

This homily is reprinted as an expression of our thanks and admiration for John Craig as well as an affectionate remembrance of him.

SERMON PREACHED BY THE REVEREND DR. HAROLD T. LEWIS, RECTOR
CALVARY EPISCOPAL CHURCH, PITTSBURGH, PENNSYLVANIA
AT THE FUNERAL OF JOHN GILBERT CRAIG, JR.
SATURDAY, JUNE 5, 2010

“Oh that my words were written! Oh that they were inscribed in a book! Oh that with an iron pen and lead they were graven in the rock forever!” (Job 19:23-24)

The preacher who must use words to honor the memory of John Gilbert Craig, Jr. faces a daunting task indeed. For John was a lover of words. If we look up “wordsmith” in the dictionary, we would find that Mr. Webster has supplied us with a photograph of John Craig as part and parcel of the definition. We live, as we needn’t be reminded, in a world in which Shakespeare’s tongue has been reduced to bastardized hieroglyphics by those who Tweet and text, and who insist that “friend” can be a verb. In the face of these egregious assaults on the language, John Craig stood resolutely on those venerable foundations of prose known as subject and predicate – and eschewed with a vengeance such grammatical aberrations as the split infinitive, the dangling participle and the sentence ending in a preposition. So even as we speak, we can well imagine John, happily ensconced in that neighborhood behind the Pearly Gates reserved for journalists – yes, there *is* such a place – blue pencil in hand, ready to critique this homiletic offering. I take no small comfort, however, in the knowledge that seven years ago, John gave me a favorable review in his columns to a sermon I preached at the marriage of his daughter Lindsay.

But John Craig was no mere linguistic purist, a slave to the *Chicago Manual of Style*. John, as the distinguished and beloved editor-in-chief of the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, actually had something to say! And more often than not, he said it unabashedly, letting the proverbial chips fall where they may. A Pittsburgher by adoption and grace, he perched himself, as it were, on the cliffs of Mount Washington, and like a one-man Greek chorus, delivered an ongoing commentary on the drama being acted out below. Believing that the city’s problems were “almost entirely attitudinal and self-inflicted,” he did not hesitate to criticize the ‘Burgh for its insularity and lack of vision, its “timidity and parochialism,” or for the level of pretension that accompanied them. While others avoided the topic of race like the plague, John fearlessly drew the parallels between racial discrimination and unemployment, even going so far as to suggest that the poverty level of racial minorities of this city was to some extent a consequence of the attention given to the “economics of professional sports.” Now John was not incapable of praise for Pittsburgh, but it was often faint at best, as when he suggested that the last two years might eventually be looked upon as the tipping point, “a time when we finally got four decades of negative history behind us.”

Not everybody could have gotten away with this, but John was able to. First, he got away with it because it was clear to all and sundry, even to his detractors (and there were a few!) that John spoke out of a clear sense of conviction. It was clear that he spoke, and wrote, from his heart, and that he was not merely taking pot shots at this or that sector of the community. Second, John’s intellect was such that even those who disagreed with his opinions could not assail the intellectual process that led to them. But John’s effectiveness as a communicator had a lot to do with his wit and humor. Using both to good effect, he could disarm his audience. A bitter pill always goes down better with a smile. But what is more, his humor was self-deprecating. When all was said and done,

there was a sense in which John did not take himself too seriously. I think he took a page from the book of Dame Margot Fonteyn (I hope John will excuse me for comparing him to a ballerina) who said that when she took the dance seriously, she could perform flawlessly, but if she ever took herself seriously, she'd fall flat on her face!

I had the privilege of spending some time with John on the day before he died. But I want to assure you that this was no ordinary deathbed visitation. John was lucid, intelligible, witty and humorous, still at the top of his game, even if within hours of his final demise. Let me tell you what I did not see on that Tuesday afternoon. I saw nary a trace of fear. John was able to face, even embrace his departure from this life as the inevitable end result of his earthly existence. Nor was there any complaining or railing in God's face. No chorus of "Why me?" Instead, John gave thanks for his life. He talked about growing up with his late sister. He talked about his beloved Candace and his children and grandchildren. Then he invited me to look through the French doors of his bedroom and onto the terrace and the shrubbery and trees beyond. "Does it get any more beautiful than this?" he asked. He then recited the Lord's Prayer with conviction and received communion for the last time with thankfulness. He then summed up his life with a rather unorthodox but certainly Craig-esque expression of gratitude: "It's been a helluva ride!" In dying, John taught us how to live. And this is why I read to him the words that the Apostle Paul recited as he faced his death, words found in today's epistle: "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith."

The lesson from the Hebrew Scriptures this afternoon is from the Book of Job, a man who has long been held up as the quintessential exemplar of patience, suffering and perseverance. Stripped of his wealth and prosperity, it was Satan's expectation that Job would curse God, but he never does. In fact, he comes to a new and deeper understanding of salvation. It is he who proclaims, in fact, the words immortalized by Mr. Handel: "I know that my redeemer liveth." But before reciting these words, he offers a lament: "O that my words were written! Oh that they were inscribed in a book! Of that with an iron pen and lead they were graven in the rock forever." In other words, despairing of justice from his friends in his lifetime, Job wishes his words could be persevered imperishably to posterity. In this regard, John Craig has an advantage over Job. John's words have been written; they have been inscribed in many books. Indeed, they are etched in the memories of those whose privilege it was to read them.

My friends, we have come this afternoon to commit to God's never-failing love and mercy not merely a writer, or journalist, or a real-life version of Perry White. No, I would like to suggest to you that we come to bury a prophet. Now, a prophet is not, as is commonly believed, someone who predicts the future. Rather he is one who interprets – indeed who is called to interpret – the signs of the times for the people. He issues words of warning, he challenges the status quo, he is a champion of the oppressed, he is a builder of community. The prophet is a risk-taker, sometimes a revolutionary, and always a seeker of justice. And so it was with John. So with this in mind, perhaps his new heavenly neighbors are not Horace Greeley and William Randolph Hearst, but fellow prophets like Amos, who wrote "Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an overflowing stream" – or Habakkuk, who said, "Write the vision, make it plain upon the tablets, so that even a runner may read it." But I think John's favorite neighbor is the prophet Ezekiel, who wrote "Whether they hear or refuse to hear, they will know that there has been a prophet among them."

Rest eternal grant unto John, O Lord, and let light perpetual shine upon him. May his soul, and the souls of all the faithful departed, through the mercy of God, rest in peace and rise in glory. AMEN.