

WARTS AND ALL

When Thomas Cromwell sat for his portrait, he insisted that he be depicted “Warts and all,” which is where the phrase comes from. That was an odd request, especially since most people are at great pains to hide the warts of life and history behind one veneer or another.

Which reminds me of another Thomas—Thomas Jefferson—and Monticello, his sublime house outside of Charlottesville, Virginia. It encapsulates the grace, elegance, and rationality of the Classical style. Yet these were the very things which allowed visitors to ignore the dark truth concerning Jefferson’s ideals about slavery and his relationship with Sally Hemings, one of his slaves. But five years ago this month there was an article in *The New York Times* entitled: “Monticello Is Done Avoiding Jefferson’s Relationship With Sally Hemings.” Visitors to the plantation are now confronted with the complicated truth of a man many think of as the ultimate champion of liberty—including the uncomfortable truth that Jefferson and Hemings’s sexual relationship may not have been consensual.

I recently read a review of a new book by Kermit Roosevelt, a professor of constitutional law—and a direct descendant of Theodore Roosevelt—in which he makes a case that Thomas Jefferson, who wrote the Declaration of Independence with its famous statement “All men are created equal” didn’t intend to imply that all people have equal rights. To use a twenty-first century phrase, he was writing from a place of white privilege.

Naturally, the book’s ruffled more than a few feathers—as has the so-called “revisionist history” at Monticello. But that always happens when people we believed to be virtuous are shown to be more complicated than we thought they were and a when it’s suggested that history is less tidy than we wish it were.

And here we are, listening to readings from the Bible, the Church’s founding document. But a close reading of it reveals that it’s also more complicated and less tidy than we assume it is—as this morning’s passage from Genesis shows. You could say Abraham is the founding father of the Christian tradition, as well as of Judaism and Islam. There’s no doubt he had lots of admirable qualities. He had great faith. He was righteous. He was hospitable. But he was also prepared to sacrifice his son—what are we to make of that?—and when his wife couldn’t conceive, he went to his wife’s

slave Hagar. Sounds like in addition to his admirable qualities he also had some which were far less so.

There's also something uncomfortably anti-woman about the whole Abraham-Sarah-Hagar saga. A few chapters before this morning's first reading, we find the first part of the story in which Sarah goads Abraham into sleeping with Hagar after which she becomes jealous, even though it was her idea, and drives Hagar out into the wilderness because she sees her as a rival. But the really terrible part of the story is that an angel appears to Hagar in the wilderness and tells her that she will have a son "who shall live at odds with all his kin." Considering that Ishmael, Hagar's son, is revered by Muslims, history has proved that loaded statement to be true.

I'm telling you all of this to give you some background to this morning's first reading. It's a story about tension between step brothers and between master and slave and, I guess, between wife and mistress. It's a story about members of the same household being set against one another. Yet they all believe they're doing the will of God.

Speaking of people believing they were doing the will the God and of things which are complicated and untidy, this past Wednesday we observed National Aboriginal Day. None of us can fail to be uncomfortable when we're asked to confront the reality of our nation's turbulent history with the First Peoples of this land. We don't want to do it and may even become defensive when our comfortable beliefs are challenged. It's much easier to live with assumptions and half-truths, especially since telling the truth comes at a cost—as Jesus himself says in this morning gospel. Yet he also says, "So have no fear of them; for nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known."

In other words, the truth will out—the whole truth and nothing but the truth. Truth that tells us that all men—no, *all* people—are indeed created equal. Truth that refuses to be covered up, denied, mocked but insists on coming out, being proud, and finally acknowledged. Truth that has the power to reconcile even the bitterest and oldest of enemies.

That work of reconciliation begins when those who have traditionally been silenced and marginalized are given space to speak their truth. But it also begins when we dare to tell the truth about ourselves, and that truth—like the truth of our forebears—is complicated and untidy. We do the worst thing with the best of intentions and then act with great nobility and compassion almost by accident. And what we call "the will of God" is so often nothing but a way to justify our own prejudices and self-serving motives. So reconciliation must therefore begin with repentance.

That's nothing to avoid. Quite the opposite, in fact. It's something to be embraced since repentance means that we can be freed from the false histories—be they personal or communal—that we've lived with for too long. And repentance allows us to tell another story, a truer story, the kind of story that's no longer whispered but is proclaimed from the housetops. Housetops under which all people find safety and

shelter—aboriginal and settler, slave and free, gay and straight, patriarch and pauper, kindred and stranger.

Repentance calls to make these kinds of houses. They're called safe spaces for a reason since they're places where only the truth is spoken and only the truth is heard—not for our own virtue but because we dare to declare that this is the *true* will of God who shows preferential mercy to those like Hagar who have been thrown out when they no longer serve a purpose or become inconvenient, to those who simply want to be proud of who they are, to those who know how wondrous, troubling, and fragile human relationships can be. And especially to those who, while wandering in the wilderness outside convention and acceptance, are called by God and assured that he loves them—warts and all. Even down to the last hair on their head.