

Jack - Famous Last Words and a Recipe for Living

Church of the Advent, Colwood BC

Sunday, August 28, 2011

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In an age which seems to prefer Twitter messages of 140 characters or less, it was impressive to watch a nation digest Jack Layton's final thoughts this past week. Possibly most impressive were his closing words:

My friends,
love is better than anger.
Hope is better than fear.
Optimism is better than despair.
So let us be loving, hopeful and optimistic.
And we'll change the world.

Our primate, Archbishop Fred Hiltz joined the conversation on Wednesday:

(Jack Layton's) entire public life was characterized by a profound commitment to the common good. He was a champion of human rights, and a passionate environmentalist. Proud to be Canadian he cared deeply about our place among the nations. In his final letter to all of us he wrote, "Canada is a great country, one of the hopes of the world. We can be a better one—a country of greater equality, justice and opportunity." . . .

In honouring the legacy of a life well lived, St. Paul's words to the Philippians come to mind: "Whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things." (Philippians 4:8). And in the spirit of Jack Layton let us act on them.

With these thoughts in mind, and while asking myself about the effect of the one called "Jack" a friend sent me an August message by Peter Millar, a former warden of the Iona Community on Scotland's West Coast. In light of the recent British riots and economic downturn in the United Kingdom he wrote:

The British journalist Naomi Klein (describes the 2001) mass looting in Argentina . . . (as) "el saqueo" – the sacking (or the "great taking"). That was politically significant because it was the very same word used to describe what Argentina's elites had done by selling off the country's national assets in flagrantly corrupt privatization deals, hiding money offshore, then passing on the bill to the people with a brutal austerity package.

(Now in 2011) whether we accept it or not, in spiritual terms this is a time of "great taking" – a "global sacking" - fuelled by a pathological sense of entitlement.

The present belief in grabbing all that we can for ourselves raises many questions. **Is it possible in our modern technological societies to re-connect with a culture of giving, of sharing?** To move away from this blind belief in entitlement? To ask seriously of society and of one another – what actually are our rights, responsibilities and privileges? Or as the old slogan put it succinctly: "To live more simply that others may simply live."

I think Peter Millar well describes the "Jack" effect without having met our late Canadian political leader. For Jack epitomized the desire of many to put sharing back on the Canadian political agenda. I remember some years ago in the Okanagan when Stockwell Day announced his candidacy in the riding of Okanagan-Coquahalla. A friend wryly noted soon after the announcement that the language of sharing had evaporated. In

the coffee shops, at the roadside, in the Dental office, after church, the conversation was all about what's mine, what can I keep, and how can I keep things away from others. The impact was blatantly obvious.

It may not surprise you to know that I am a New Democrat, and have been pleased to have Jack Layton's smiling face on my front lawn during recent elections. What has surprised me with many Canadians is the huge groundswell of compassion around Jack's illness and the fondness with which he is held in popular esteem, at least for now. It is a shame that sometimes, one must die to get adequate or widespread recognition. Obviously, outside Quebec not everyone voted for him or supported what he publicly advocated. But the affection continues, and forcefully. His personal appeal increasingly connected with the daily experience of many. Again, Peter Millar:

Even within our secular societies many still believe in God and with the understanding that the earth is a sacred place. **Many also believe that we are in a fundamental way accountable to each other**, and that we are stewards of the earth in all of its diversity, beauty and wonder.

I hope that in the aftermath of Jack's death, and as a new parliament forms, and as our church seeks to express a truthful faith perspective in the months and years ahead, that accountability of humans to each other and to creation, and that a sense of sharing, might return to political and social discourse in our great country and our own community.

Political differences will continue to exist, for the argument should be about the strategy which will affect hopeful change. But the priority of sharing itself, in a non-competitive and mutually supportive political and social environment must again become the norm.

In terms of performance standards for social and political leaders in our current culture, what about applying St. Paul's ethical injunction we heard this morning:

Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honour. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.

Is this too much to ask, or impractical for our day? I don't think so.