

An old essay – relevant to today

We were watching a 1935 film called *Ruggles of Red Gap*, about a rough, ready and loud citizen of the town of Red Gap way out west. His name is Egbert Floud (played by Charles Ruggles) who while in England “won” the services of a valet named Marmaduke (played by Charles Laughton). Upon his arrival in Red Gap the valet is confused by the hyperactivity of American “culture”. But he carries out his services with a stiff upper lip and even becomes a celebrity because of the way he dresses, his accent. Egbert shows him off, treats him as an equal, and so Marmaduke senses a change in himself. He begins to like the familiarity of these independent Americans. He loses his stiffness, his habit of accommodation to the British aristocrats of his past. He even joins Egbert at the town saloon with its loud clientele who know nothing about formal dress – just sombreros, shaggy beards and a pendulum way of walking.

To me the climactic scene comes when Egbert and Marmaduke are off at a side table and Marmaduke looks pensive, caught between the old world and the new. He mumbles something and Egbert says, “That sounds like what Lincoln said at Gettysburg” and he asks the barkeeper “What did Lincoln say at Gettysburg?” Nobody can remember. Then Marmaduke starts mouthing words and Egbert says, “That’s it! That’s what Lincoln said! Stand up Marmaduke and speak it out.” So Marmaduke recites (as only a Charles Laughton could): *Fourscore and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.*

Slowly the loud talk settles down. This ragtag crew begins to converge toward Marmaduke, who seems entranced himself: *Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation or any nation so conceived and so dedicated can long endure. We are met on a great battlefield of that war. We have come to dedicate a portion of that field as a final resting-place for those who here gave their lives that that nation might live. . . It is for us the living rather to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us -- that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion -- that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain, that this nation under God shall have a new birth of freedom, and that government of the people, by the people, for the people shall not perish from the earth.*

All of which alerts us to the power of language. At our everyday level of “talk” we can’t remember what we said yesterday and that may be said of academic talk and newspaper columnists as well. It’s only when we advance to the language, the style of a Shakespeare, of a Lincoln, which rises from the depth of our being, that Old Faithful erupts, attracts our attention, showers us with grace and humanity. What an unusual moment within the standard, predictable boozing and shoot-outs of other Westerns. Silence, reverence, truth, the power of language!

Indeed, if we could hold still long enough to listen closely to the language of Sacred Scripture, the eloquence of St. Paul, of Job, great changes might occur in us, so that we might rise more often than we do and speak truth; become God’s word made flesh. But what’s the hurry; there’s always tomorrow - in the meantime: slogans, noise.