



The Episcopal Diocese of Hawai‘i

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Aloha ke Akua:

I write this article on Friday, January 20, the day after a debate among Republican candidates for the South Carolina Presidential primary. During the debate, questions were put to Mr. Gingrich about statements made by one of his former wives. I was reminded of a time in the late 1990’s when I wrote to President Bill Clinton asking him to resign as the President for lying under oath in court, for having a sexual relationship with a subordinate over whom he exercised “power,” and for repeatedly committing adultery. At the time, I explained to the President that I understood adultery was not a crime, but that it did show a lack of morality needed in a leader and that I, as an Episcopal Priest, found his serial behavior immoral and unacceptable in a leader; that having a sexual relationship with an intern or an employee was an abuse of power and would not even be tolerated in the corporate world; and that the failure to tell the truth in court was inexcusable in a leader called to uphold the Constitution. Frankly, I also stated plainly that I had voted for him twice and that I would not likely be described as a conservative (politically or theologically). I did not receive a reply from the White House.

I am not going to write to Mr. Gingrich. I pray that his conversion to Roman Catholicism has allowed repentance, forgiveness, and amendment of life. I was again, however, reminded that personal morality does make a difference in a leader, and that past actions do have consequences and show the moral basis of the person. I know that people change and that there can be true transformation by God’s grace. Those called into leadership (in the nation and, especially, in the Church) do have a higher responsibility and the actions of the individual do have an impact on the person’s judgment. As citizens and as Christians, we struggle to judge a person’s morality and whether they are called to be a “leader.”

I have been re-reading Reinhold Niebuhr of late. As some have discerned in my preaching, my faith deep down is influenced by Paul and Augustine, and Niebuhr is one teacher in that tradition. Listening to President Clinton some years ago and then Mr. Gingrich last night, I was reminded of the struggle within the individual of sin and self-justification. In his *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (1937), Niebuhr argues that the individual person is extremely self-interested and this self-interest is the source of human sinfulness. He suggests that the individual “Moral Man” can check natural selfishness through conscience, self-discipline, and love for another. Social groups (tribes, movements, nations) look out for their own (those “in” the group – whether it be based on nationality, race, class, religion, etc.) and therefore look to dominate other groups. Everyone’s motives are mixed – individually and collectively – but the group can act in destructive ways to fulfill a vain dream, thus allowing the individual to justify evil acts. All actions are based on the “curious compounds of good and evil in which the actions of the best men and nations abound.” Niebuhr also said, “Nations, as individuals, who are completely innocent in their own esteem are insufferable in their human contacts.” The self-righteous “delusion of innocence” makes us insufferable at best and likely destructive to ourselves and those around us, and encourages us into an unrealistic and untruthful division of the world into “us” (good) versus “them” (bad).

The failure of a person and especially a leader to act as the individual “Moral Man” – checking natural selfishness through conscience, self-discipline and love for another – raises the concern for me about that person’s ability to see into the complexity and ambiguity of life without demonizing others and, therefore, forgiving “immoral” acts for the self-deluded “good” of society. The leader without a personal moral grounding can allow or commit any act – no matter how evil – for the “good of society.”

I certainly recognize the individual failures of all human beings. We are all sinners. Repentance, forgiveness and redemption are at the core of our faith in Jesus Christ. The deeper concerns for me in individual leaders are repeated acts of immorality (whether it be around sex, money or power), personal grandiosity, a sense of being hounded, narcissism and anger. Can an immoral individual lead a society into truth? We are left to struggle with our own finitude and self-justification. Can a society survive on its own sense of grandiosity and righteousness?

In this election year, we must pray for our leaders and those called to serve on our behalf. We must also be reminded that for us, as the followers of Jesus Christ, there is no perfect candidate or nation. I suggest that there are “moral” progressives and conservatives. We must live as best we can with the “curious compounds of good and evil” seeking God’s Kingdom of justice, love, and peace in a broken, finite world. We must also remember that our individual actions and statements in ordinary life help define our society and us.

I will conclude with the words of one my favorite hymns (Hymnal 665):

All my hope on God is founded;
He doth still my trust renew,
Me through change and chance He guideth,
Only good and only true.
God unknown,
He alone calls my heart to be His own.

Daily doth the almighty Giver
Bounteous gifts on us bestow;
His desire our soul delighteth,
Pleasure leads us where we go.
Love doth stand At His hand;
Joy doth wait on His command.

Mortal pride and earthly glory,
Sword and crown betray our trust;
Though with care and toil we build them,
Tower and temple fall to dust.
But God's power, Hour by hour,
Is my temple and my tower.

Still from earth to God eternal
Sacrifice of praise be done,
High above all praises praising
For the gift of Christ, His Son.
Christ doth call One and all:
Ye who follow shall not fall.

“Therefore, my beloved, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labour is not in vain.” 1 Corinthians 15:58

Aloha ma o Iesu Kristo, ko mākou Haku,

+Bob

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+ Keali‘ikoaakeakua