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Christopher Pramuk

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Christopher Pramuk

*His word was in my heart like a fire
shut up in my bones.*

- Jer. 20:9

It is a strange time to be a Jesuit university professor, a Catholic theologian, and a parent. It is a difficult time, in the words of Thomas Merton, “to be human in this most inhuman of ages,” an era perhaps not unlike the 1960s, when, to cite my dissertation director, “the whole country was having a nervous breakdown.” In other words, *not* to be deeply unsettled by the divisive climate of our times would itself be a cause for deep concern. The question becomes, what to *do* with our anxiety? To paraphrase the prophet Jeremiah, how can we turn the “fire” in our bones, the sense that something is profoundly out of kilter in our world today, into a force for positive change?

When Inhumanity Passes for Normal

In a remarkable essay published a few years after the Nuremberg trials, Thomas Merton observed that “One of most disturbing facts that came out in the Eichmann trial was that a psychiatrist examined him and found him *perfectly sane*.” Merton continues:

I do not doubt it at all, and this is precisely why I find it disturbing. If all the Nazis had been psychotics, as some of their leaders probably were, their appalling cruelty would have been in some sense easier to understand. It is much worse to consider this calm, “well-balanced,” unperturbed official, conscientiously going about his desk work, his administrative job in the great organization: which happened to be the supervision of mass murder.

Lest we be tempted to hold Eichmann and the horrors of Auschwitz at a safe historical distance, Merton then reverses our gaze, turning the mirror around to interrogate *our world*, the cultural milieu of “Western civilization” that could allow such a man as Eichmann and a whole nation to follow lock-step in carrying out Hitler’s Final Solution.

The sanity of Eichmann is disturbing. We equate sanity with a sense of justice, with humaneness, with prudence, with the capacity to love and understand other people. We are relying on the sane people of the world to preserve it from barbarism, madness, destruction. And now it begins to dawn on us that it is precisely the *sane* ones who are the most dangerous. It is the sane ones, the well-adapted ones, who can without qualms and without nausea aim the missiles and press the buttons that will initiate the great festival of destruction that they, *the sane ones*, have prepared.

Merton finally turns our gaze on the church, asking whether Christians are called “to be ‘sane’ like everybody else,” to assume “that we *belong* in our kind of society,” that “we must be ‘realistic’ about it. Certainly some of us are doing our best along those lines already. There are hopes! Even Christians can shake off their sentimental prejudices about charity, and become sane like Eichmann.”

The grim sarcasm of Merton’s voice here – adopting something of Eichmann’s own self-rationalizing “‘double-talk’ about himself” – is perhaps not so distant from the anguished dread that many thoughtful people of faith today feel when considering President Trump and his inner circle of advisers. The costs of adjusting ourselves to a “reality” void of empathy, of higher moral discernment, of democratic principles, of compassion – “I was only following orders,” was Eichmann’s trial defense – are very high indeed, warns Merton. He concludes: “I am beginning to think ‘that sanity’ is no longer a value or an end in itself... or per-

haps we must say that in a society like ours the worst insanity is to be totally without anxiety, totally 'sane.'"

Not so far from the terrifying Cold War climate of Merton's era, today it seems we are left to rely on "the sane ones" surrounding the president to stay his hand. But who are these sane ones? To sanction racist xenophobia and unthinkable acts of violence in the name of God and country – what President Trump has called the coming "storm" – needs to be identified for what it is: blasphemy, idolatry, and demagoguery, akin to Pharaoh giving orders for the slaughter of the Hebrew first-born. (Why do it? Well, because I can.) Who will have the courage to check this president's potentially catastrophic mental impulses?

From Moses and Jeremiah to Gandhi, King, and Merton, the prophets and saints raise certain fundamental questions that continue to haunt us with the gravity of our present situation from the divine perspective of the whole. Much like St. Ignatius, Merton urges us to pay attention to the inner movements of the spirit as we face critical choices about our nation, our planet, and our children's future. And also like Ignatius, Merton urges us to reclaim the tender and fiercest strength of the human heart: our "capacity to love and understand other people."

When the prophet Micah gave voice to his astonishing vision of a future in which the nations would "beat their swords into plowshares" (Mic. 4:3), he was painting a picture for his nation's despairing imagination, a people that had grown weary with burying their dead. No doubt many of his contemporaries considered him crazy. Jesus' own relatives thought he was "out of his mind" (Mark 3:21). Rabbi Abraham Heschel famously called the prophets "the most disturbing people who ever lived." Of himself, he said, "I am the most maladjusted person in society."

What about us? Can we dare to believe that the capacity for love and peacemaking lives alongside the capacity for fear and violence in every human heart? "We equate sanity with a sense of justice, with humaneness, with prudence, with the capacity to love and understand other people." But do we?

To Be Prophetic in the Way of a University

In her book *The Public Dimensions of a Believer's Life*, the late Catholic theologian and Georgetown Univer-

sity professor Monika Hellwig explores the tensions between "conformity and critical dissent" that young Christians inevitably face in their emerging relationship with civic life. While conformity with societal norms is generally a virtue to be cherished, she argues, history teaches us that there are exceptions, "and to miss the exceptions can be disastrous."

Like Merton, Hellwig lived through history's bloodiest century. As the German-born daughter of a Jewish mother who lost her father to the Nazis at age 9, and as a beloved Jesuit educator for over 30 years, she asks exactly the right question: What kind of Christian formation will "bring believers to a maturity that allows them to be loyally critical to the institutions to which they belong"? Hellwig concludes, "Unless the essentially prophetic, redemptive character of the Christian commitment is emphasized, most Christians will settle quietly into the routine of established observances and never realize that a critical dimension of the faith is missing."

As Jesuit educators it is crucial to remember that the vision of the prophets never ends in despair, but holds out God's promise that we are capable of building a more humane and peaceful world. "I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live" (Deut. 30:19). Critical dissent in the face of corrupt power is central to the biblical summons to freedom. And so is Jesus' difficult command to love our enemies.

Before we dismiss the Sermon on the Mount as insanely naïve and self-defeating, perhaps our task is to consider, utilizing all the disciplinary tools of our universities, how the alternative is working out for the human family. Indeed a great many of our students sense the peril of the present historical moment and are drawn to Jesuit universities, I believe, if obscurely and inarticulately, precisely for this reason, yearning to make a difference. In their desire to resist and transform the way things are, they need our support. Above all, they need our witness in the sacred task of learning to love and understand other people, and of holding our leaders accountable.

Christopher Pramuk is a theologian, author, scholar, and musician; in August 2017, after many years at Xavier University, he returned to Regis University as University Chair of Ignatian Thought and Imagination.