

Abraham Lincoln

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“WITH MALICE TOWARD NONE”

A few days after his second inaugural President Lincoln wrote to Thurlow Weed thanking him for a complimentary note on the recent inaugural address. Referring to the address, Lincoln wrote, “I expect the latter to wear as well as—perhaps better than—anything I have produced; but I believe it is not immediately popular.” Not always is an author or speaker a true prophet of his own work. In this case, Lincoln was. This brief address, whose closing paragraphs are rich with the flavor and cadences of the Old Testament, is assurance of the speaker’s immortality in the minds of man as long as the language is spoken and read. Lord Curzon said that Lincoln’s Second Inaugural, his Gettysburg Address, and William Pitt’s toast after the Battle of Trafalgar constitute the three supreme examples of eloquence in the English language.

Neither party expected for the war the magnitude or the duration which it has already attained. Neither anticipated that the cause of the conflict might cease with, or even before, the conflict itself should cease. Each looked for an easier triumph, and a result less fundamental and astounding. Both read the same Bible, and pray to the same God; and each invokes his aid against the other. It may seem strange that any men should dare to ask a just God’s assistance in wringing their bread from the sweat of other men’s faces; but let us judge not, that we be not judged. The prayers of both could not be answered—that of neither has been answered fully.

The Almighty has his own purposes. “Woe unto the world because of offenses! for it must needs be that offenses come; but woe to that man by whom the offense cometh.” If we shall suppose that American slavery is one of those offenses which, in the providence of God, must needs come, but which, having continued through his appointed time, he now wills to remove, and that he gives to both North and South this terrible war, as the woe due to those by whom the offense came, shall we discern therein any departure from those divine attributes which the believers in a living God always ascribe to him? Fondly do we hope—fervently do we pray—that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue until all the wealth piled by the bondman’s two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said, “The judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.”

With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation’s wounds; to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan—to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves, and with all nations.

LINCOLN, SECOND INAUGURAL ADDRESS, MARCH 4, 1865.