Sunday, September 24, 1972
WHO BLUSHES ANYMORE?
Jeremiah 8:4-12

“They did not know how to blush!” said Jeremiah about the people of his time. His statement is also relevant for us; namely, people can lose their sense of shame; they can stop blushing. We can become too cool, too detached. To put it another way, there can be something good about blushing!

But what about us? Have we stopped blushing? The quick answer to that question is that we all blush at certain times. Even though we sometimes like to think that we live in a kind of unshockable generation, most of still blush at public immodesty. And while young people are said to be remarkable in “keeping their cool,” I doubt that the blushing mechanism has been put on ice in most adolescents. In fact. most of us still have our blushing response working in personal situations.

Certainly, we still blush when we are flattered — perhaps as much in shame about wanting that flattery, as in pleasure or surprise over the fact that we got it. We blush when we are caught with having put something off or having forgotten an appointment. Most of us blush when someone mentions something from the past which we had hoped they had forgotten. We may blush when we arrive late for an occasion, and someone has what we think is the unpardonable bad taste to welcome us loudly.

There’s something good about all of this kind of blushing, something wonderfully human. It shows we have emotion and feeling and can be touched. Blushing is an emotion which reveals a sensitiveness like crying or laughing.

In addition, some of us find ourselves blushing fairly constantly about matters of taste. These occasions too, are often highly personal. What makes some of us blush may not affect others in the same way. Visiting a city somewhere in America, we pick up the local newspaper and reading the ads may make us blush. Or the implied assumptions of many television commercials can be a blushing matter.

Furthermore, all of us will hopefully continue to blush at the increasing amount of pornography which degrades human beings.

Who blushes anymore? We all do quite naturally and quite understandably.

But there'$ another kind of blushing that enough of us who call ourselves Christians may not be doing. And that’s what the prophet was concerned about. More than the young are maintaining their cool. We’re talking here about the flushed, hot humiliation in the face of intolerable facts; the standing accused of one’s complicity in something that is terribly damaging to our brothers and sisters in the human race, the blush that burns the face and the soul. Jeremiah was talking about the blush that leads to con-fession and a resolution to change things.

It was this level of the blushing, or rather the no-blushing issue which Jeremiah was talking about again and again. The incredible hypocrisy of the scribes, boasting in their wisdom and lying through their teeth; the greed of the al-ready rich, angling for more by an unconscionable exploit-ation of the poor. the maintenance of an unusually good deal by the prophets and

priests, healing the wounds of people lightly, crying “peace, peace,” when there was no peace. As Jeremiah put it, “Were they ashamed when they committed abomination? No, they were not at all ashamed; they did not know how to blush!”

Jeremiah was particularly critical of the fact that religious institutions tend to become ends in themselves and alienated from those who need help the most. This too should make us blush.

But if Jeremiah or Jesus were here today, they would find a number of additional things about which we are slow to blush.

We blush less and less about violence. We take it for granted. To not blush is to have lost one’s sensitivity and sense of shame. And we lose this when we simply be-come too accustomed to something. We get used to it; our senses are dulled. I wonder how many people blushed when seeing the movie, THE GODFATHER. The world is being in-undated by the brazen conviction that power can do anything, justice nothing.

One of the most terrifying facts of this age and something 1 to blush about, is the evidence that we are becoming more tolerant of “official violence. “A current example, an especially painful one, is provided by the report of the official commission on the Attica Prison rebellion and its suppression a year ago. The report makes clear beyond argument that hundreds of rounds of ammunition were fired without warning that day at men who had no guns. And the most terrifying fact of all is that the report makes clear that the original official accounts of the events were lies, and nobody even blushed when caught in the lies.

Another more difficult example lies in Israel’s reprisals for the savagery of Arab terrorists at Munich. The declared aim was to hit guerrilla camps. Accounts by re-porters after the first air raids indicated that Israeli intelligence cannot be perfect either; the bombs hit at least some places where there were no guerillas and they killed innocent men, women and children. The official argument is always that such action is necessary to counter grave risks to society. Undoubtedly the provocation at Attica, as after Munich, was extreme, but it should still cause us to blush and have a deep sense of shame. It almost seems as if we don’t even ask any more if it really helps to take action that almost inevitably will kill the innocent along with the guilty.

Again, what bothered Jeremiah in his. time was that the people became so deadened to violence and lies and false justifications that they couldn’t even blush. Have we become so desensitized that an Attica, or a Kent State, no longer seems to touch the moral nerve of Christians? Does it cause us to blush when self-righteous people say, “They got what they deserved. They should’ve killed all of them.”

Hopefully more and more of us are blushing about our in-volvement and record in Vietnam. It would help us to blush more if we could make the mental leap of imagining hundreds of bombs falling from unseen planes on villages in Nebraska or Kansas. How many reckon the moral cost that will have to be paid for that violence?

Blushing of this kind is not disloyalty. Jeremiah was not disloyal to his nation. It doesn’t mean that a person has resigned from a nation or that he is sympathetic to the nation’s adversary. It simply means that the moral alarm has gone off inside of him somewhere; that the blood has gone charging through his system, making his body squirm and his face red.

The loss of life in a war when it is fought a long way off with technological weapons systems which make it possible for those using the weapons to never see those who are being killed, makes death and suffering too easily just a matter of cold statistics to be read with a glance and we do not blush.

None of the persons involved are ever reminded that they are involved in anything out of the ordinary. Even the fact that some of these are American lives does not come home to us strongly except when the loss is very local, and even then, we have a place to file it — with the roll of others from 1918, 1944, 1950. We have no place to file the deaths of innocent civilians.

We have seen so much violent death on our globe in the last fifty years that it might seem understandable that the people of our generation would be almost dispassionate about human suffering. Almost! Face to face with war, man's shrugging question may be one of the most terrible of the age — -"Who blushes anymore?"

Protests again the war and other kinds of violence have often been public blushing. Sometimes they have been arrogantly ambitious in prescribing solutions. But one wonders if this is any more arrogant than those who op-pose public blushing with bloodless, humorless rage and for whom the only important word is victory. There is really no victory for anyone is such a conflict. We all lose.

God help us as a nation if in the crises of the present or the future the people begin to fear to blush and can feel no shame or do not care enough morally to even blush. We have seen in the recent past a whole nation that neutralized blushing with self-justifying anger and moral smugness and with a missionary purpose that had as an end result the murder of six million Jews.

Who blushed? Who blushes anymore? And there's so much to blush about!

Not long ago, the Wall Street Journal carried an excerpt from a speech by David Packard, former Deputy Secretary of Defense. He told about visiting an industrial plant that was running a year behind its defense project schedule. After a couple of hours, it was apparent the company knew it would be at least a year off schedule on the day the contract was signed. He said, "I asked the manager why he offered to do the job in one year less than was possible." The essence of his reply was, "Yes, we knew we could not meet the terms of the contract, but there was no way to get the contract if we told the truth." And the manager didn't blush a bit. Hear Jeremiah's words — "Were they ashamed when they committed abomination? No, they were not at all ashamed, they did not know how to blush."

Recently, I read an interview with Major Bunting, Rhodes_ Scholar, Virginia Military Institute honor graduate and Assistant professor of history at West Point. He said, "When I was down in the Mekong River Delta Region in Vietnam, we had to write 'search and destroy' on the plans for our operations; then after two months, we had to write 'search and clear'; then it was reconnaissance in force.' In fact, they were all the same operations; we were changing the name of a pointless operation to make it seem as if it had a point. It was an elaborate subterfuge."

He went on to say, "And this is when the whole question of honor and integrity enters into it. Somewhere in the career of many officers, many prominent officers, there occurs a transmutation of personal integrity as it's under-stood in the very idealistic way they understood it as cadets — the transmutation of that integrity into institutional loyalty. It's not an

active form of dishonesty. If one goes to the adjoining company supply room and raids fifty parachutes out of it, in the best interest of one's company, this is essentially a loyal and honorable act, because it makes the company took good. If one inflates a body count, in the best interest of one's company, it is also loyal and honorable." Jeremiah's words come back at us, "Were they ashamed when they committed abomination? No, they were not at all ashamed, they did not know how to blush.

These are only examples, but there's so much to blush about! It's a blushing matter that often less than half of the registered voters vote. The continuing slaughter on our nation's highways is a blushing matter for all of us. As Christians and as citizens, we dare not lose our sensitivity and sense of moral outrage which issues in blushing in these and other matters.

In recent months, John Hersey, the writer and novelist has been a frequent visitor in the sixth circuit court of Connecticut, sitting in New Haven. What he saw there caused him to blush. Here's how he described the scene.

"The 6th Circuit Courtroom which some New Haven Lawyers call the pit, is a great dingy box of passions. Two stories high, its flaki1:}"ceiling supported by metal stanchions, with tall dusty windows and creaking floors; what faces one sees there, ravaged, jaunty, dazed, dis-enchanted, raging, resigned. A man in his forties found intoxicated, clutching in his arms a stuffed tiger nearly as tall as he, his constant companion and only comfort, a natty type accused of gambling, in a whipcord bush jacket and knickers and smartly polished leather boots, three weed-like red-eyed minors in blue jeans, accused of armed robbery, a woman booked as a prostitute, with a pokey soiled wig and a hacking cough, an empty-faced teenager held for possession, with his mother who is p1ayed out to the very end of her kitchen string, on hand to stand up with him. This place and many others like it, are society's open sores. A hundred cases a morning. Breaking and entering, assault, gambling, pimping, prostitution, found drunk, armed robbery, non-support, welfare fraud, disturbing the peace." Who blushes anymore?

And what about our personal faith? I intend this as an indictment that begins with me and that some of you may feel extends to you: that somewhere, somehow in the past we suspended the whole matter of deepening and deepened faith, that sometimes quiet, sometimes passionate relating of the creature to the Creator, that effort toward self-knowledge that begins not in self-appraisal, but in emptyhanded posturing of oneself before the Great God.

Maybe we need to come to worship blushing, not in a mood of self-condemnation which does not become a human being but in the full blush of knowing that we stand accused by our dealing lightly with our own lives, even non-seriously, as well as dealing lightly with the lives of others and dealing lightly with our relationship to God.

Blushing is a kind of public exposure. Nothing is more discomfiting to some of us. Our very nerve ends stand exposed. But is this not our calling as Christians — to be in the rawest sense aware of the pains and torments of our brothers and sisters of the human race. This was 7. the way Jesus lived and the way in which he calls-us to live. My brothers and sisters, I call you in the name of Christ to blush with me. Amen.