

Abraham Lincoln and God in Everyday Life

Today is February twelfth, so every American knows this is the birthday of a great president, Abraham Lincoln. Last year, close to the twelfth [of] February there was a Sunday and I spoke about Lincoln in connection with spiritual life. And this Sunday it is exactly [the] twelfth of February so I could not escape Lincoln, who is one of my personal heroes.

In 1957, when I was first coming to this country, several friends wanted to help me with transitions: how to use [a] fork, how to use [a] knife, how to shake hands with ladies, how to greet Americans, and like this – lots of advice, some asked for. Some without any asking. (Audience joins him in laughter.) And some of those advices they did not come to any use to me. For example: one friend who had been in London for several years wanted to give me a training in table manners. So he took me to a restaurant and showed me how to hold [a] fork in the left hand (he was coming from England you know) and how to hold a knife in [the] right hand. And so that knowledge... when I came in first after visiting some countries, I was coming by Pacific, I landed in Honolulu. And a couple who were Vedanta friends, they were my hosts, they took me one day to a cafeteria. And I was holding my fork in the left hand and knife in the right. And this lady was watching me. She did not say anything at that time, but later on she said, “Swami, are you left-handed?” (audience laughs). “Well, why?” “Well, we in America use the fork in our right hand and normally, usually don’t use knife, in preference to the fork.”

Like this, many advices did not come to any practical use, but one Swami who was in this country for a short period, he gave me a golden piece of advice. He told me, “Brother ... you are going to America; you should be familiar with the life of Abraham Lincoln. That character is a great hero of the American people.” So after coming to the US, I think within a year or so, I chanced to read the first book about Lincoln, and as I read that, my interest in Lincoln grew. It grew and grew and grew. Being a man of religion, a religious man, why did that...I became so much interested in Lincoln? I think through these years I have read about one hundred books about Lincoln. By now the books, apart from articles and all, the number of books about Abraham Lincoln may be more [like] about six thousand. Because, I found that this man was really great, not because he was a great statesman. He had two great achievements in his period of his presidency, namely the saving of the union and the Emancipation Proclamation – the two great deeds of his life politically speaking. And he was a great statesman also, but apart from that, the more I read about him, the more [I read] about his practical life – how he is receiving people, how he is working, I began to feel that here was a man who is a fit subject for study, for students of religion.

The subject of my talk this morning, is, as announced in the bulletin, “Abraham Lincoln and God in Everyday Life.” As those who have studied books about Lincoln well know, that he was not a Christian in the technical sense of the term. He was never a member of a Christian Church. Once some people asked him directly this question, and he said, as is well known in his

biographies, he said, "If I find that a church is strictly following the precept of the savior, Lord Jesus Christ, 'Thou shalt love the Lord Thy God with all thy heart, with all thy mind and all thy soul,' I shall join that church." Of course it is known that at Springfield, the place of his activities before he became president, he used to go to a church with his wife because [his] wife was a deeply religious person. And they had a pew-- that pew is still preserved. It was my opportunity to visit the places associated with Lincoln more than once: his birthplace and the place where he grew, his homes. Then in New Salem where he worked—in several roles in the shop, as a postmaster and so on, I visited those places. And I also visited Springfield, the house where he lived. I felt that I was visiting a place of pilgrimage and several persons were visiting there and people are so quiet. Really, it seemed by looking at their faces that they had come to visit a sacred place.

Anyway, as I became more and more familiar with the life and activities of this great man right from his boyhood, as we all know he lost his mother at an early age and he had a stepmother. But his stepmother was as dear to him as his own mother, so very recently a book has been published, *The Two Mothers of Lincoln*. I read it through the lines, very inspiring. As you follow the character of this growing boy and through his youth, through all his activities, one thing you find -- he is exhibiting in his character qualities that are adored by persons who value morality, who value religion. For example: truthfulness, honesty, kindness. See? Even as a boy ... the boys, children even in their play sometimes become so cruel to some animal, but in Lincoln's character you never find [that]... He was a jovial boy. He invented games and kept his companions jolly and cheerful. But you will never find anything that is mean, anything that is cruel, anything that is dishonest, anything that is untruthful. You could say, "How did he... how did he acquire these characteristics?" His own stepmother used to think of that—this boy. Lincoln was not a very... in his external appearance he was not a very charming boy. But people, on close observation used to say, in his... He was disproportionate in his bearing, but still people used to, when they were familiar with him, they used to feel that he was really beautiful. The inner character brings beauty in the face, in your physical appearance.

Now later on, he became... He grew up in years, then, as you all know, who have studied Lincoln. One book or two books about Lincoln won't give us really any idea of what Lincoln was. We have to do a study in depth, then we can really feel... because outwardly he very rarely spoke about God or religion, you see, though later on everybody, many books have been written and many biographers... every biographer says that even though he was not a member of a church, but he was a keen student of the Bible and in his lectures and talks, he had many times quoted passages from [the] Bible. Still he was not a Christian. That is the wonder. People used to wonder. He had so much... so much love for Lord Jesus Christ; he is such a keen student of [the] Bible and he has developed in his life such honesty, such purity, such simplicity, such compassion, such faith. Often in his talks and all we hear his mention of Providence, "if it is God's Will." Even in the Gettysburg Address we find that. God was for him something, see, Who had gone into an inner

shrine of his heart, not to be spoken of. And that, it seems he was born with that characteristic. That is why in one of the books I read about him – his wife remarks to him that “You were a saint in an early life. In one previous life, you were a saint.” So though he was not externally religious, like many religious people, but for him God was a living force, a living power, Whom he never forgot.

And for him, that God is a God of every day, every hour. It is not a Sunday God, it is not a God whom we have to worship only in a church or in a temple. It is a God, see, who is really the center of human of life. There have been books published. Several authors have tried to formulate a philosophy about Lincoln’s character and belief, but on one point every writer is unanimous – that even though not a member of a church, he was a deeply religious man and he had a tremendous faith in God. Just as we read in the Vedanta scriptures, “In all that you do, know that the power is coming from God.” So devote, offer all your actions to God, good or bad, success or failure, everything has been – has to be-- offered to God. This great man, though to most of us he was a statesman, a politician, but this man practiced that. Nobody knew, but he offered all his actions, even great actions like running for the presidency, deciding the future of a great developing country. All these things he did not... He was doing as much as possible, and he believed that whatever power he has, it is God’s power, coming from God. And that is why [there was] the sense of power and authority which people felt. His cabinet and other members and all sometimes differed from his [decisions]. But Lincoln has his own judgment, and everybody felt the power of his judgment.

Now for Lincoln, it was not the exhibition of his ego. It was the power [? possibly “fire” but probably “power” as in context above] of faith that it is God who is working through me. Success or failure it is – I have no right to count the success or failure. It is God in me, Who is guiding me. He never lost that faith. When young, he was a postmaster and then he was running a small shop along with another in New Salem, a small town near Springfield. Even in those days, if you closely follow his actions, you’ll find that this man has two levels of existence. On one level he is working, speaking, making jokes, and all, but another level is guiding him, even his petty small deeds. And he knew... at that time he might not have, but later on as he grew, more and more this consciousness began to come to him, that it is... it is God Who is working through me. That is what is meant by “God in everyday life,” a God, Whose Presence we feel. A person who is trying to lead a religious, deeply religious life, should be able to feel the presence of God in his actions, in his thoughts, in his deeds. He may not say it to others, but in his heart of hearts he feels that it is a great spiritual power. You’d call it – call that power, Providence or Christ or whatever name. It doesn’t matter. And he intensely believed this: that this world order is not a material phenomenon, see, a spiritual power-- that “Providence” is working everything, including human lives.

Now several of his contemporaries have written their memoirs about Lincoln. And last year I discussed in more details, quoting passages from

several of these books, and I will just read one sentence from one work written by Mr. A.T. Rice, who was a contemporary of Lincoln. He had met Lincoln several times and he says, he makes this remark, "Those who follow his life must be impressed with the equal serenity of Lincoln's temper in moments of the darkest adversity as in the hours of his greatest triumph."

Now a man of God, what do we expect from him, a person who is trying to realize God seriously? We expect from him this equanimity, this calmness. This calmness comes from faith and resignation. As Lord Jesus Christ taught us in his prayer, "Thy Will be done." A person who has practiced this, not merely read this, now to him comes this calmness. In hours of crisis, in hours of triumph, he remains calm. See? Now, I read in one of the books, he had... either in [a] congress[ional] election or presidential [election] or whatever, a telegram came and people are so happy around him in Springfield. And they almost mobbed him in excitement. Then at [an] interval, he said, jokingly, "There is a lady waiting in my house for this news. Will you permit me just to go for a few minutes, to tell her this news?" – meaning his wife, you see.

You can notice the balance of his mood and character. You find the same thing in his actions. He's making [a] joke on serious things. Why? It is only a person with a deep spiritual sense, [who] can make that, because this thing is important for us in our spiritual life. A man of God knows that God alone is real and what we call life, what we call the world and all its phenomena and activities, they are passing events. They are going, going, passing on, passing on. But God is eternal. God is real. These ideas as students of Vedanta we have read often, in the Upanishads, in the Bhagavad Gita, and all these. But Lincoln practiced this, even though he was very responsible at every phase of his life. As a congressman, as a shopkeeper as a postman, as a splitter of the rails, every action for him was sacred. That is true. But, at the back of all this we find a sense of detachment, what in Vedanta we call it vairagya. Plunge yourself into the world, but don't be carried away by the world, because you are... he knew... is that eternal. Everything will pass away. Nothing will stay here. But you as a seeker of God should focus your attention on the eternal, on that God.

Now Lincoln, even from his young days when he was a lawyer, he was very fond of reading a poem that brings this idea of the contradictions of human existence. Things come and go. Things come and go. We normally see only the one side; we don't see the other side. This poem was written by a Scotchman, and he was very fond of reading this, reading it to others also. Now later on, I have asked Mr. Reed to read a selection from that poem. As you know I am not keeping my normal strength and all these issues. [Voice fades so not sure about "these issues"]. So later on, I would like to play a portion of the lecture I gave last year. Last year I was very vigorous, but as you see, things happen like this. And this year I am very frail and weak, but as several writers and authors have tried to give a philosophy of Lincoln, of Lincoln's action of... and towards the end of my last year's lecture about Lincoln, I quoted one such author who tried to give a philosophy to Lincoln -- that philosophy very much approximate to the philosophy as [of] God as the

Universal Truth, even in our personality, at the back of our personality. What we call our soul, that universal spirit. That idea, this author has... she is a lady... she was considered to be a French-American, considered to be one authority, one Lincoln scholar. Her name is Miss Morrow, Irene [Honoré] Morrow, I think. Now, I would first request Mr. Reed to come and read that selection from that poem which Lincoln loved very much and then a portion of this concluding portion of that tape will be played. I would request Mr. Reed to come. The name of that poem is... He will say while he speaks."

Oh Why Should the Spirit of Mortal be Proud

*Oh! why should the spirit of mortal be proud?^[SEP]
Like a swift-fleeting meteor, a fast-flying cloud,^[SEP]
A flash of lightning, a break of the wave,^[SEP]
He passeth from life to his rest in the grave.*

*The leaves of the oak and the willow shall fade,^[SEP]
Be scattered around, and together be laid,^[SEP]
And the young and the old, and the low and the high,^[SEP]
Shall molder to dust and together shall lie.*

*The infant a mother attended and loved,^[SEP]
The mother that infant's affection who proved,^[SEP]
The husband that mother and infant who blessed,^[SEP]
Each, all, are away to their dwellings of rest...*

*The hand of the king that the sceptre hath borne,^[SEP]
The brow of the priest that the mitre hath worn,^[SEP]
The eye of the sage, and the heart of the brave,^[SEP]
Are hidden and lost in the depths of the grave.*

*The peasant whose lot was to sow and to reap,^[SEP]
The herdsman who climbed with his goats up the steep,^[SEP]
The beggar who wandered in search of his bread,^[SEP]
Have faded away like the grass that we tread...*

*Yes! hope and despondency, pleasure and pain,^[SEP]
Are mingled together in sunshine and rain,^[SEP]
The smile and the tear, the song and the dirge,^[SEP]
Still follow each other, like surge upon surge.*

*'Tis the wink of an eye, 'tis the draught of a breath,^[SEP]
From the blossom of health to the paleness of death,^[SEP]
From the gilded saloon to the bier and the shroud,^[SEP]
Ah! why should the spirit of mortal be proud?*

This is followed by the audiotape of the last portion of Lincoln lecture, from the prior year, Spiritual Homage to Lincoln. The full text of poem by William Knox is available at <http://www.lincolnstudies.com/archives/335> with minor textual variations from the poem as read.