

The Life and Character of the Prophet Joseph Smith

WILLIAM E. BERRETT

I do not know whether it is fair to have a wonderful chorus sing before a speaker speaks. The contrast is too marked. I have often wished that in speaking, we could express ourselves as beautifully as a chorus can express itself as it sings to us.

As I look at this audience this morning and contemplate why you are here, my mind goes back to my first trip to the nation's capital in 1951. I was impressed on that occasion with the halls of Congress, with the beauties of the White House, with the many monuments that adorn buildings and grounds in that great city; but I recall this morning especially a little article that I read in a newspaper at that time. It is rather vivid in my memory.

A Russian historian had visited the United States for something over a year studying the history of great Americans and American institutions. As he was about to board his ship to return to his native land, newspapermen interrogated him. One of them asked him this question: "In your study of great Americans during this past year which of them do you consider to be the greatest?" His answer is most startling. He said, "You have only had one truly great American, one man who gave to the world ideas that could change the whole destiny of the human race—Joseph Smith, the Mormon prophet."

I regret very much that I did not retain that newspaper, nor can I remember the name of the Russian gentleman; but as I look in your faces here this morning and realize that you are here and I am here because of one great man, Joseph Smith the Mormon prophet, and when I realize that there are some two million of us over the world who revere his memory—that by the end of the century there will be some ten million who revere his name—I begin to see something of what the outsider saw in this great American.

Certainly we are ruled by ideas; and when we bear in mind the great ideas which Joseph Smith brought to the attention of mankind, which he taught to us, we begin to realize why his influence grows with the years. Time will not permit an enumeration of all these great ideas. I want to mention only a few of them this morning.

He restored to the earth the understanding of the nature of God—that God is a personal being with a body of flesh and bone like unto that of man, who hears and answers prayers,

William E. Berrett was Administrator of Seminaries and Institutes of Religion for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints when this devotional was given on 21 April 1964.

who is concerned with his children. He gave to us an understanding that man is of the same species as God, like him in form, and may become like him in character, may become like him creators of worlds, an idea which raises man above all other created things.

To a world that was relatively lost in its understanding of the nature of man and the nature of the gospel, he brought forth the idea that the gospel would be preached to all people who had ever lived upon the earth, to all living and all dead, that all mankind might be judged by the same standards. He brought forth the idea that all men would be resurrected from the grave, that we are eternal beings, that practically all of mankind would eventually receive some degree of glory—the most optimistic picture that has ever been given by a religionist to the world.

He brought again the power of God among men, given him of the Father, the power to bind on earth and it should be bound in heaven, or loosed on earth and it should be loosed in heaven—a power that only those in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints understand.

I suppose we could name on the fingers of our two hands all the books ever published in the United States of America that have continued to live and increase in circulation over the years—books that we term “living books.” Of those ten living books three of them are attributed to this man, Joseph Smith. Next to the Holy Bible, the book that is most published and circulated in the world is the Book of Mormon. Certainly the time will come when no person in collegiate life will consider himself educated if he is unfamiliar with the great living books attributed to the Prophet Joseph Smith.

However, this morning I am not going to take time to elaborate upon the great ideas which he brought forth in our day and which have scarcely been enlarged since the Church began. I am, rather, going to talk about the

qualities of leadership which made him a fit instrument in the hands of God for the Lord’s purposes upon the earth—qualities of leadership which, if you cultivate and possess them, will fit you to be servants of the Lord in this latter-day kingdom.

The first of these qualities is the quality of intelligence, without which, of course, none of us can hope to achieve great things. You may ask how we can test the Prophet’s intelligence; well, very soon yours will be tested by your professors in examinations. While that might not always be an accurate test of intelligence, it is useful. If we had the Prophet Joseph in our classes, we might be able to make some comparisons.

It is interesting to note that the Prophet, who had little opportunity for formal schooling, was our greatest advocate of education. Sensing that his people should know languages, especially those basic languages of the Holy Bible, he employed a Hebrew scholar, Dr. Seixas from Oberlin College, to come over to Cleveland, Ohio, to teach Hebrew to the leaders of the Church. He thought they could master it in seven weeks of night school. This proved a little bit short, and they employed him for another seven weeks—fourteen weeks—equal to one quarter of schooling. Only two of the students mastered Hebrew sufficiently to give any discourses on it, the Prophet Joseph Smith and Orson Pratt. All others felt a little inadequate in that language.

In the course of a brief few years the Prophet Joseph was able to read Egyptian—the ancient hieroglyphics—German, Hebrew, and Greek. I suppose he would not have been proficient in speaking any of them, but he understood them and conversed on Biblical writings in those various languages. On one occasion he mentioned a great number of languages and said, “If I live long enough I will master them all.”

Sometimes we test the intelligence of an individual by seeing how his views on many subjects compare with those of other men. The

Prophet Joseph had views on many subjects other than religion. At the time that he was being groomed as a candidate for the office of President of the United States in the spring of 1844, he wrote a memorial to Congress in which he voiced his views on many public issues. That memorial is worthy of study, for it shows his statesmanship in many fields.

He advocated a strong federal banking system, something we did not get in this country until we had our Federal Reserve System in 1917. He advocated extensive prison reforms, that the prisons become schools of learning so that the character of the inmates might be changed. He advocated improving the navigation of the Mississippi River by establishing a dam across the river a few miles below Nauvoo and the building of locks so that ships could avoid the rapids of that river. If you visit that area today a few miles below Nauvoo, at Keokuk, you will find the great Keokuk Dam built at exactly the spot where he advocated one should be, though he was laughed at at that time. He advocated the extension of the American Commonwealth westward to the Pacific Ocean, at a time when the land west of the Mississippi was considered relatively of little value.

It would be worth your while to read some of the views of the Prophet Joseph on many subjects other than religion, that you might sense something of his great intellect and his knowledge and understanding of the problems facing our country in his day.

He had a second great qualification. He had a zeal for learning; he was a great student. You may think yourselves students when you pay your fees and register here at BYU, but there are those who would inform you that that does not constitute a student. I like to read sometimes the first account of Jesus as a student. His parents had taken him, at the age of twelve, down to the temple at Jerusalem; and there he sat at the feet of learned Rabbis, asking and answering questions. He became so absorbed

in his learning that he forgot his folks entirely, and they left the city without him and had to come back the next day to find him. When you become so absorbed in learning, in a problem you face in your class, that you forget time, you forget your lunch, you forget to go home, you forget your date, then I believe you can attach to your name the label "student."

Joseph Smith could not leave a problem alone until he found its solution. Problems which had faced mankind for generations unsolved, Joseph Smith could not leave alone. He had a zeal for learning the like of which is rarely known in this world of ours. He became a proficient conversationalist on a multitude of subjects.

He had, over and above his zeal for learning, a third great characteristic. He had a faith in God. There have been great scholars. There have been people who have delved into the mysteries of the universe so far as the mind would enable them to go: Plato, Aristotle, Demosthenes, Francis Bacon—oh, a multitude of intelligent minds eager to learn—but on many of the most important problems they failed because they could not find among their contemporaries or in the exercise of reason the answer to their problems. When the Prophet Joseph Smith could not find answers among his contemporaries or in the writings of the learned, he went on his knees in prayer to God and prayed with such faith that he opened the heavens and received answer after answer to problems that have bothered the philosophers through the ages. His faith is most remarkable, from the time he went into the woods as a boy to pray until the time of his martyrdom.

I often think that, among all the acts of faith on his part, this was greatest: when he prayed to the Lord to reveal to him the original writings of a man dead for thousands of years and whose writings had been lost for a long, long time. In studying the Holy Bible he found, in the Book of Genesis, many problems. To give you one of the simple ones: The Bible speaks of

Adam and Eve having sons—Cain, Abel, and Seth. Cain killed Abel, leaving only Cain and Seth to perpetuate the human race. There is no mention of daughters.

I do not know how many millions of people have read those passages and were puzzled by them, but did not have the faith to go to God to solve them. The Prophet knew something was wrong. There was no answer among men. He prayed to the Lord to reveal to him what Moses originally wrote, convinced that part of the account was lacking. To me that is the greatest act of faith in his life. It is one thing to translate an ancient document by the power and gift of God, quite another to pray for the contents of a long-lost document.

Well, you know the answers. Scores of times, baffled by the incompleteness of the Holy Bible, he prayed to the Lord that he might know the correct text and corrected the Bible and offered his corrections as a challenge to the whole world of Biblical scholarship. In all the years that have elapsed since the Prophet Joseph lived, none of his ideas have been proven false, none of his corrections in the Holy Scriptures have been proven false. They have not all been confirmed, but none have fallen by the wayside.

The Prophet Joseph had a fourth great characteristic that fitted him for leadership. I am going to call it the power of introspection, the power to look within oneself and appraise what you see. I think perhaps all of you this morning took a last look in the mirror before you left your homes or your lodgings, and you probably look more presentable here this morning because you did. I think perhaps we make better appearances because of mirrors that allow us to see a reflection of the outer shell of ourselves. But it is rather a rare person who can look within himself, though all of us, I think, would like sometimes to withdraw from ourselves, meet ourselves on the street, see what we look like, hear what we talk about, even though it might be embarrassing.

The Prophet Joseph had the rare quality of looking within himself. In translating the Book of Mormon from the gold plates into the English tongue, he came to the realization that he did not know the English language well. In the first edition of the Book of Mormon there were about 2,000 grammatical errors—about the same number that college students make in an equally large essay. Nevertheless, he was not content. When the second edition was printed in 1837 all of the grammatical corrections were made by the Prophet Joseph himself.

If you want to see the literary heights to which a man can climb who realizes his own weaknesses, who sees within himself and wants to correct what he sees, read the one hundred twenty-first, one hundred twenty-second, and one hundred twenty-third sections of the D&C, in which we see beauty of expression rise to a height perhaps only equalled in American prose by the Gettysburg Address.

The Prophet saw weaknesses in his own character. As you read the D&C you will find repeatedly verses which condemn the Prophet Joseph, the Lord's condemnation because he was following after the persuasions of men, and calling him to repent lest the Lord choose another. A lesser man would have left these out. No one needed to know that the Lord had upbraided him. I think perhaps the only person who can afford to tell his faults is the person who has first overcome them. But these faults were overcome.

As we read in his journal, one instance is most interesting. A man came into his house and called him nearly every vile name under heaven. He so aroused Joseph's anger that the Prophet says, "I kicked him out of the house and kicked him every step of the way out to the front gate." Then he enters in his journal his remorse—that this was not befitting a prophet of the Lord to thus lose his temper. As you read the entries in his journal made during the last year of his life, you find his great

compassion upon those who reviled him and persecuted him. He was not easily aroused any more to anger.

No wonder he said, "I was as a rough stone until the Lord took me in hand." Indeed he was. He was a far different man in June of 1844 than he was when the Church was organized in 1830. He had literally raised himself to greatness. Always aware of his weaknesses, he frequently admonished the people, "A prophet is not always a prophet, but only when he is moved upon by the Holy Ghost. At other times he is as other men, subject to their weaknesses and mistakes." Oh, if we could keep the same perspective of ourselves as he seemed to have kept of himself as he marched through life as a prophet of the living God! This power of introspection, what a priceless power!

He had, over and above this, a fifth great quality without which no person can become great or useful in God's kingdom. He had a love of people that is rarely found among men, and his love was returned by those in the Church. I think, for example, of the great story of Stephen Markham, who joined the Church in the East, sold his property, and came out to Nauvoo with a bag of gold. He listened to the Prophet admonish the people that the Lord wanted them to complete the Nauvoo Temple and urge the people to give of their means, that the temple might be built. At the close of the meeting Stephen Markham came forward and put the little bag of gold upon the rostrum: "Use this for the temple."

He started again from scratch and, with the aid of his neighbors, built himself a fine home in Nauvoo. Two years later he heard that the Prophet Joseph was in debt. He was running a store. There were no funds to support the Presidency of the Church. The members of the Church were taking advantage of him. They were getting goods on credit and not paying their debts, knowing the Prophet would hardly sue them. Hearing this account, Stephen Markham sold his home, moved his family into

a tent, and came and laid the proceeds in the Prophet's hands, saying, "Pay off your debts. We need you as a prophet of the Church."

Yes, people returned his love. Emma says of him that he so loved people that he could never eat alone, even if he had to call in a stranger off the street. Certainly we shall never forget the fateful story of June, 1844. The Lord had informed him or inspired him to know that if he fell into the hands of the law at Carthage, he would be killed. Obedient to the revelation, he prepared to flee to the West and find a home for the Saints in the valleys of the mountains. He crossed the Mississippi to the Iowa side. The horses were ready; they were packed. But before the party could get underway, a messenger came across the river from his wife, Emma: "The people in Nauvoo are saying that you are running away. They say you are a coward, that you are leaving them to their fate."

He turned to his brother, Hyrum, and said, "If my life is of no value to my friends it is of no value to me. We are going back." As he rode from the city of Nauvoo toward Carthage, which was to be the place of his martyrdom, he stopped at a little rise and turning back, said to those with him, "Oh, that I could but speak once more to my beloved people!" Yes, he loved people.

A year earlier a Missouri sheriff by the name of Reynolds had come into the state of Illinois, secured a writ of extradition, and, with a Constable Wilson, from Carthage, had found that the Prophet was visiting his wife's relatives some twenty miles out of Nauvoo. They went to that place. They pretended they were missionaries and called him out of the house. They seized him, abused him, beat him with their pistol butts until he was black and blue. They refused to let his wife see him. They put him on a horse and rushed him toward the Missouri border to get him out of the state of Illinois. Some of his friends intercepted them by the way and got a writ from a local judge accusing them of abusing their prisoner.

Further, the Nauvoo Legion was raised in Nauvoo and came out to the rescue. We have a strange procession: the Prophet a prisoner of the sheriff, the sheriff a prisoner of a local sheriff. They go into Nauvoo, where the Prophet is tried and released.

Then comes an unusual act. He invited Sheriffs Reynolds and Wilson to his home. He had his wife, Emma, and himself serve them with the finest that could be provided. He treated them with every kindness and courtesy, until one who was there on that occasion said, "His treatment of these men, who had been so brutal to him, would have melted the heart of an archcriminal."

Yes, here was an unusual man, in whom were combined five great elements: intelligence, a zeal for learning, an unusual faith in God, a power of introspection, a love of people. In combination they made him a fit instrument in the hands of God to restore the Church in these latter days, qualities which, if we possess and cultivate, give us the elements whereby we, too, may become useful.

As Joseph Smith rode from Nauvoo toward Carthage, he met Stephen Markham and was

asked, "Joseph, where are you going?" Joseph's answer rings down the ages: "I am going like a lamb to the slaughter, but I am calm as a summer's morning. I have a conscience void of offense toward God and all men." Would that all of us could say that!

Of all Americans, probably Joseph Smith has left us the most writings that look into the recesses of a man's heart. In the six great volumes that we sometimes refer to as *The History of the Church* and sometimes as *The Documentary History*, we see into the inmost recesses of his mind. I have said, and repeat here, "I believe that I know him better than I have known any man in this life save my own father." By it I mean I know how he would react to every temptation. I know what his counsel would be to me in almost every situation in which I might find myself. He is a great companion. I recommend him to you.

I bear you my solemn witness that I know that he is a prophet of the living God, and that the Church of which we are members, founded by him, is directed by Jesus Christ. May the Lord bless you with like testimony, I pray in the name of the Master. Amen.