

11th September 2021

Wordless

“Good words do not last long unless they amount to something.

Words do not pay for my dead people.”

Chief Joseph (Hinmaton-Yalaktit), Nez Percé chief

on a visit to Washington in 1979

Hinmaton-Yalaktit, “Thunder Rolling Down the Mountain”, succeeded his father as chief of the Nez Percé Native American tribe in north-eastern Oregon in 1871. Following a gold rush in the area, the federal government had repossessed some six million acres of tribal land. By 1877, times were hard for the Nez Percé. Hinmaton-Yalaktit at first agreed to take his people to a reservation in Idaho. However, a group of young Nez Percé warriors attacked white settlements and then came to hide among the tribe. Hinmaton-Yalaktit was forced to fight. Moving north through the mountains of Idaho, Wyoming and Montana, he led the Nez Percé on one of the most brilliant retreats in American history. In time, however, the exhausted, starving Nez Percé were forced to surrender. Hinmaton-Yalaktit had become famous as “The Red Napoleon”, and his elegant surrender speech is one of the most famous statements in American Indian history. And his words above have had an important effect on me.

On the night of 9/11, 2001, when I was Moderator of Edinburgh Presbytery, I had a sermon to present at a gathering of 300 people. It was an important occasion and I had worked hard on my text, choosing words carefully and revising it thoroughly. But I had watched the unfolding events of 9/11 throughout the afternoon, so by the evening, I was in pieces. I knew the sermon had to be abandoned. But what was I to put in its place? What memorable words? What healing phrases? When I rose to preach, I had nothing to say. So, I said just that, and invited people to sit quietly for five minutes and let our silence and tears be our reflection.

Hinmaton-Yalaktit was my teacher on 9/11. His guidance encouraged me to preach a wordless sermon, perhaps the best sermon I’ve ever preached. “Good words do not last long unless they amount to something.” I pray to God that Hinmaton-Yalaktit will continue to teach me to say nothing when nothing needs to be said.

A prayer for today

*On this anniversary of 9/11, I offer no words, Lord,
but sit in silent communion with you. It is enough. Amen*

An original reflection by © Tom Gordon

Also available at <https://swallowsnestnet.wordpress.com>