

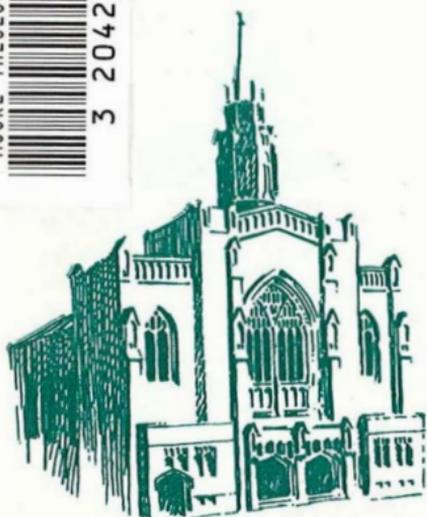
COINCIDENCES IN THE LIVES OF ABRAHAM LINCOLN AND JOHN F. KENNEDY

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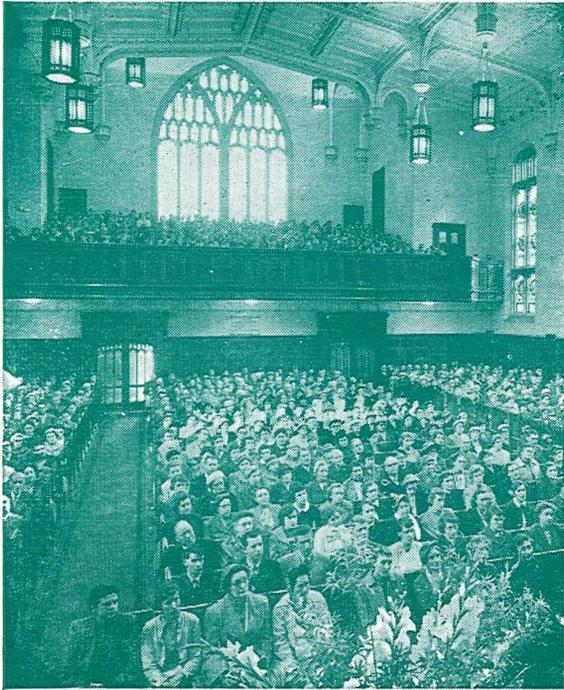
BY THE
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This is a sermon delivered in St. Stephen's Presbyterian Church, Macquarie Street, Sydney, Australia, on Sunday, November 22nd, 1964 — the anniversary of the death of President Kennedy.

The Service was attended by the Consul General of the United States, Mr. E. A. Bolster and members of the Senior and Junior Australian-American Associations.

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COINCIDENCES IN THE LIVES OF ABRAHAM LINCOLN AND JOHN F. KENNEDY

After President Kennedy's death on November 22, 1963 people began to point out the remarkable coincidences between his life and that of President Lincoln.

Here are some of them:

- * Lincoln was elected in 1860, Kennedy in 1960.
- * Both presidents' wives lost children while in the White House.
- * Both were concerned with civil rights.
- * Lincoln had a secretary named Kennedy and Kennedy had a secretary named Lincoln. In each case the secretary tried to dissuade the president from going to the place where he met his death.
- * Both were slain on a Friday in the presence of their wives.
- * Both were shot from behind and in the head.
- * John Wilkes Booth, who killed Lincoln, was born in 1839. Lee Harvey Oswald was born in 1939.
- * Booth shot Lincoln in a theatre and eventually sought refuge in a warehouse. Oswald shot Kennedy from a warehouse and sought refuge in a theatre.

- * Booth and Oswald were both murdered before they could be brought to trial.
- * Both Lincoln and Kennedy were succeeded by men named Johnson. Andrew Johnson was born in 1808, Lyndon Johnson in 1908.
- * The names Lincoln and Kennedy each contain seven letters, Andrew Johnson and Lyndon Johnson each contain a total of 13 letters and John Wilkes Booth and Lee Harvey Oswald each total 15 letters.

Now I think you will agree that some of these coincidences are quite weird, but most of them are fortuitous. What I want to do is to discuss three important ways in which Lincoln and Kennedy were similar in character and destiny.

1. BOTH DREW THEIR STRENGTH FROM RELIGION

Whenever I think of Abraham Lincoln I see in my imagination a dark brown pew standing out among other pews of a lighter colour in the Church which many of you would think of as Dr. George Docherty's Church in Washington, DC. Most people still think of it as Peter Marshall's Church. So many people crowded the Church when Peter Marshall was Minister they had to rebuild it on a larger scale. One thing they retained was 'Lincoln's Pew.' The Church is just three blocks away from the White House and Lincoln used to worship in that pew. As was not surprising, he found it difficult to keep the real atmosphere of worship because people used to crowd the Church not to worship God, but to see President Lincoln. Accordingly he formed the habit of coming along to the Wednesday evening prayer meeting and sitting in a side room where

he could not be seen, but from which he could hear the prayers, the reading of the word of God and the message of the Minister. Nobody knew he was doing this until a boy noticed mysterious footsteps in the snow outside the side door of the Church. He followed them and found that they started at the White House. So people discovered that President Lincoln recharged his spiritual batteries in the New York Avenue Presbyterian Church.

Four years ago I preached in that Church, as I did again last year. On both occasions I had long talks with the Rev. Edward Elson of the other big Presbyterian Church, the National-Covenant, in Washington. He told me that while President Eisenhower was in the White House he worshipped faithfully in his own Church with Dr. Elson and in the whole period of his presidency up till that time he had missed only seven Sundays, most of which were accounted for by his illnesses. In one five year period Sir John Northcott when he was Governor of N.S.W. missed only one Communion Service in St. Stephen's and then he was overseas. The present Governor, Sir Eric Woodward, who is also a member of this Church, is chalking up a somewhat similar record. If the busiest people in the nation find time to worship God, feel the need to worship and have learned the art of taking in strength from God, how much more should we lesser folk form this practice and see that nothing interrupts the regularity of our worship.

One hundred years ago, on the 21st November, 1864 Abraham Lincoln wrote a letter to a certain Mrs. Bixby whose five sons were all reported killed in battle. This was the letter:

"I pray that our Heavenly Father may assuage the anguish of your bereavement and leave you only

the cherished memory of the loved and lost, and the solemn pride that must be yours to have laid so costly a sacrifice upon the altar of freedom.”

President Kennedy, addressing a Washington audience in February, 1961 said this:

“No man who enters upon the office to which I have succeeded can fail to recognise how every President of the United States has placed special reliance upon his faith in God. Every President has taken faith and courage when told, as we are told to-day, that ‘The Lord will be with thee. He will not fail thee nor forsake thee. Fear not; neither be thou dismayed.’

“While they came from a wide variety of religious backgrounds and held a wide variety of religious beliefs, each of our Presidents in his own way has placed a special trust in God. Those who were strongest intellectually were also strongest spiritually . . .”

What makes this statement impressive is the way President Kennedy practised what he preached. Every Sunday he and his family faithfully attended their own Church. In his first address after being chosen by the Democratic Party in Los Angeles he quoted the words of God to Joshua, “Be strong and of a good courage; be not afraid, neither be thou dismayed.” In his inaugural address as President in front of the Capitol Building in Washington with 100,000,000 people listening he quoted the book of Isaiah, challenging the whole world, both East and West, to unite to “undo the heavy burdens . . . (and) let the oppressed go free.” In other important speeches he quoted the Scripture, “Of those to whom much is given, much will be required.” “The

wicked flee when no man pursueth” and “Man shall not live by bread alone.” The last speech he ever wrote, the speech he was to deliver the day he died contained an appeal for “the ancient vision of peace on earth, goodwill toward men.” Yes, John Kennedy knew his Bible and it gave him strength.

2. BOTH LINCOLN AND KENNEDY WERE IDEALISTS

Abraham Lincoln was an awkward individual with a long, thin face which people tended to ridicule. But he was so honest that he often made speeches which presented unpalatable facts and alienated people. He refused to make “easy speeches to comfort cruel men,” to be a smooth diplomat covering up that which was wrong. They laughed at him as “Honest Abe”—but because he was so honest they trusted him and eventually elected him to the highest position in the land.

Once when he was a struggling young lawyer an unworthy partner, mainly through excessive drinking, ran up enormous debts and then decamped leaving Lincoln to face the music. He slaved for years to repay those debts though he was not directly responsible. About this time a man asked him to take a legal case for him. The man was justified in point of law, but he could only win the case at the expense of a widow and her children. Abraham Lincoln said to him:

“Yes, there is no reasonable doubt that I can gain your case for you. I can set a whole neighbourhood at loggerheads; I can distress a widowed mother and her six fatherless children and thereby get you 600 dollars which rightfully belong, it appears to me, as much to them as to you. I shall not take your case, but I will give you a little

advice for nothing. You seem a sprightly, energetic man. I advise you to try your hand at making 600 dollars some other way."

Once when Lincoln was still a young man he and some friends suddenly came round a corner to see a slave market and human beings auctioned in the heat of the Southern sun like so many cattle. Abraham Lincoln's remark was, "In God's name let's get away from this boys. One day I'll hit that thing and when I hit it I'll hit it hard." So he went into politics an idealist and he stayed an idealist to the end as the great Gettysburg Address in November, 1863 showed:

"That this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom and that government of the people, by the people and for the people shall not perish from the earth."

When John F. Kennedy stood for the Presidency people said he didn't have a hope for three reasons. One, he was too young, only 43. Two, he was too rich — his family were worth about 300,000,000 dollars. Three, he was a Catholic and no Catholic had ever been elected to the White House and no Catholic could be elected there were many more Protestants than Catholics in the United States. But he was elected, and he was elected as a young idealist, his idealism expressed in the phrase "the New Frontier" having been made quite clear as the presidential election campaign began.

Eleven days before his first Inaugural Address in Washington John F. Kennedy addressed the Massachusetts Legislature in the State where he had grown up. Quoting from Holy Scripture he said, "Of those to whom much is given, much is required." He went on to say that at some future date the high court of history would ask four questions of those who had been en-

trusted with high political office—questions which every one of us ought to apply to our own lives:—

1. Were we truly men of courage?
2. Were we truly men of judgment?
3. Were we truly men of integrity?
4. Were we truly men of dedication?

As part of his dedication and idealism President Kennedy wanted to take all the great scientific progress which had made possible the atom and space ages, and dedicate it to peace and prosperity for the benefit of all mankind. He had some success in persuading the Russians to join him in this. Again he formed the Peace Corps to harness the idealism of young men and women and make it possible for them to give several years of their lives helping backward nations. Surely all of us ought to be doing something to sponsor peaceful and positive measures to promote understanding and brotherhood. It seems appalling that Australia is talking of reducing the miserable 2.7 million we give annually to the Colombo Plan when we are planning to spend hundreds of millions extra on defence and have overseas reserves of over £800,000,000. As President Kennedy says "To whom much is given, from him much will be required" and Australia will have to answer not only to the high court of history, but to the high court of God if we can't do better than this. We need more idealists in this country of the order of Lincoln and Kennedy.

3. BOTH WERE GOOD MEN DESTROYED BY EVIL MEN

It seems appalling that men as patently honest as Lincoln and Kennedy, as clearly dedicated to the great-

est good of the greatest number, should not be universally admired and assisted in every possible way. But it is one of the harsh facts of life in this imperfect world that an idealist must expect to be laughed at. Why? One reason is psychological. Those who have let go their standards feel ashamed in the presence of an idealist. They feel embarrassed and their defence mechanism is to laugh at him, mock him as the enemies of Jesus did in the last hours in Jerusalem.

Not only that, but the more a good man tries to do some positive good in the world, the more certain he is, sooner or later, to cut across some evil vested interest. He will meet resistance, he will meet intrigue, he will meet threats and violence. When these things become focussed in one distorted personality he will come face to face with death itself. Once again the supreme example was the sinless Son of God.

Lincoln was only 54 when he died, Kennedy only 46. Kennedy was in office for only 34 months, not quite three years. Yet the impact of his personality, the impact of his work, and the impact of his death will go on down through the years, perhaps down through the centuries. When we think of these things, and how in some respects both Lincoln and Kennedy achieved more through the shock effect of their deaths than through the strenuous efforts of their working lives, surely it helps us to understand a little better how the death of Jesus Christ at the age of 33 after only a three year ministry could bring such redemption to the world. This was God's shock treatment.

I don't think it is irreverent to compare imperfect men like Lincoln and Kennedy with Jesus, the more so as they drew so much of their inspiration from Him. Yet when you have said all this and noted the coinci-

dence of their good lives and their violent deaths, you need much more to explain Christianity. The fact remains that when people come to believe in the crucified Christ as the Son of the living God, believe in Him as not only crucified but risen again, then the power of the Holy Spirit comes to the believer and personalities are changed for time and eternity.

It is the living Christ who is challenging us now to cross the Jordan and enter the Promised Land, to enter a New Frontier and to build a new world. It is the Christ who is calling us to be dedicated men and women, Christian idealists, in the fight against evil things knowing the price will be high. We too might be called to make the supreme sacrifice, but His promise is still the same—as it was to Joshua, as it was to Lincoln, as it was to Kennedy, so it is to us, "Be strong and of a good courage, be not afraid, neither be thou dismayed; for the Lord thy God is with thee whithersoever thou goest."

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