

II Chron. 7:14 - "If my people, who are called by my name, shall humble themselves, and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land."

As most of you know, the clergy of the Oxford-University community have called upon churches throughout the state to make this Sunday a special occasion for repentance and turning from the tragic events of last Sunday night and Monday morning. For most of us here today, those events seem like a terrible nightmare that we would never have believed possible. And yet they happened, and they have left behind them not only two persons dead and many others injured, but also damage and wounds to our University and our state that it will take many years to repair and heal.

I'm sure that all of us here today - a week after the tragedy - feel depressed, burdened, and sorrowful; as, indeed, we should. But, as Christians, we cannot let our reaction stop at this point. Fundamental to the Christian faith is the profound conviction that even out of the worst tragedy, some good can come; that light can be born out of darkness; that there can be an Easter for every Good Friday. It is in the light of this faith that we call upon you this morning to reflect prayerfully upon the past so that we may look creatively to the future. What can we learn from our tragic experience? (And God help us if we do not learn, for we will only have it to go through again.) What can we do now? This is the real question.

The first thing we can do is to face up to our own guilt in the situation. You and I didn't go out and throw the bricks and the bottles. You and I didn't go out there and fire the guns. Yet you and I, along with every other Mississippian, are responsible in one degree or another for what happened. For we are responsible for the moral and political climate in our state which made such a tragedy possible. Maybe you and I didn't actually create this climate, but, if we didn't, it is certainly evident that we did all too little to dispell it or change it. The things that we have "left undone that we ought to have done" should bother us every bit as much as the "things which we have done that we ought not to have done." The decent, respectable, and responsible people of Mississippi have failed when events like those of last Sunday night can take place within our state.

What has been the climate in our state during the past several years? You know and I know that it has been one of fear and intimidation; one of defiance and irresponsibility. The official line of massive resistance to any form of desegregation and of last-ditch defiance of the Federal Courts was laid down, and anyone who dared to challenge it found himself in deep trouble. Calm and rational discussion of the matter was virtually prohibited, so there was no chance for moderate men of both races to sit down in good faith and work out some reasonable and workable solution to the very real problems which the Court's decisions posed. Above all, the people of Mississippi were told by their political leaders over and over again that the Federal Courts could be defied forever; that they would never have to obey the law of the land. And most of the people of Mississippi believed them. Mississippians have been deceived and misled by our leaders for nearly eight years now. Is it any wonder, then, that violence erupts when the issue becomes real, rather than academic, within the borders of our own state?

Think of the freshman at Ole Miss today. He was only ten years old when the Supreme Court's decision on segregation was handed down. His is the generation that has been exposed to text-book censorship, mandatory essay contests on white supremacy, and a massive propaganda campaign against the Federal Courts. Is it any wonder that he feels persecuted and oppressed? Seldom, if ever, has he been reminded that half of the people of Mississippi are Negroes and that they are people, too, with rights of their own. Think of the freshmen - and upperclassmen as well - who were out there

throwing bricks and bottles the other night. Who could really blame them when the Governor of the state himself was in open rebellion against the law; a living symbol of lawlessness?

Think of the thugs and the toughs from near and far who did the most damage Sunday night and nearly all the damage Monday morning. What could you expect when supposedly responsible legislators were saying, "We will never surrender," and "The people of Mississippi know what to do!" What could you expect when so much of the Mississippi press was voicing the same sentiments? It was an open invitation to every thug and tough within 300 miles to come pouring into Oxford, for they had every reason to believe that the decent, responsible people of Mississippi would back up their actions 100%. There are thugs and toughs everywhere, but they come in such numbers and with such violence only where they think they are wanted.

The point is, we cannot blame this tragic business only on thugs and irresponsible students. The major part of the blame must be placed on our leaders themselves; and upon you and me and all the other decent and responsible citizens of the state of Mississippi, who have allowed this impossible climate to prevail. It is we who have failed. We have failed our children, our University, and our state. It is for this that we pray God's forgiveness this morning.

But true repentance means more than just remorse. It includes also a redirection of our will and our efforts. We must now give our all to salvaging the situation; to bringing order out of chaos, peace out of strife. We must come to grips with reality, throw off the old climate, and put on the new. In short, we must accept the fact that the color of a person's skin is no longer a barrier to his admission to the University of Mississippi. I would hope that, as Christians, we would accept this as just and right, whether we like it or not. But if we are not yet at the point where we can do this, we, at least, can be realistic and patriotic enough to accept ^{it} as the law of the land. In any event, we should know by now that this is the only happy and reasonable issue out of all our afflictions. To think and to act otherwise - to continue to breathe defiance and disobedience - will only bring more suffering and anguish. It will only mean more of the same violence and horror that has shocked us so deeply since we last came together at the altar of the Lord.

This is what worries me most about the efforts of so many Mississippians to pin the blame for last week's violence on the Federal Marshalls. If our only response to this tragic event is to start pointing the finger of blame at other people, then we will never solve our basic problems. If we are not mature enough and secure enough to admit and confess our own guilt, if we continue to nurse and nurture our collective paranoia - then we will never get around to doing anything about the real root of our troubles: the moral and political climate in which we live. And we will have to go through once again the horror of more violence and bloodshed. It will all have been for naught. We will have learned nothing.

But I, for one, look to the future with faith and confidence. From my conversations during the past few days, I am convinced that most of the decent and responsible people of the Oxford-University community have learned the lesson we must learn from last Sunday's madness. And from the statement of those 127 Mississippi businessmen last Tuesday it is apparent that others have learned also. The fact that many other Mississippians have not and that many of our political leaders are making every effort to keep them from doing so should only spur us on to more and greater efforts. By God's grace, some real good can come out of our tragedy, and it is up to you and to me to see that it does.

A little less than a century ago, our own southern forebears found themselves in the aftermath of far greater tragedy. And there were those then who tried hard to redeem the times. Among them was our own L. Q. C. Lamar; and another, George Washington Cable, made his most memorable speech on this very campus of the University of Mississippi. But, above all, there was the noble example of General Robert E. Lee. Lee's public life is familiar to us all, but most of us know little of his life in his own parish church. A devout Episcopalian, Lee was present in his church shortly after the War, when a Negro Churchman came to the altar to receive the Sacrament. The other people in the church, confused and resentful, stayed in their pews. Then General Lee quietly arose, walked up the aisle, and knelt beside the Negro.

This great man set a standard which has never quite been forgotten by the South. It is to this standard that we must now repair. For it will be through countless small words and small deeds, done in the name of Christ by Christians, that this University, this community, and this state will yet redeem themselves for the tragic events of last Sunday and Monday.