"THE MAGNIFICENT MISSIONARY"

I. INTRODUCTION

Today in this inspiring communion, let me salute the magnificent missionary -- Abraham Lincoln.

A missionary is one with a mission.

It is customary to think of a missionary as one who goes forth to propagate a religious faith.

Very naturally we think of Jesus Christ, of Buddha, of the Apostle Paul, of Mohammed, of Moses, of Francis Xavier, of Father Marquette or others.

But a missionary can be more than this.

A missionary could be a dedicated group like the Crusaders. Or it could be an entire nation under a spirited leader.

The mission might be in any field of human activity.

The Roman emperors leading the legions of ancient Rome were missionaries bent on conquest.

The French under Napoleon were missionaries bent on world domination.

The Moors inspired by Mohammed were missionaries intent on the destruction of all infidels, and that included all who did not embrace the doctrines of the Koran.

The first English in India were missionaries seeking an expanding trade.

Every generation has had its individuals, its groups, its institutions, with a sense of mission in some field of human activity.
II. CIVIL MISSIONERS

Among the missionaries of mankind in the field of civil endeavor there is one who stands out above all others -- that magnificent missionary -- Abraham Lincoln.

He sought to propagate no religious faith.
He sought no conquest, like Caesar or Napoleon.
He neither sought nor exercised autocratic power.
He sought no material advantage.
He was a humble, common man, whose only weapons were an incandescent conviction, an unflinching zeal, an invincible logic and an unfailing sense of right and wrong.

III. THE MISSIONARY EMERGES

Not far from where we meet today, in the city of Bloomington, on May 29, 1856, the spirit of this great missioner emerged.

Two years before that date the repeal of the Missouri Compromise and also the new and hateful doctrine of popular sovereignty was breeding a strong revulsion in the land.

Heretofore the issue of slavery was essentially a policy problem.

In some quarters it was probably little more than an intellectual exercise.

When the meeting in Bloomington drew to a close, Abraham Lincoln was summoned to speak.

This was the occasion when he uttered the celebrated "Lost Speech". The form and text may have been lost, but the spirit and the effect were imperishable.
This was the utterance which his partner, Herndon, referred to as the greatest of his life.

Until then, according to Herndon, the slavery issue had been argued on grounds of policy and not from the standpoint of eternal right.

But on this day Abraham Lincoln seemed newly baptized.
"From that day", wrote Herndon, "to the day of his death he stood firm in the right."

The smothered flame had broken forth.
A new sense of justice fired his energy.
His soul was now seasoned.
Abraham Lincoln had found his cross.
A new sense of mission was lighted.
The magnificent missionary had emerged here on the rolling prairies of Illinois destined to become one of mankind's greatest crusaders in a human cause.

IV. THE INTERIM YEARS

In that interim period between the emergence of the magnificent missionary and the time when the formal debates in this series began not only the great moral issue of that day, but also the zeal of Lincoln was being fueled.

In the presidential election of 1856 James Buchanan was elected.
In the territory called Kansas the clashes over the slavery issue were being referred to as war.

The unrestrained spirit of John Brown burst into murderous action like that of some Apocalyptic horseman of Vengeance.
In that period came the amazing decision of the Supreme Court of the United States under the leadership of Chief Justice Taney in the celebrated Dred Scott case.

There came in that period a most extraordinary document called the Lecompton Constitution, under which one group expected that Kansas might enter the Union.

There was the fact of an election campaign for the United States Senate between Lincoln and Douglas and the development of sharp personalities between them as each sought a victory.

There was the fact of a growing interest beyond the boundaries of Illinois to give national significance to the contest between Lincoln and Douglas.

Thus in that period between the emergence of Abraham Lincoln's sense of mission at Bloomington two years before and the first of these debates at Ottawa on a hot Saturday afternoon in August of 1858, the spirit of the moral baptism was working steadily in the soul and mind of Abraham Lincoln.

V. THE MORAL LIGHT SHINES BRIGHTLY

In this great continuing discussion beginning at Ottawa and ending in Alton, few things were left undiscussed.

The debate embraced the Missouri Compromise of 1850, which sought to limit the extension of slavery.

It included the effort to repeal that compromise through the Kansas-Nebraska Bill, which was piloted through a Senate Committee by Judge Douglas.
It involved the Dred Scott decision in the Supreme Court of the United States.

It covered the personal life of the candidates.

But the moral issue was the overriding light.

It came in the very first discussion at Ottawa.

"I hold," said Lincoln, "there is no reason in the world why the negro is not entitled to all the natural rights enumerated in the Declaration of Independence. The right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. . . . in the right to eat the bread without the leavy of anybody else which his own hand earns, he is my equal and the equal of Judge Douglas and the equal of every living man."

Here was the beginning of the moral thunder which was to roll down through conflict, emancipation and victory.

On they went -- these gladiators -- from Ottawa to Freeport, from Freeport to Jonesboro, from Jonesboro to Charleston, from Charleston to Galesburg, from Galesburg to Quincy, from Quincy to Alton.

It was then mid-October.

Here then came the final discussion.

Slavery is wrong. It is wrong. It is wrong. The very word came tumbling from Lincoln's lips over and over.

"That is the real issue," said Lincoln in the final discussion.

"That is the issue that will continue in this country when these poor tongues of Judge Douglas and myself shall be silent. It is the eternal struggle between these two principles -- right and wrong -- throughout the world."
VI. THE CONTAGION

Then as now editors and politicians, scholars and historians could interpret the debates as they saw and felt them against the backdrop of their own day.

It may be difficult to evaluate this great event by orienting oneself into that period and then looking backward into the past and forward into the future.

Two years before the debates the missioner had emerged.
Character and conviction had emerged.
A notion of the ultimate course which the country was to take and the moral concepts which must be asserted had emerged.
The missioner had found himself.
And so on and on he went.
The issue of principle was drawn.
It was the age old struggle of right and wrong.
At first it had to be tempered to reality.
Abraham Lincoln knew that he was dealing with an entrenched institution.

He knew he was dealing with a Supreme Court, with a Congress, and with a Constitution.

He knew that he was dealing with a divided land, with a people who were sharply divided.

He was dealing with friends and party associates interested in a political victory.

He was dealing with his own senatorial candidacy.

All these were realities.
And he knew that the people must be conditioned for this whole dose of basic moral principle and the struggle between right and wrong.

This was not a case for a thimbleful of gospel.

And as the conditioning process went on, so the conditioning of the spirit of Abraham Lincoln went on.

With it all, there was the slow but inevitable contagion which developed.

The thousands upon thousands of people who attended or who read the accounts were caught up in the fervor of the occasion.

They were given a sustained chance to think, to meditate on the moral issue and to separate the superficial from the genuine.

They had a chance to get a sharpened sense of the real issue and to reflect week after week upon the basic principle of human equality.

VII. THE ULTIMATE IMPACT

The ultimate impact of this series of debates can best be found in the utterances which came later.

On a cool November afternoon at Gettysburg in the year 1863, five years after the debate series came to an end there came those deathless words from the lips of Lincoln, when he spoke of a nation conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.
After five years the eternal truths rolled on and on.

Again, on a misty morning in the month of March, 1865, in the Nation's Capital, as he stood to receive the oath for the second time, with all the agonies of carnage and death written on his rugged face and his furrowed heart, he could yet say, "It may seem strange that any man should 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."

Thus did a sense of mission which slowly incubated on these rolling prairies of Illinois become fashioned and shaped in these debates to carry on and on not only in the hearts of his countrymen but in the heart of a great, humble man, who to the very end dedicated himself to the spirit of what Thomas Jefferson wrote in the Declaration of Independence so many years before when he said, where all could behold, "We hold these truths to be self-evident…….that all men are created equal."

The magnificent missionary had executed the mission to which he was ordained.