

May 7, 2020

Thursday of the Fourth Week of Easter

Blessed Among Us

Henry David Thoreau

Naturalist and Social Critic (1817–1862)

Henry David Thoreau, who was born in Concord, Massachusetts, subscribed to no organized religion. Yet there was in Thoreau something of the sage or Desert Father, an intense need to dispense with socially defined values and to experience life “first-hand.” This desire led him in 1845 to spend two years in solitude at Walden Pond, “wishing to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived.” His account of this experience became a literary classic. But in a sense Thoreau was himself an American classic who embodied the spirit of nonconformity, the impulse to seek renewal in nature, and the will to stand by his convictions.

Thoreau’s mystical communion with nature speaks to the concerns of an ecological age. But he was also a stern moralist and social critic. Finding it intolerable to live in a country that sanctioned slavery, he was arrested for refusing to pay a tax financing the Mexican War—a war to extend slavery. Though his overnight stay in jail was no more than a gesture, it resulted in a famous essay on civil disobedience, one of the most eloquent arguments ever written on the authority of conscience and the duty to resist injustice. It would be embraced by Tolstoy, Gandhi, and Martin Luther King Jr. and inspire generations of peacemakers.

Thoreau died on May 6, 1862.

*“Only that day dawns to which we are awake. There is more day to dawn.
The sun is but a morning star.”*

—Henry David Thoreau

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