

Homily for Maine Frontier Day

Savages. The place was teeming with savages. They did not, (it was said), understand private property. They did not "plant any Gardens or Orchards, Inclose or improve their lands, live together in settled Villages or Townes. Those who had traveled to the savage land came back full of tales, describing the natives as:

Lazy, "naturally" given to "idleness" and unwilling to work for "their own bread." Dominated by "innate sloth," "loose, barbarous and most wicked," and living "like beasts."

It was clear, upon such observation, that the English Empire had a God-given responsibility to "inhabit and reform so barbarous a nation," and so they did, sending ships and soldiers and settlers. They burned the crops and the shelters. They slaughtered families, "man, woman and child," claiming they had harboured and supported the enemies of the crown. After four years on the blood-soaked frontier, one English correspondent sent this description back across the water:

Out of every corner of the woods and glens they came creeping forth on their hands, for their legs would not bear them. They looked anatomies of death; they spake like ghosts crying out of their graves." The death toll was so high that, "in short space there were none almost left and a most populous and plentiful country suddenly left void of man or beast." The "void" meant vacant lands for English resettlement.

This was the frontier in 1596. The name of the country could have been America, but it was not America. The so-called savages were not Native Americans. They were native Irish.

Ireland was the proving ground for the masterminds of the British Empire. Ronald Takaki describes the connection in his book, "A Different Mirror:"

Sir Humphrey Gilbert, Lord De La Warr, Sir Francis Drake, & Sir Walter Raleigh participated in both the invasion of Ireland and the colonization of the New World...Commander John Mason conducted military campaigns against the Irish before he sailed to New England, where he led troops against the Pequots of Connecticut.

Meanwhile, the SSPCK--the Society in Scotland for Propagating of Christian Knowledge--was intent on stamping out "the barbarian tongue" of Gaelic, the first step towards civilizing the "Wild Scots" of the Highlands. They also busied themselves with New World heathens. Seeking a missionary to preach to Native Americans to Georgia in 1735, they settled on the Reverend Iain MacLeod. A Gaelic-speaker, they believed, would be able to converse with the natives quite easily--one barbarian to another.

Savages and Barbarians, Tinkers and Thieves, Devils and Drunks... our ancestors carried

these names along with the rest of their burdens. The words burned into them, like the memory of the guns and cannons, the burning hunger and smoldering homesteads.

Some had left their homelands by choice. Some followed the fleeting hopes of a better life, a land of milk and honey, honest work and decent pay. Others were driven from their homes with fire and sword, forced to flee with next to nothing. The men and women of Scotland and Ireland suffered war, blighted crops, and countless disasters. Few owned the land on which their families had lived for generations. A Landlord's whim could drive entire villages out into the raw Atlantic weather, across moors and craigs and down to the creaking, stinking ships waiting to carry their cargo of misery over the sea. And on those moors, and craigs, and ships, when two or more gathered in God's name, for joyful worship or desperate prayer, it was home, home, home that their hearts hungered for, home that their spirits sought.

From one frontier to another, the story played out again and again. Clearing the Irish, Clearing the Scots-- then moving the displaced Scots to the lands where the Irish had been. The Powers and Principalities played with these living pawns and treated their maps like chess-boards. And so these "savages," these "barbarian Celts" were shoved from one edge to another, always with a promise dangling in front of them and a bayonet at their backs. Taunting them with tales of bounty, teasing them with glowing descriptions of plentiful homesteads in another land, the English practiced all their tactics on the Irish and the Scots to prepare for their next frontier.

Here, now, in this place, on Maine Frontier Day, the story is told again-- how Native people were pushed aside, to make way for the conquering colonial powers. And who was sent to do the pushing? The Scots-Irish. Here they stood, on the edge of all they knew. Here they cleared the great forests, fought soldiers and wild beasts, infiltrated Indian territory, and built their homes, at the shifting boundaries of an infant nation.

Somewhere, at the edge of a forest, an immigrant mother composed a lullabye in Gaelic. She struggled to make sense of the frightening changes and the hardship they endured. She poured out her heart to a restless child with these words:

Dean cadalan samhach, a chuilean mo run	Sleep peacefully, my dear little one
Dean fuireach mar tha thu, s'tu 'n drasd an ait ur	Live as you are, now in a new place
Bidh oigearan againn	There'll be young men amongst us
Lan beartais is cliu,	Winning wealth and reknown
'S ma bhios tu nad airidh	If you are deserving,
'S leat feareigin dhui	One will be for you.

Hungry for an anchoring wisdom in this strange land, she imagined a new sort of nobility. The settlers will raise up their children with strength and courage, as they did in the Highland clans of her far-off homeland. Like any mother, she tried to put a brave face on things:

Gur h'ann an Ameirearga tha sinn an drasd'	It's in America we are now
Fo dhubhas na coille nach teirig gu brath	In the forests' everlasting darkness
Nuair dh'fhalbhas an duldach 's a thionndas am blaths	When winter's gone & warmth returns

Bidh cnothan is ubhlan is siucar a' fas

There'll be nuts, apples, & sugar to come

Mo shoraidh le failte Chinn-taile nam bo

My farewell & greetings to cattle-rich Kintail

Far an d'fhuair mi greis arach

Where I was brought up

'S mi 'm phaisde beag og

Where I spent my childhood

Bhiodh fleasgaichean donn'

Where brown-haired lads

air am bonnaibh ri ceol

Would be dancing to music

Is nionagan dualach, 's an gruaidh mar an ros

And long-haired lasses with cheeks like a rose

There is one verse more startling, more powerful than the rest. Beyond the wistful longings, the mother catches a glimpse of a deeper truth. She recognizes a connection with others in this challenging, changing land:

Tha sinn 'nar n-Innseanaich cinnteach gu leor

We're Indians sure enough,

A-mach 's a' choill' udlaidh

Out in the dark forests

Gun sugradh, gun cheol,

Without mirth or music

'S nan sgrìobhadh iad firinn

If only the truth would be written

A-sios mar bu choir

down rightly,

Cha tigeadh na Gaidheil

Never again would the Gaels

Gu brath air an tior

have to chase after them.

We're Indians, sure enough-- not that we pretend to be the same, or claim we're identical. There is no need to point out our differences now. But we do share a history, brutal as it is. Our two stories are one. If only this lullabye had been sung by more settlers, perhaps we would have recognized it sooner. Instead, the frontier became, and remained, a place of sorrow and bloodshed.

When our ancestors crossed the Atlantic, they became threshold people, standing at the open doorway of possibility. The old burdens and cruelties haunted the edges of their vision. New burdens and new cruelties crowded--and clouded--their field of vision further. They found themselves being shoved to the edges once more. Blinded by their own desperation, they forgot the old ways of welcoming. They forgot the deep hospitality their ancestors had known. Their hands curled tightly to protect what little they had. They had lost so very much... They forgot how to unclench their fists.

This is a day of triumphs and tragedies. The greatest of triumphs is that we gather here, with enough vigor and courage to retrace our steps and re-examine the past. The greatest of all tragedies is this: that two weary, hungry, cultures came together, but did not find common ground. Two cultures with a shared history of great love for the land, each with traditions full of wisdom and welcoming, met here, but did not listen hard enough. We can say we won--we have our stories, our history, our sturdy homes--but nothing can ease the phantom pain of the wholeness that was lost.

On the stage of the world, the story is told again and again. Refugee or landlord, traveler or settler, the need for care and compassion never leave us. Strangers--and angels--may always

be in our midst, and the ancient virtues of Highland Hospitality are still vitally important today.

As Scripture says, "Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing so some have entertained angels without knowing it... Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God."

It is said that "you cannot shake hands with a clenched fist." These two movements, the outstretched hand and the clenched fist, have both been part of our heritage, and it is always hard to choose between them. The clenched fist and the barred door are close and safe. They feel strong and secure. But God calls us to a different kind of strength, a greater source of security.

Our clans may have given our ancestors life, but our clannishness has often confined us, kept us locked away from the abundance that God intends. Let us lift up our eyes, and open our doors, our hearts, and our minds, in that questing, imaginative spirit that has guided the Celts for hundreds of years. Our heritage mean nothing if it is locked away... but consider how our wealth can increase if only it is shared! Angels await us, disguised as strangers. Kinfolk surround us, awaiting an invitation. We stand at a threshold, we immigrant people:

hungry for feasts but not sure our supplies will hold...

hungry for friendship, but not sure who we can trust...

hungry for life, but unsure of the risks involved.

We have not made our own way in this world. We arrived here and survived here through the care of countless others, who paid our passage, helped us over the threshold, gave us work, helped us raise our barns and our houses, cared for our bodies and souls, and ensured our survival in a thousand different ways. We live as a result of their risks, their gifts, their love.

This, then, is how we honor our Scots-Irish heritage: we step back to the threshold, and with God's gracious Spirit and the Travelers' tales to guide us, we open the door. We welcome the guest-- the stranger, the angel. We do not repeat the mistakes of our oppressors, who called everyone savages and brutes and other less-than human names. Instead, we dare to recognize that we share this land and this human story. We will live more fully if we tell our stories together. We will live more fully if we share each other's gifts.

We cannot live well if we only feel the bayonets behind us, forgetting the hopes and promises ahead. We must muster our strength to remake this battleground into common ground, a place of meeting and understanding, once again.

--Holly S. Morrison, August 12, 2006

References:

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