

## God, Life, and Everything "Indigenous Peoples Day"

I am writing this on Columbus Day. Or, as many localities are now re-naming it, Indigenous People's Day (or Native American Day).

Why this change in names? After all, Columbus discovered America, right? Wrong.

Christopher Columbus never set foot on what is now the lower 48 of the United States. He landed in the Caribbean.

That's one reason to skip this holiday.

The bigger reason is what he did once he got to the Americas. Columbus was an explorer in search of money. He needed money to fund his explorations, and he needed to find a way to make money out of those trips. His goal was a quick route to the far east (China, Japan), but he would be happy with anything that showed his backers that the trips were profitable.

What he came up with was gold. Though there was not perhaps as much as he claimed, over the course of his journeys and years in the Caribbean, he began to enslave the indigenous people. He was cruel in his demands and crueler in his punishments. He demanded the native people to bring a quota of gold each month or have their hand cut off. Many bled to death because of it.

In the long run, Columbus opened up a drive for conquest in the Americas. This led to the virtual extinction of the indigenous people of the Caribbean. It encouraged wider conquest of South America and North America. It brought on the decimation of entire nations. And, to add to the injury, when the Europeans concluded that local inhabitants made poor slaves (because they tended to run away or die under the harsh conditions), they began importing African slaves who could not run away.

So why do we celebrate Columbus? I frankly don't know. I hope his legacy does not mirror our values because they are wicked values.

Now, I've heard some defend Columbus by saying that he was a man of his times, that slavery was common, and indeed that the Indigenous people were no saints and also had slaves. But remember this: Ferdinand and Isabella had forbidden Columbus from taking slaves. After seven years as acting governor of the Caribbean, Columbus was brought back to Spain in shackles because of his cruelty.

People of his time understood cruelty was wrong. Even those who felt Europe was far superior (and that was a sign of the times), knew that such gross cruelty was immoral. To claim that a person was simply "a man of his times," bears no moral weight - wrong is and always has been wrong.

I recently read another defense of Columbus. It went something like this: The native people were not really native. They had migrated to the New World centuries before - just as the Europeans were now. So they had no right to the land just because they had been living there for so long. Besides, said the apologist, they also fought and killed each other and took slaves, so it was perfectly fine for the Europeans to do so.

The moral bankruptcy of that argument almost boggles the mind. To say that everyone is a migrant so nobody can claim the land as their home means that invasion is always justified, that "they do it too" is always justification for bad behavior, and that anyone who in the future invades our home and takes us into slavery is perfectly within their rights. In other words, might (and barbarism) make right.

Perhaps that is the reasoning for some who have no sense of society, of law, of human concord. But it is wrong.

In the same way, what Columbus did - and what he inspired - was wrong. That does not mean that I believe all people of European ancestry (like myself) should go back to Europe. That simply isn't possible. But I do believe it means that we who are of predominantly European heritage do owe it to the indigenous peoples to learn more history from their point of view. I believe learning about the culture of the local native peoples would do much to help. Learning the most easily accessible native language would do much good, too.

This may be why so many communities - and states - are leaving Christopher Columbus behind and changing their focus. These are not just "granola" communities either. The state of South Dakota has replaced Columbus Day with Native American Day.

I am all for this change. And even though the date has already passed, there's time to plan for next year.

So Happy Indigenous Peoples Day!

(And don't worry about the kids. As long as they get the day off of school, they'll love it just the same.)