

The Jesus Line

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In J.R.R. Tolkien's magnificent Christian allegory "The Lord of the Rings," a somber Gandalf tells Frodo that the Dark Lord has returned and is on the move.

"I wish it need not have happened in my time," says Frodo.

"So do I," Gandalf responds, "and so do all who live to see such times. But that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us."

I feel much like Frodo these days, bewildered and frightened by the darkness descending upon the land.

The obscene gap between have and have-nots continues to widen; the environment is gutted by rapacious oligarchs and politicians; desperate refugees are met with suspicious hostility; access to affordable health care is relentlessly attacked; hate crime against religious and ethnic groups is skyrocketing; the national war machine is re-vamped to the tune of billions of dollars; foreign dictators who disdain human rights are courted; and mean-spirited incivility, rage, recrimination, mockery, and outright duplicity dominate public discourse.

Like Frodo, I wish the times were less toxic. But they aren't. So, as Gandalf pointed out, the only choice is to decide what to do with the time in which we find ourselves.

We Christians know how we're supposed to respond, even if we don't always act accordingly. We're called to be "ambassadors for Christ, as though God were making his appeal through us." II Corinthians 5:20 At all times, but especially in dark ones like these, our duty is to convey through word and deed the message of the God we worship. Retreat or withdrawal, although tempting, simply isn't an option. Doing so betrays the incarnational God-in-the-world core of our faith.

Contrary to what many American Christians think, being a faithful ambassador for Christ definitely doesn't mean obsessing over sexual morality as if that's God's only concern.

Instead, it's to emulate Jesus by feeling compassion for and ministering to the socially marginalized, be they native daughters and sons or foreigners who seek asylum from oppression. Representing Christ means respecting the God-bestowed dignity of all human beings, and affirming the rights which are theirs by virtue of their humanity.

It means cherishing the beauty and goodness of the earth given to us by a beneficent God rather than greedily and wantonly ravaging it and its creatures.

It requires us to resist the arrogance, anger and shallowness currently poisoning our cultural and political climate by modeling the virtues of patience, forbearance, compassion, humility, and hope.

And it obliges us to muster the courage to defy both political and religious leaders when their actions and words bolster rather than counteract the poison.

Our faith isn't just another species of political activism or social reform. We should never conflate partisan politics with Christ's message. Yet as ambassadors for Christ, we may be forced by the time in which we live to express our allegiance to him through political activism and social reform as well as personal behavior, laboring for a society in which, as Catholic Worker founder Dorothy Day said, it's a bit easier for people to be good.

This of course doesn't mean that we embrace violent rabble-rousing or gratuitous trouble-making. We should respect political authority whenever it comports itself properly. Jesus himself tells us to render to Caesar what is Caesar's. But his intent in doing so was to warn against passively acquiescing to Caesar overstepping his bounds. When that abuse occurs, we must resist, as Jesus did, or risk betraying our calling.

For Christians, then, there is definitely a line—call it “the Jesus line”—which we can't cross if we hope to retain our identities as Christ's ambassadors. That line is defined by the Sermon on the Mount; the compassion, mercy, hospitality and love Jesus offered the dispossessed and scorned social pariahs he encountered; his humble but firm defiance of temple and state abuses of power; and the thirst for justice and common decency that Jesus inherited from the Hebraic prophetic tradition.

We Christians cross the Jesus line when we fail or, even worse, refuse to be stalwart ambassadors in the times that have been given us. Jesus said, “If you love me, you will keep my commandments.” It's pretty clear, despite obfuscations by those who put politics before faith, what that means.

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