

Magnanimity

At the eleventh hour on the eleventh day of the eleventh month in the year 1918, Winston Churchill stood looking out his window toward Trafalgar Square, meditating on the cost and consequences of the Great War which had just ended, the 'War to end all Wars,' one in which more than 9 million people died. A war that introduced new modern killing machines into battle for the first time, like armored tanks and machine guns, airplanes and nerve gas, a war that led to the fall of 4 major world imperial powers, that marked the end of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the end of the Second Reich in Germany, the end of the Czars of Russia who had ruled for over 350 years, and the end of the Great Ottoman Empire that had lasted more than 700 years, all gone at that hour on that day of this month in that year.

When Churchill's wife arrived, she suggested that the two of them go to Downing Street to congratulate Lloyd George, the Prime Minister. Other politicians and members of the Cabinet joined them there and they began to discuss the peace terms that were being dictated to the Kaiser. According to Churchill's diary, he pointed out at that gathering that the 'fallen foe,' was close to starvation, such that Churchill proposed immediately rushing 'a dozen great ships crammed with

provisions' to the German port of Hamburg for distribution to the people. The suggestion, however, fell upon deaf ears.

At about the same hour that Churchill's magnanimous suggestion was being rebuffed by his less merciful colleagues, a twice decorated German non-commissioned dispatch runner, who had been temporarily blinded during a heavy gas attack on the night of October 13th, sat in a Prussian military hospital and learnt of Germany's plight from a sobbing Lutheran chaplain. Six years later that soldier wrote down a description of his reaction to the news:

"I knew that all was lost," he wrote. "Only fools, liars, and criminals could hope for mercy from the enemy. In these nights hatred grew in me, hatred for those responsible for this deed . . . The more I tried to achieve clarity on the monstrous event in this hour, the more the shame of indignation and disgrace burned my brow. What was all the pain in my eyes compared to this misery? In the days that followed, my own fate became known to me . . . I resolved to go into politics."

That German soldier's name was Adolf Hitler.

I have often wondered what would have happened if those politicians in Downing Street on that fateful afternoon of 1918 had been infected by the largeness of heart and magnanimity of Churchill's vision, and had rushed those food ships and

provisions to Hamburg. Germany might have been brought again within the fold of nations, and thus averted the great and tragic economic and social disaster that soon suffered thereafter. The whole history of the twentieth century might have taken a very different turn, and we might have avoided the dire consequences of the Holocaust and *another* World War.

Indeed after the second great World War of the twentieth century, the Americans were affected by a spirit of magnanimity and conceived of the celebrated Marshall Plan for the benefit of the defeated in Europe, for the reconstruction of the devastated cities, and the recovery of nations and governments. And there has been a remarkable peace among the nations in Europe ever since. A reading of history, I think, shows that time and time again, an act of magnanimity at a particularly significant moment could have stopped the unfolding drama of some great tragedy and altered the course of history, and changed the destiny of so many lives.

Magnanimity, a largeness of heart, a generosity of spirit; a forgiving nature; the kind of human sympathy that succeeds in loving its enemy, as Jesus commanded us all to do, and often, thereby, turns enemies into friends. For who at the end of World War II would have ever imagined that a few short years later that our enemies Germany and Japan would be amongst America's strongest allies? Such is the power of magnanimity, perhaps most

dramatically seen after war, and not uncommon among soldiers or among athletes who struggle with each other, whereas it is, I think sadly, so less commonly found among those who struggle mainly with ideas. Generals and football players are often more magnanimous than our religious leaders or our politicians.

Jesus, however, exemplified that spirit of magnanimity in his life and in his death, as he dined with sinners and tax-collectors, as he went about with publicans and Pharisees, honored Samaritans, as he dismissed the woman caught in adultery, or allowed the harlot to wash his feet with her tears, or cured the sick daughter of the Syro-Phoenician woman, and at the end of his life as he bespoke those selfless words as he lay dying upon the Cross: "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do."

So these days in this bitterly divided country of ours, we need more of the spirit of magnanimity, especially in light of this very long and contentious election season of ours. I hope that we will all be generous with one another, as a nation and as individuals, that we will be infected with the magnanimous spirit of Churchill or Marshall for those in need and those who are suffering. That we will be far less interested in victory, or in profit, or in keeping what we have for ourselves, and much more interested in a magnanimity and generous spirit that can alter the course of human history and transform lives. The

American philosopher George Santayana once wrote, "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it."

Magnanimity is of God, a God whose mercy has no end, who is long-suffering and slow to anger, who is patient with us and asks that we be patient with one and other, that we love our neighbors as ourselves, a God who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who welcomes the stranger, forgives the sinner, and turns the heart of the enemy towards goodness, towards love and compassion, and thereby changes everything and so I pray that tomorrow, on Remembrance Day as it is called in Europe, or Veteran's Day as we call it here, that we will all *remember* the lessons of the past and look to God to stir up the hearts of all Americans, including ourselves, Americans on both sides of the aisle, across parties, tribes, races and culture, that God will stir up our hearts with a spirit of magnanimity and love towards one another, that in the midst of these present struggles, we will be as benevolent and generous as we have been before, so that all those who have suffered or died in those great wars will not have done so in vain. AMEN.