birth of Abraham Lincoln, under the auspices of the Lincoln Centennial Association, at Springfield, Ill.

"Not Springfield's but Illinois', not Illinois' but the Nation's, not the nation's but the world's, is this man." Though the name of Lincoln has become a world-wide treasure, how good it is for you to feel that he belongs not to the world but to America, not to America but to Illinois, not to Illinois but to Springfield, to you nearest and dearest of all; and, because he is nearest to you, his memory spells duty and high obligation and inescapable responsibility.

In explanation rather than in criticism of a great writer of another day, it was truly said—Alas for the man who has no shrines! Doubly, trebly true is this of a nation, if it may truly be said that it has no shrines. America has many shrines. We have come to love and to honor many of the great and the good that have made the few years of our history splendid and commanding in the annals of human achievement. But surely there will be no dissenting from the thought that the two chiefest and holiest shrines of America are to be found on the bank of the Potomac and within this city of Illinois, twin shrines for the American people, each of them reverently regarded and tenderly treasured.

What characterization of Lincoln could be more perfect than the word of Ecclesiasticus in which the latter describes the character and the life of another and earlier liberator: "And God brought out a man of mercy, a man loved of God and man, whose memorial is blessed. He sanctified him in his faithfulness and meekness."

A man of mercy! Lincoln was that. Not only was he a man of mercy, but a man of infinite com-

passion. He was a strong man, a rugged man, a virile man, but such was his strength that it blossomed in unfailing mercy and compassion.

A man beloved of God and men! This was Abraham Lincoln. A man beloved of God, whom God raised from among the simplest and the lowliest of the people to be a prince among men, and to be remembered reverently and tenderly long after the princes of the earth shall have been forgotten. A man loved of God and men! Men did not always love him; they did not always understand him. It was just before his passing, as the bearer of a martyr's crown, that men began to understand this man. But how men have loved him since! How the world has come to cherish him as its own! But it is all so obvious and inevitable. Lincoln was God's man, and God's man who can withstand?

His memorial is blest. What better proof than that we are gathered in this hour, as men are wont to gather at a shrine, in order to do homage to one of the two august memories of American history, the earlier memory, austere and majestic, the later memory more human and kindly and benign.

Saint Beuve has said, "The glory of Bossuet has become one of the religions of France. We recognize, we proclaim it, we honor ourselves by paying to it daily a new tribute." May we not say that the glory of Lincoln has become one of the religions of America—a religion of the American people? The glory of Lincoln, who was more than President, more than statesman, more than martyr, is one of our religions. If we do not worship him, it it not, as Carlyle says, that "men worship the shows of

great men; the most disbelieve that there is any reality of great men to worship," but because he is almost too great for our homage and too lofty for our praise. His glory is our religion. His memory is a consecration of American life.

It is well to emphasize every day, and more than ever at such a time as this, that Lincoln is a religion in our land, lest some of us imagine that the railroad-dividend, or the yield of the mine or the harvest of the field, or the output of the factory, or the cash-book of the warehouse, is our religion. In the temple of deathless fame his memory is enshrined. We do not know whether his bust has been chosen to adorn a niche in the Hall of Fame on the University Heights in New York; if not, it is because he is Fame. His tomb at Springfield is not less sacred and precious than the grave at Mt. Vernon, each a revered shrine of the American people, each a hallowed altar of humanity.

Vindication of the American democracy—we call this man of the people, simply sublime because sublimely simple. Let other nations boast of their achievements; we point to Lincoln, the man—not unique, but uniquely American, matchless the world over, but completely, robustly, sincerely American.

No miracle was he who was the inevitable product of the American people. Far greater than the seeming miracle of his life would have been the failure of America to bring forth a man equal to its supreme trial. Not by virtue of accident rose Lincoln to the place of liberator of a race and saviour of a nation. The mission came to the man because he was the man for the mission. The unutterable privilege of breaking the shackles from off millions of slaves had to come to Abraham Lincoln, because of the destiny of his character—this man of rugged strength of character, uncompromising conscience, unspoiled simplicity of heart, blameless purity of soul, whose was the greatness of real goodness and the goodness of real greatness.

Turning for a moment to a foreign estimate of Lincoln, which naturally is temperate and sober and in no sense perfervid, we find the French Democracy some years back casting a commemorative medal inscribed: "Lincoln-honest abolished slavery, re-established the Union, saved the Republic." The "honest man" of the French characterization explains everything else. There is a direct and inevitable relation between "honest man" and all the rest. Great as were his achievements, the French people rightly felt that the man was even greater than his works. "Honest man" France names him; the negro race called him "Father Abraham"-a title infinitely more to be desired than "Conqueror," which is the portion of an Alexander or a Napoleon.

We are often reminded, and not without justice, that there is nothing supremely great in American art, or letters, that the contributions of America to the world's treasure-stores are all material, such as the cotton-gin and the steam press, the telegraph and steamboat, the telephone and harvester. If American letters have produced nothing superlatively great, we have something superlatively great to offer to history in the life of the founder

of the Republic and in the life of him who was the saviour of the Nation and the restorer of our National Union. We point to Lincoln, the man. Beecher apostrophizes him as Illinois' gift to the Nation. Lowell glorifies him as the new birth of our new soil—the first American. Emerson sees that he is an heroic figure at the centre of an heroic epoch. Wendell Phillips proudly hails him as the natural growth of democratic institutions. And Phillips Brooks honors him with a name above every other that he might have asked—this best and most American of all Americans.

Lincoln was the most American of Americans. It cannot truly be said that Lincoln was not a type. God help us if Lincoln be not a type, if it be true that he stands alone, without fellows, without ancestors and without sucessors. His ancestors were Cromwell and Hampden, Hancock and Adams, Washington and Franklin. His ancestry was the the Magna Charta and the Declaration of Independence. Among his forerunners were Garrison, John Brown, Theodore Parker; Lincoln himself was just and generous enough to say of his forerunners, the intrepid Abolitionists, that their moral power had enabled him to do all.

Lincoln was chosen out of the people—the great American commoner, plain man of the people, as Emerson first styled him. To be the first man of a people in a land where every citizen is king is to be the manliest of men and the kingliest of kings—king by divine right, by the divinest of rights—the right of manhood and worth and character. Is it not the very Paladium of our liberty that the com-

moner, the homespun man, may rise to the highest station in the land? Is it not the inspiration of our youth and the pride of our manhood that the commoner, speaking for his kind, voiced the abiding truth: Government of the people, by the people and for the people shall not perish from the earth?

As one thinks of the two shrines of American history, and to these others will be added in the years that are to come, how are they confounded who declare that the people whom Lincoln trusted cannot even now be completely trusted! How often have we erred in the one hundred and thirty years of American history in the matter of choosing the Chief Magistrate of the nation? Not once have we chosen badly. What kingdom or empire of the earth has done as well? Within seventy-five years this nation chose two men as President of the United States who are to stand among the world's immortals-Washington and Lincoln within one century! Match that in all the centuries of the earth's kingdoms and empires. What European nation has had two rulers from 1789 to this hour who compare in moral and spiritual stature with these two giants of a giant continent?

Lincoln the man is at one and the same time the vindication of the American democracy and of the dignity and nobleness of the common people from whom he was sprung. He proved anew that the uncommonest men and women rise out of the ranks of the so-called common people.

How the memory of Lincoln rebukes the pettily arrogant and the meanly proud, who disdain and even abhor the common people because they are

not nice nor yet refined nor yet cultivated! Lincoln was not nice; he was simple, rough, uncouth, elemental, himself. He never talked very much about democracy or the common people because he was one of them. In the mind and speech of Lincoln, the people were never "They" but always "We." Lincoln was saved from the ungenuineness of a lip-philanthropy by his common sense, his most uncommon sense of humor, his utterly democratic spirit.

Sprung from the people and trusting in the people, the people trusted and loved him. "They who trust us educate us." They alone distrust the people who are not worthy of a people's trust. Let not a man of the people who trusts and would serve them, who dares to speak of the duties of the strong and the rights of the weak, be derided as a demagogue. For Lincoln was a man of the people-not a blatant demagogue, not a democrat on parade, but so democratic, so firmly trusting in the people that the immortal watchword that he gave to the nation was the necessary expression of the fundamental democracy of faith and life of him "whose genuine love of the people no one could suspect of being either the cheap flattery of the demagogue or the abstract philanthropy of the philosopher." As one reviews the life of Lincoln, the prophet of democracy, one is moved to say that no man has the right to call himself a democrat who distrusts the people, who is fearful of entrusting the people with plenary power, who is afraid that the popular rights movement has "gone too far." Lincoln trusted the common people with less reason for

faith than have we. We have every reason to trust the people, which moved him to place his trust in them, and one besides, Lincoln himself—the common people incarnate in this type of man.

Democracy means not the eternal sounding of futile shibboleths, such as State rights—too often an apology for a state of wrong—but the application of fundamental political principles to the working out of the problems of American life and American welfare. Democracy is to be something more than the pose of a hungry office-hunting minority or majority; it is to be the genuine conviction of a vast majority, not the slogan of a party, but the ideal of the whole nation.

Lincoln came of a race of pioneers, of men who dared to the very verge of their being. We, too, in our day must pioneer as did Lincoln in his-not rashly adventurous but bravely daring in the enterprises of the soul. Rash and fool-hardy were deemed the pioneers of a century ago. In truth, they adventured much, but only they were rash and fool-hardy who little esteemed the pioneers and appraised them low. Pioneers must we be in the new world of our making and of our re-creating, with the qualities of the pioneers who, above all, were the soldiers of the common weal. Not pioneering for themselves, for he is no pioneer who would serve himself alone, but pioneers merely that we may occupy the outposts of new realms of the spirit and new regions of achievement to be peopled and to be blessed by the generations for which we shall have prepared the way as Lincoln prepared the way for us gathered to do him homage!

In a very real sense, Lincoln was prophetic of that which is yet to be, prophetic of the new religion, though he knew it not, prophetic of the religion of Abraham and Moses and Jesus and Lincoln—the religion which is summarized in the words—Love of God and love of neighbor.

Lincoln was prophetic in yet another sense, for he was the foreseer of the newer and truer democracy. He struck a deadly blow at that most terrible of all castes, the caste of race. If we are to be true to his memory, we must strike other and telling blows at every vestige of the false idolatry of caste and rank. Democracy is not an institution to be created nor a structure to be established nor even an ideal to be realized. More unsubstantial, withal more vital and preduring than all of these, be it not forgotten that democracy is the attitude of the common mind, that it is the aspiration of the common altv.

Lincoln fulfilled the idea laid down in the holy writ for the governance of those who are to choose judges and rulers of the people: "Moreover, thou shalt choose out of all the people men of strength, such as fear God, men of truth, hating their own gain."

Men of strength were the judges and rulers to be! He was a man of that moral strength which is the noblest courage—strong enough to dare to be in the right and to do the right though he must needs stand alone. Let us not forget his strength, who was as strong as he was simple, not only strong enough to carry on a mighty war to a triumphant close, but strong enough to oppose an unjust war, even though waged by his country. So strong was he that, refusing to be goaded on by his friends and unafraid of his foes, he issued the Emancipation Proclamation at the right hour, when it was destined to achieve the greatest good. Man of strength was he who, three days before his assassination, gave voice to the guiding rule of his life: "Important principles may and must be inflexible"; who, in his Cooper Union address, delivered himself of the almost prophetic burden: "Let us have faith that right makes might, and in that faith let us to the end dare do our duty as we understand it."

Such as fear God! Fearless before man, Abraham Lincoln feared God. Lip-piety was not of the substance of his religion, nor was he given to many professions of faith, but he walked in the fear of God. Not only was he a profoundly religious man, the content of whose life was rooted in religion, whose religion flowered in the beauty of the good and the true, but his was a conscious faith in a supreme purpose. Almost might one say in paraphrase of the word of Schiller, that the churches were not religious enough to command his allegiance. The question touching his day is not so much whether Lincoln was a churchman, but whether the churches of his time were Lincoln-like. Only to a God-fearing man could have come the inspiration with which he closed his second inaugural address: "With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish

the work we are in." Such fear of God is a nation's strength.

Men of truth! Scorning to tell a lie and lover of truth, this man who could not stoop to think or to speak a lie, was little likely to act or to live a lie. Compromise and time-serving were strangers to his vocabulary. Wise but not fearful, circumspect but not compromising, careful but unafraid was he. Nothing could be unfairer than to think of Lincoln, as is sometimes done, as if he had been a man of political cunning, lacking in intellectual stability and moral courage. He was open-minded, but he was sturdily self-reliant. He was intellectually receptive, but always self-contained, even as he was a man of the people though never common. Carl Schurz tells that in the first Springfield legislature in which he sat, he recorded his protest against a pro-slavery resolution, though followed by only one other man. So did he love truth and scorn a lie that when he was warned in advance against the consequences of his Springfield address, he silenced his timid friends with the unforgettable words: "It is true, and I will deliver it as written."

Hating their own gain! Self-seeking was far from him and the quest after gain of any kind was unthinkable in this lover of his country. He was not a President with a conscience, but he was conscience incarnate in a President. He hated the gain of the people's praise, even the gain of such popular good-will as would bring about his re-election, unless such gain could be had without the sacrifice of self-respect. He was a statesman who pleaded ever for truth and never for victory. He would

have shared Lowell's scorn for the party which builds a platform as a bridge to victory and not, one might add, as a refuge for truth. The people could not flatter him, politicians could not frighten him, riches could not purchase him, ambition could not unsteady him, power could not dazzle him, who served his conscience as his king, who "held his steadfast way like the sun across the firmament."

Rightly was it said of Lincoln that his was a character such as only freedom knows how to make. If our democracy become polluted by the taint of caste, it will produce no Abraham Lincolns. Lincoln fought not so much slavery as the thing which made it possible—the feudal spirit of caste of which negro slavery was only the most abhorent symptom. It was a noble prophecy of a tribune of the people, George William Curtis, that the part assigned to this country in the good fight of man is the total overthrow of the spirit of caste. It is a far cry from the riotous opposition to the appearance of a coat-of-arms, in the late thirties of the last century, on the carriage of a rich New York family, to the title-hunting mothers and fathers of our own day, who prefer the purchase of some negligible dukelet or paltry princeling to the best of men, if so be he bear no prouder title than that of fellow-American of Abraham Lincoln.

We need today, be it said in the spirit of Abraham Lincoln, not a new South but a true South—a South that shall be true to itself, true to the Union and true to the principles of true democracy, a South that shall not have the name of democracy upon its lips and despotism in its heart. One thing is cer-

tain—that the way not to prepare the negro for citizenship is the way in large part of the South which denies to the negro the right to a complete education, which grants him little more than the shreds and scraps of a rudimentary education that is not worthy of the name. Unless Lincoln's work is to have been done in vain, the South must not fix upon servitude without chains as the abiding portion of the negro race.

Lincoln has conferred a new dignity upon labor, but the new dignity of labor must include larger dignity and fuller life for the toiler. If it be true, as Lincoln said, that to secure to each laborer the whole product of his labor, or as nearly as possible, is a worthy object of any good government, then children shall cease to toil, then Northern capital shall cease to enslave the children of the South, then women must not be overworked and underpaid, must not be driven into shame from shop and store and factory by a starvation wage, then man must have a larger and larger share of the fruits of his labor. If we are to do Lincoln's work, we must enfranchise all men, and first of all ourselves, into that glorious liberty of the sons of God which has been appointed to us, that we, the citizens of the American democracy, may be the emancipators of untold millions for all time.

Not very long ago I was invited to purchase a volume purporting to set forth the genealogy of Lincoln. The price of the volume was to be ten dollars, something more than the value of the house in which Lincoln was born. The descent of Lincoln is of very little importance by the side of the ques-

tion—how shall we avert a descent from Lincoln? What can we do in order to ascend to the heights on which he stood? This Lincoln commemoration from year to year will be of little value unless, in the spirit of the Gettysburg address, we make it tell by dedicating ourselves anew to the things for which he lived and died. The important thing today is not what we say of Lincoln but what Lincoln would say of us if he were here in this hour and could note the drift and tendency in American life and American politics. Are we true to him, are we loyal to his memory?

Edmund Burke once said that during the reign of the kings of Spain of the Austrian family, whenever they were at a loss in the Spanish Councils, it was common for their statesmen to say that they ought to consult the genius of Phillip II. We dwell in times of great perplexity and are beset by farreaching problems of social, industrial and political import. We shall not greatly err if upon every occasion we consult the genius of Abraham Lincoln. We shall not falter nor swerve from the path of national righteousness if we live by the moral genius of the great American commoner.

Instead of following Lincoln, we too often strive to make it appear that he is following us. Instead of emulating him we too often venture to appropriate him. Instead of sitting at his feet as his disciples, and humbly heeding the echoes of his lips, we attribute to him our own petty slogans. The truth is that Lincoln belongs to no party today, though in his time he stood well and firmly within party ranks. His spirit ought today to inform all

parties. He was a partisan second, an American first, as he is the first of Americans. Men and measures must not claim him for their own. He remains the standard by which to measure men. His views are not binding upon us, but his point of view will always be our inspiration. He would not be blindly followed who was open-minded and open-visioned. He did not solve all the problems of the future, but he did solve the problem of his own age. Ours it is not to claim his name for our standards but his aim as our standard.

Lincoln is become for us the test of human worth, and we honor men in the measure in which they approach the absolute standard of Abraham Lincoln. Other men may resemble and approach him; he remains the standard whereby all other men are measured and appraised. Gibbon tells us that two hundred and fifty years after the death of Trajan the Senate, in calling out the customary acclamation on the accession of an Emperor, wished that he might surpass the felicity of Augustus and the virtue of Trajan. Melior Trajano-better than Trajan! Such a standard is Lincoln become for us, save that we dare not hope that any American may serve his country better than did Lincoln. However covetous of honor for our country we may be, we cherish no higher hope for the land we love than that the servants of the Republic in all time may rise to the stature of Abraham Lincoln.

In his lifetime Lincoln was maligned and traduced, but detraction during a man's lifetime affords no test of his life's value nor offers any forecast of history's verdict. It would almost seem as if the glory of immortality were anticipated in the life of the great by detraction and denial whilst yet they lived. When a Lincoln-like man arises, let us recognize and fitly honor him. There could be no poorer way of honoring the memory of Lincoln than to assume, as we sometimes do, that the race of Lincolns has perished from the earth, and that we shall never look upon his like again. One way to ensure the passing of the Lincolns is to assume that another Lincoln can nevermore arise. Would we find Lincoln today, we must not seek him in the guise of a rail-splitter, nor as a wielder of the backwoodsman's axe, but as a mighty smiter of wrong in high places and low.

Not very long ago I chanced upon a rarely beautiful custom in the city of Florence. It was the day of the martyrdom "of a prophet sent by God." A multitude stood before the spot where he was done to death—his hands miraculously uplifted in blessing in the very moment of torture and death—and every man brought a rose petal in token of reverence and gratitude to the martyred soul. This day every American citizen, every American man and woman and child has in spirit brought a petal to the grave of Lincoln, who sleeps tonight beneath a wilderness of love-tokens from men of all faiths and tongues and races and backgrounds—who are become one and indivisible in their love and honor for the memory of Abraham Lincoln.

I have sometimes thought that the noblest tribute paid to the memory of Lincoln was the word of Phillips Brooks in Westminster Abbey when, pointing out that the test of the world to every nation was—Show us your man—he declared that America names Lincoln. But the first word spoken after the death of Lincoln is truest and best—the word of Secretary of War Stanton, standing by the side of that scene of peace—"Now he belongs to the ages." It was verdict and prophecy alike, for Lincoln is not America's, he is the world's; he belongs not to our age, but to the ages; and yet, though he belongs to all time and to all peoples, he is our own, for he was an American.

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