

What Was It All For?

Having recently watched the documentary by Ken Burns and Lynn Novick about the Vietnam war it seemed relevant to ask questions such as what was the horror, the suffering, the deaths, the grief of relatives of those US servicemen killed, and the trauma of so many Veterans, for; and decades on have we humans *en masse* learned anything?

Perhaps some have learned some things but have these few made any difference to what our respective governments do? Or are we as a species fated to remain as we are and have been for millennia? An apparently conflict-addicted species in thrall to abstractive ideas, ideals, ideology and causes political, religious, and social, where there is still an "us" and "them", the others who are wrong, or unwanted, and where so many of us seem to still be persuaded by rhetoric, propaganda, and cannot understand how we so often employ fallacies of reasoning such as the appeal to authority.

What I have termed my *weltanschauung* of *pathei-mathos* was and is my learning from my own suffering-causing extremist past. My fallible attempt to understand and provide some answers, if only for myself.

But there remains an ineffable sadness especially as we approach a remembrance of certain events millennia ago when someone was betrayed, vilified, crucified and suffered and became the genesis of an inner and outer and noble change for many human beings, century after century. But the suffering, the deaths, the grief, continues because some, indeed many, of us, as I did for decades, can always find some excuse, some cause, some ideal, some -ology or -ism, some certitude-of-knowing, to justify what we do.

Millennia ago one person asked: Τί ἐστὶν ἀλήθεια? My reply now, two days before Palm Sunday, is: παθῶν δέ τε νήπιος ἔγνω. ¹ But how many more years, decades, millennia, before we as a species, in sufficient numbers, have learnt?

David Myatt
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[1] Gospel of John, 18:38. Hesiod, Ἔργα καὶ Ἡμέραι [Works and Days] v.218:

σὺ δ' ἄκουε δίκης, μηδ' ὕβριν ὄφελλε:
ὑβρις γάρ τε κακὴ δειλῶ βροτῶ: οὐδὲ μὲν ἐσθλὸς
ῥηιδίως φερέμεν δύναται, βαρύθει δέ θ' ὑπ' αὐτῆς
ἐγκύρσας ἄτησιν: ὁδὸς δ' ἐτέρηφι παρελθεῖν
κρείσσων ἐς τὰ δίκαια: Δίκη δ' ὑπὲρ ὕβριος ἴσχει
ἐς τέλος ἐξελοῦσα: παθῶν δέ τε νήπιος ἔγνω

You should listen to [the goddess] Fairness and not oblige Hubris
Since Hubris harms unfortunate mortals while even the more fortunate
Are not equal to carrying that heavy a burden, meeting as they do with Mischief.
The best path to take is the opposite one: that of honour
For, in the end, Fairness is above Hubris
Which is something the young come to learn from adversity.

a. δίκη. The goddess of Fairness/Justice/Judgement, and - importantly - of Tradition (Ancestral Custom). In this work, as in *Θεογονία* (Theogony), Hesiod is recounting and explaining part of that tradition, one important aspect of which tradition is understanding the relation between the gods and mortals. Given both the antiquity of the text and the context, 'Fairness' - as the name of the goddess - is, in my view, more appropriate than the now common appellation 'Justice', considering the modern (oft times impersonal) connotations of the word 'justice'.

b. Mischief. The sense of ἄτησιν here is not of 'delusion' nor of 'calamities', per se, but rather of encountering that which or those whom (such as the goddess of mischief, Ἄτη) can bring mischief or misfortune into the 'fortunate life' of a 'fortunate mortal', and which encounters are, according to classical tradition, considered as having been instigated by the gods. Hence, of course, why Sophocles [*Antigone*, 1337-8] wrote ὡς πεπρωμένης οὐκ ἔστι θνητοῖς συμφορᾶς ἀπαλλαγὴ (mortals cannot be delivered from the misfortunes of their fate).

c. δίκαιος. Honour expresses the sense that is meant: of being fair; capable of doing the decent thing; of dutifully observing ancestral customs. A reasonable alternative for 'honour' would thus be 'decency', both preferable to words such as 'just' and 'justice' which are not only too impersonal but have too many inappropriate modern connotations.

d. νήπιος. Literal - 'young', 'uncultured' (i.e. un-schooled, un-educated in the ways of ancestral custom) - rather than metaphorical ('foolish', ignorant).