

The Loneliness of Leadership

GORDON B. HINCKLEY

I appreciated very much the music of the band [BYU Symphonic Band, directed by Richard A. Ballou]. You are all awake after that. I will do what I can to restore you to your former state.

I have come here today without a written talk. I had one, but I discarded it. I awoke at five this morning thinking of something else. When I get through, I suppose you will say, "He should have slept."

I am not here to preach. I do not wish to preach to you. It is easy to preach, and we do a great deal of it to young people. I would simply like to talk with you. I believe you are worth spending time with. I believe you are worth reasoning with.

This is a devotional service. I have only one desire, and that is to share with you a few thoughts in a very informal way, with a hope and prayer that I can bring some small measure of inspiration and lift to you. I think you need that; I think we all do. I prayed this morning that I might be able to do so, that I would be guided by the Holy Spirit. And I hope that you will add your prayers to mine.

President Nixon

I suppose many of you watched President Nixon last night as I did, when he spoke to the nation and was listened to by the world.

I watched him with great interest. I observed him as he wiped the perspiration from his face, realizing, I am sure, the importance of what he was saying. As I looked at him, I thought of the terrible loneliness of leadership.

The Loneliness of Leadership

True, he has advisors. He has at his beck and call any number of men with whom he can consult; but when all the chips are down, he has to face the world alone, as it were. His advisors do not face the cannon fire of public opinion. That comes to the leader.

As I sensed the loneliness of leadership while watching him, there came to my mind some great words from William Shakespeare: "Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown" (*King Henry IV, Part II*, act 3, scene 1, line 31).

The Vietnam War

If the Lord will inspire me, I should like to talk briefly about that. I was asked, when someone found out I was speaking here, to say something about the Vietnam War. I am a little reluctant to do so, but I think in terms of this

Gordon B. Hinckley was a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints when this devotional address was given on 4 November 1969.

general theme I might express a few thoughts. I have had many feelings about that conflict. I have been in South Vietnam a number of times. I have witnessed the growth of our forces from a handful since I first went there in 1961 to the 540,000 who were there the last time I was there. I have known something of a feeling of bitterness over some aspects of that conflict. I have spoken quietly in private conversation, never publicly, some rather trenchant criticism about some of the things I have observed. I have been in situations where I have tried to comfort those who mourned over the loss of choice sons. I have wept as I have turned away from the beds of those who have been maimed for life. I think I have felt very keenly the feelings of many of our young men concerning this terrible conflict in which we are engaged, but I am sure we are there because of a great humanitarian spirit in the hearts of the people of this nation. We are there in a spirit of being our brother's keeper. I am confident that we have been motivated by considerations of that kind, and, regardless of our attitude on the conduct of the war, of our feelings concerning the diplomacy of our nation, we have to live with our conscience concerning those whose freedom we have fought to preserve. We are there, and we find ourselves in a very lonely position as leaders in the world, criticized abroad as well as at home.

To Live with Ourselves

There is a great loneliness in leadership, but, I repeat, we have to live with ourselves. A man has to live with his conscience. A man has to live up to his inner feelings—as does a nation—and we must face that situation. I know of few if any alternatives with which we can live other than the alternative with which we are immediately faced. I think that is all I would like to say about this today.

There is a loneliness in all aspects of leadership. I think we feel it somewhat in this university. BYU is being discussed across the nation

today because of some of our practices and some of our policies and some of our procedures, but I would like to offer the thought that no institution and no man ever lived at peace with itself or with himself in a spirit of compromise. We have to stand for the policy that we have adopted. We may wonder in our hearts, but we have to stand on that position set for us by him who leads us, our prophet.

The Savior Walked Alone

It was ever thus. The price of leadership is loneliness. The price of adherence to conscience is loneliness. The price of adherence to principle is loneliness. I think it is inescapable. The Savior of the world was a Man who walked in loneliness. I do not know of any statement more underlined with the pathos of loneliness than His statement: "The foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nests; but the Son of man hath not where to lay his head" (Matthew 8:20).

There is no lonelier picture in history than of the Savior upon the cross, alone, the Redeemer of mankind, the Savior of the world, bringing to pass the Atonement, the Son of God suffering for the sins of mankind. As I think of that, I reflect on a statement made by Channing Pollock:

Judas with his thirty pieces of silver was a failure. Christ on the cross was the greatest figure of time and eternity.

Joseph Smith

Joseph Smith likewise was a figure of loneliness. I have a great love for the boy who came out of the woods, who after that experience could never be the same again, who was berated and persecuted and looked down upon. Can you sense the pathos in these words of the boy prophet?

For I had seen a vision; I knew it, and I knew that God knew it, and I could not deny it, neither dared I

do it; at least I knew that by so doing I would offend God, and come under condemnation. [JS—H 1:25]

There are few more sorrowful pictures—not in our history anyway—than of the Prophet being rowed across the Mississippi River by Stephen Markham, knowing that his enemies were after his life, and then there came some of his own who accused him of running away. Hear his response: “If my life is of no value to my friends it is of none to myself” (*HC* 6:549, 23 June 1844).

The History of the Church

This has been the history of this Church, my young friends, and I hope we will never forget it. It came as a result of the position of leadership which was imposed upon us by the God of heaven who brought forth a restoration of the gospel of Jesus Christ. And when the declaration was made concerning the only true and living Church upon the face of the earth, we were immediately put in a position of loneliness, the loneliness of leadership from which we cannot shrink nor run away and which we must face up to with boldness and courage and ability. Our history is one of being driven, of being winnowed and peeled, or being persecuted and hounded. Recently we have experienced a new wave of criticism, as many of you know.

I go back to these words of Paul:

We are troubled on every side, yet not distressed; we are perplexed, but not in despair;

Persecuted, but not forsaken; cast down, but not destroyed. [2 Corinthians 4:8–9]

A Missionary’s Loneliness

I talked last night with the father of a missionary. He said, “I’ve just been talking with my son in another land. He is beaten; he is destroyed. He is lonely; he is afraid. What can I do to help him?”

I said, “How long has he been there?”

He said, “Three months.”

I said, “I guess that’s the experience of almost every missionary who has been there three months. There is scarcely a young man or woman who is called to go into the world in a position of great responsibility to represent The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints who does not feel much of the time, I am sure, in the early months of his or her mission, the terrible loneliness of that responsibility. But he also comes to know, as he works in the service of the Lord, the sweet and marvelous companionship of the Holy Spirit which softens and takes from him that feeling of loneliness.”

The Lonely Convert

It is likewise with the convert. I have been thinking this morning of a friend of mine whom I knew when I was on a mission in London thirty-six years ago. I remember his coming to our apartment through the rain of the night. He knocked at the door, and I invited him in.

He said, “I’ve got to talk with someone. I’m all alone. I’m undone.”

And I said, “What’s your problem?”

And he said, “When I joined the Church a little less than a year ago, my father told me to get out of his home and never come back. And I’ve never been back.”

He continued, “A few months later the cricket club of which I was a member read me off its list, barring me from membership with the boys with whom I had grown up and with whom I had been so close and friendly.”

Then he said, “Last month my boss fired me because I was a member of this church, and I have been unable to get another job and I have had to go on the dole.

“And last night the girl with whom I have gone for a year and a half said she would never marry me because I’m a Mormon.”

I said, “If this has cost you so much, why don’t you leave the Church and go back to your father’s home and to your cricket club

and to the job that meant so much to you and to the girl you think you love?"

He said nothing for what seemed to be a long time. Then, putting his head down in his hands, he sobbed and sobbed. Finally, he looked up through his tears and said, "I couldn't do that. I know this is true, and if it were to cost me my life, I could never give it up."

He picked up his wet cap and walked to the door and out into the rain, alone and trembling and fearful, but resolute. As I watched him, I thought of the loneliness of conscience, the loneliness of testimony, the loneliness of faith, and the strength and comfort of the Spirit of God.

The Loneliness of Testimony

I would like to conclude by saying to you here today, you young men and women who are in this great congregation, this is your lot. Oh, you are all together here now. You are all of one kind; you are all of one mind. But you are training to go out into the world where you are not going to have about you ten thousand, twenty thousand, twenty-five thousand others like you. You will feel the loneliness of your faith.

It is not easy, for instance, to be virtuous when all about you there are those who scoff at virtue.

It is not easy to be honest when all about you there are those who are interested only in making "a fast buck."

It is not always easy to be temperate when all about you there are those who scoff at sobriety.

It is not easy to be industrious when all about you there are those who do not believe in the value of work.

It is not easy to be a man of integrity when all about you there are those who will forsake principle for expediency.

The Peace of the Spirit

I would like to say to you here today, my brethren and sisters, there is loneliness—but a man of your kind has to live with his conscience. A man has to live with his principles. A man has to live with his convictions. A man has to live with his testimony. Unless he does so, he is miserable—dreadfully miserable. And while there may be thorns, while there may be disappointment, while there may be trouble and travail, heartache and heartbreak, and desperate loneliness, there will be peace and comfort and strength.

A Promise and a Blessing

I like these great words of the Lord given to those who would go out and teach this gospel:

I will go before your face. I will be on your right hand and on your left, and my Spirit shall be in your hearts, and mine angels round about you, to bear you up. [D&C 84:88]

I think that is a promise to each of us. I believe it; I know it. I bear testimony of its truth to you this day.

God bless you, my dear young friends, you of the noble birthright, you of the covenant, you who are the greatest hope of this generation—young men and women of ability and conscience, of leadership and tremendous potential.

God bless you to walk fearlessly, even though you walk in loneliness, and to know in your hearts that peace which comes of squaring one's life with principle, that "peace of God, which passeth all understanding" (Philippians 4:7), I humbly pray, as I leave with you my witness and my testimony of the divinity of this holy work. And as a servant of the Lord, I invoke upon you every joy as you go forward in your lives to rich and marvelously fruitful experiences, in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.