

Howard Thurman's Eulogy for John F. Kennedy

24 November 1963

Lagos, Nigeria

The time and the place of a man's life on the earth is the time and place of his body, but the meaning and significance of his life is as vast and far reaching as his gifts, his times, and the passionate commitment of all his powers can make it.

President John F. Kennedy is dead.

It is given but rarely to an individual the privilege of capturing the imagination of his age and thereby becoming a symbol of the hopes, aspirations and dreams of his fellows so that often in their enthusiasm and relief, they are apt to forget that he was the symbol—that he stood for them and his strength was their strength and their strength was his strength, and his courage was the courage he drew in large part from his faith in them and their faith in him.

This, by the grace of God, was John F. Kennedy's privilege.

I.

When he became President of the United States, the youth of the land and the young in spirit were caught up in the sweep of his confidence, his sense of purpose and his direction. There was an aura of destiny in his assurance. When he said, in essence, "Do not ask what can my country do for me, but rather what can I do for my country," the winds of God blew across the land. When the Peace Corps was announced and it was clear that he was calling upon young and old alike to become apostles of sensitiveness, placing their lives and talents at the disposal of human need anywhere without benefit of

anything other than the opportunity to give, the morning stars sang together and the sons of God shouted for joy. They felt that, for yet a little while, Life and time were on their side because the future belonged to them.

II.

Again, by the grace of God, it was John F. Kennedy's privilege to become the first Roman Catholic to be elected President of the United States. This marked a turning point in the history of the nation. It was a recognition of one of the basic elements in the genius of the democratic dogma—that a man must be free to worship God after the manner of his own spirit and in accordance with the private promptings of his personal conscience as expressed in a free choice of the faith to which he will give his devotion and his life. As a Protestant clergyman, I rejoice to say that the people, as a whole, found spiritual strength in his authentic devotion to his own faith. By some instinctual wisdom they sensed that a man must be at home somewhere in order to feel at home anywhere.

III.

Again, by the grace of God, it was John F. Kennedy's privilege to become the voice of the American conscience in the matter of the civil rights of its citizens, particularly of the 20 million American Negroes and other so-called minorities in the land. Whatever may have been the impatience as to the speed with which his leadership affirmed itself, there was never any doubt that he was acting out of the center of an informed heart and a conviction as to the true spirit and meaning of democracy and the American dream. It was his insistence that the North, the South, the East, the West were held together by a spirit that transcended all sectionalism and that after the laws had

spoken and the formal intent of the nation had declared itself in a language all could understand, the ultimate place of refuge for any man, was in another man's heart.

What he felt to be true of his own country he dared to project as the creative possibility of all the nations of the earth. The unfinished work, the outlines of which he has vouch-safed to us in his living, may we carry on and may what we leave undone be the sacred work of those who in their turn shall follow us.

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Prayer

Close present Father, to whom Life and Death are expressions of Thy Wisdom and Thy Love, wilt Thou accept our stricken hearts and unabated grief as but an expression of our frailty and the depth of our dependence upon Thy Grace.

When we are most ourselves we know that there is in Thee strength sufficient for our needs whatever they may be. May this assurance hold us in the Way lest our feet stray from the places, our God, where we met Thee.

Brood over us with Thy Spirit as we stumble along the Path of our Remembrance:

We remember President Kennedy and say our muted AMENS to his spirit as he spreads his life before Thee in his sudden home coming. And we rest in what he reports to Thee concerning us, his people, whom he loved with such abiding affection.

We remember his family, particularly those who called him husband, father, brother, son, and who cradled him in all the love and tenderness that are within the power

of mortal man to share with mortal man. Out of all that Thou hast garnered from all the generations of the suffering of Thy Children, share with them the full measure of Thy Grace in all the levels of their pain.

We remember him upon whom falls the vast responsibility of office at this fateful moment in the history of our world. Be strength to his weakness, steadiness to his faltering steps, courage to his heart, vitality to his body, vigor to his mind and keep before his eyes the vision without which we shall all stumble in the darkness. Tutor us in all ways needful to companion him with confidence and help.

We remember all the nations and peoples of the world who hoped with us that together a way may be found to lift the burden of war and the threat of war from the heart, to move the great weight of poverty from the backs of the poor, to bring in a time of tranquility when everywhere, at home and abroad, the barriers that separate shall be no more and men will love and trust each other and nations will dwell together as friendly peoples underneath a friendly sky.

Our words are ended and the rest is silence.

Let the words of our mouths
and the meditation of our hearts
be acceptable in Thy Sight,
O Lord, our strength and our Redeemer.

Amen