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Radio Address: Will America Be First?, 1935

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WILL AMERICA BE FIRST?
Address over WGN
May 29, 1935.

Tomorrow America pauses for a moment in the routine of living
to remember two of the most important factors in the history of humanity.
The strange irony of time has momentarily united the observance of Memorial
Day and the festival of the Ascension of our Lord. It is probable the human
heart cannot imagine two events in more startling and eternal contrast.
On the one hand, the uncounted host of our honored dead, the mute but crying
evidences of man's hatred and folly; on the other, the continuing vision of
the conquering Christ rising above war and the rumors of war to receive from
the hand of God the crowns of universal Kinghood and the final pledge of
everlasting peace for the torn and broken hearts of men. Here is the
ancient and modern contrast between the plans of God and the failures of
men, a contrast which American men and women may well pause to consider in
terms of the problems of today and the hope of tomorrow.

As Memorial Day of the year of our Lord 1935 dawns, every American
citizen, even the 17,000,000 men, women, and children on relief rolls, knows
that our beloved country has been singularly blessed by the generous hand
of Providence. We have never lost a major war, either against the forces
of Nature or the armies of a momentary enemy. For more than one hundred
and fifty years America has gone on her conquering way, hurling her last
frontier into the Pacific, building great fortresses of commerce and
industry, and extending her influence to every corner of the globe and
every sphere of human activity. If men have used the slogan "America First"
to express the thoughts occasioned by Memorial Day, they have not merely
repeated the mad motto of a vicious imperialism. "America First" was a
simple and obvious truth for which the heroic years were a cloud of witnesses
and a happy peaceloving people, the final evidence.
And yet at this very moment in the history of our beloved nation we who believe in her future and her destiny are compelled by the bitter logic of circumstance and the evident disaster of the past few years to convert our proud slogan into a question: Will America be first? Will she be able to maintain and uphold those fundamental principles and truths for which the brave, unnumbered dead whom we honor tomorrow fought and died? It must be perfectly clear to every observer of our recent history that we are today approaching an hour of decision in our national life. We cannot shift today's responsibilities to yesterday's heroes. If they have died in vain, it will not be their failure, but ours. If their bones lie unremembered in the fields of Valley Forge and Gettysburg and Flanders it will not be their tragedy, but ours. Nor can we shift the responsibility for our future to generations yet unborn. When the hand of God sounds the zero hour in the life of men and nations the response must be quick and immediate from those who are at the moment standing on the hilltops of life. The question "Will America be first?" comes to us and to no one else.

Its answer depends upon the things in which America desires to be first. There are many ways in which we do not want to be first. We cannot be first in forgetting the men and women who are today beaten down and crushed by our civilization. We cannot be first in the economic oppression of smaller and weaker nations so that we reap tomorrow the blasted harvest of universal hatred and fear. We cannot be first in the piling up of gold upon gold in tragic forgetfulness of the calm, devastating voice of Him who said "What shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose his own soul?" Today - on the eve of Memorial Day and Ascension Day - we know that there must be a better way for America to be first. There must be a way in which we can unite the observance of these two events so that from them will come a new vision, a new courage, and a new desire to build a national life touched by living coals from forgotten altars greater than our own.
We do not want to see America broken up - but if the eternal purposes of God for our people are to be realized, America must today be broken up into 125,000,000 human souls. When all is said and done, the problems of the nation are only the problems of the individual made more pressing by the fact that there are so many of us. Strangely enough it has remained for our age to forget this great fundamental truth, so clearly stamped on the pages of history by the imperial hand of God. It has remained for us to find a new evasion of that deep, overwhelming sense of individual, personal responsibility to God and our neighbor which is the cornerstone of all human society and the only basis on which men can live together in all godliness and honesty. Six thousand years ago in the first twilight of the world Adam said "Oh Lord, the woman thou gavest me" - and today in another merely twilight hour of our history, we have translated his words into modern terms "Oh Lord, the system thou gavest us." Peace and hope and strength do not lie that way. Wrecked economic systems and broken social orders are only the sure and inevitable reflection of wrecked human lives and sinbroken human hearts. They may be multiplied a million times, but when the hand of the living God cuts away all the pitiful evasions by which men try to hide their weaknesses and failures, their lies before us an individual, open, quivering human heart whose pain and disaster must be our greatest concern - first, last, and always.

Here and nowhere else lies the final answer to the question "Will America be first?" America's problem is the individual's problem - and today as in all the ages, when sorrow wounds and death strikes, the great trouble of the individual human heart is sin. It is the eternal and immutable will of God that the journey of man from the cradle to the grave be governed by certain definite laws. Two thousand years ago these laws were summarized by One Who knew them better than anyone else and kept them as no other could: "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart and with all thy mind - and thy neighbor
as thyself." To break these laws is sin - the conscious, willful battering
down of the blessed and holy relationship between God and man. And God is
just - also in the twentieth century. Sin must mean punishment and disaster -
swift, sure, and terrible. Have we not seen this with fearful intensity
during the past few years? So long as men and women sin - against God,
against themselves, against their neighbor - there will be trouble. America
has a reputation for facing trouble, boldly and fearlessly. Here is the
trouble we face today - and facing it we immediately find the answer - offered
by the hand of the living God reaching across the faithless years into every
sinbroken human heart and bringing the final assurance of sins forgiven and
peace with God. Out of the tragedy of the world, out of the welter and woe of
the Universe, out of the darkness which has come over us rises the figure of
Him Whose ascension into heaven the Church commemorates tomorrow. Over the
heartsick and homesick roads of humanity sounds His blessed voice with the
stillness of God and the peace of eternity: "I will be lifted up and will
draw all men unto me. The Son of Man came to seek and save that which was
lost. Come unto me all ye that labor and are heavy-laden and I will give you
rest." My dear friend, have you ever heard anything better and surer than
that? To you who are tired and weary of the pitiful efforts of men to
raise themselves by their own bootstraps the voice of the Church comes today
and tomorrow with the blessed assurance that God has never asked men to do
that. That is the way of sin and forgetfulness of God. There is a better
way - no, in the name of God - the only way: "I will be lifted up and will
draw all men unto me." Here is the way in which America can be and remain
first. As we hear his words come up like thunder through the years we feel that
here, at last, is one who knows what is wrong with us, What we are groping after
blindly, and how we may find it. The one characteristic of our human life in
the twentieth century which stands out with startling clearness today was also
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the one which struck our Lord as He watched it two thousand years ago. It was our restless weariness. He saw men and women going to and fro, at labor and at leisure - poor men, rich men, learned men, untaught men - weary and heavy laden, bearing burdens of fear and foreboding, carrying huge invisible loads of regret and care and sin. He saw it in their faces, He read it in their acts, and His eternal pity went out like a tide to a troubled, tormented humanity. And so even today, His words, so healing in their tenderness, fall upon the heart of troubled America like the tone of evening bells "I will be lifted up and will draw all men unto me." They might have been spoken yesterday, or this morning - So true are they to the crying need of our anxious times when so many broken voices murmur through the world.

Where is a very old legend that at twilight on the evening of Ascension Day our blessed Lord came to the gates of heaven. He was met there by the angel Gabriel. Gabriel said "Oh Lord, it is finished?" Our Lord answered "It is finished." And Gabriel said "Shall I now send down to earth the legions of angels and archangels to proclaim to the weary hearts of men that their redemption has been accomplished and that the proud gates of eternity are once more open before them? And our Lord looked down upon earth, down past the setting sun to the place where He could see a small group of men and women going down a little hill in Galilee. He turned to Gabriel and said: "No - I have left down there a small band of men and a few women - and from now on it is up to them." And so today - after two thousand years in which we have found no better way to bring peace and hope and strength to the heavy heart of humanity - it is still up to us. When under the continuing providence and pity of God that realization comes, America will be first, finally and forever.