

Independence Day

Matthew 5:43-48

St. John's, Salisbury – 7/4/10

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Today we once again celebrate the declaration of our nation's independence, without which, of course, St. John's would be, not an Episcopal Church, but part of the Church of England. Let's begin by looking at the dream our nation began with.

That dream was a lovely one – not as well known, perhaps, as Martin Luther King's – but one that was at least as significant historically, since it served as the basis for the grand experiment that became our nation and informed our national identity. We hear a wonderful restatement of it in the 1965 inaugural address of Lyndon Johnson:

They came here – the exile and the stranger, brave but frightened – to find a place where a man could be his own man. (I guess 1965 was just a little early for gender-neutral language.) They made a covenant with this land. Conceived in justice, written in liberty, bound in union, it was meant one day to inspire the hopes of all mankind; and it binds us still. If we keep its terms, we shall flourish.

Just as Virgil's epic, the *Aeneid*, provides a somewhat too idealistic mythology of the founding of the Roman Republic, Johnson's restatement of how our nation was born somewhat overstates the impulses that brought the original settlers to our shores. As my Political Science professor made clear to us, the only religious liberty the Puritans who came here were really after was their own freedom to persecute dissenters. Lest you think that our own religious forebears, the Church of England folks who landed in Jamestown, were much more benign, let me point to a couple of their rules. A first offense of failing to attend church services twice daily resulted in the loss of food for a day, the second a whipping and the third six months in jail. Missing church on Sunday the third time was a capital offense. If that rule were still in effect, I assure you I wouldn't be standing here today; I'd have been long gone! There **was** a time in my life when my church attendance was not exactly regular. So I'm particularly sensitive to **that** law.

Still, the mythology that Americans have always considered their own – and I'm not using that word "mythology" at all in a negative way – I merely mean by it the way we see ourselves – is of a new nation, conceived in liberty, one that could prompt one of the first to arrive on its shores, John Winthrop, to liken it to a city upon a hill that all might watch. It was to be in popular imagination a light to show the world how a truly Christian nation could survive – indeed, thrive. Of course, we began this great experiment with an economy sustained by that "peculiar institution," slavery, which counted slaves as three-fifths of a human being when at last we produced a constitution, a constitution that also deprived women of a vote for over 130 years.

A question that just **has** to be asked is whether a nation that can exist for so long, and so successfully on, in part, the sweat of the brows of people brought here as slaves, can honestly describe itself as a truly Christian country. Well, that was, after all, what the Civil War was all about, right? We did away with slavery and now emphasize the equality of everyone. We are **all** created equal. I've told you the story before about my experience of life under the laws of segregation that existed in the South while I was in the Navy; and we all know that for a long time we didn't treat everyone in every place in our country with exactly the same degree of respect. I leave it to you to think of all the instances and circumstances that you have seen in more recent times, and in places not historically segregated, in which more genuine equality, even respect, could have been shown those whose appearances might not have been like the settlers who arrived in Plymouth or Jamestown. Indeed, don't some of the debates around the issue of legal and illegal immigration raise issues about how truly welcome some folks may be even today? Hear again Jesus' words in today's gospel: "If you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others?" And remember, as I am sure he did, the words of Deuteronomy: "You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt."

There are those who will find fault with almost anything one might do, if it tends to make them begin to rethink their own behavior. John the Baptist came among them neither eating nor drinking and was condemned for it. Jesus sat with sinners and ate and drank, and was called a drunkard and a glutton. People didn't want to really listen to either one – any more than many of our fellow countrymen want to understand the lives of those who may differ from them in looks or language.

I don't know about you, but when I think about a nation that might be worthy to be thought of as a city upon a hill, I think also of Emma Lazarus's so well-known poem, "The New Colossus":

Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,
With conquering limbs astride from land to land;
Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand
A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame
Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name
Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand
Glow world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command
The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame.
"Keep ancient lands, your storied pomp!" cries she
With silent lips. "Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"

“Come to me,” Jesus said, in the same vein as the poem on our Statue of Liberty, which welcomed those European immigrants who arrived in America through Ellis Island – as both my paternal grandparents did. These new Americans were not always made as welcome once they landed as they may have expected to be, but they made lives for themselves, and in no more than a few decades most had acquired both economic and political parity. But, today, whatever our personal attitude may be to the strangers among us, clearly our nation’s political attitude of welcome has changed – especially to immigrants from the south. No longer do we embrace the tired and poor. We want only technically trained and economically productive newcomers.

I invite you, on this weekend of the commemoration of our nation’s birth, a nation conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal, to think of whom we welcome, and how we welcome them, in specifically Christian terms. I’m indebted for this analysis to John Caputo, of Syracuse University, whose book, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct?*, looks at a number of issues in sometimes unexpected ways. He suggests that when we welcome only those folks we invite into our homes we are not truly showing hospitality at all since we are picking and choosing those we want in our homes, usually people just like us; there’s even some reciprocity involved because they are the same folks we would expect to invite us into their own homes. One mark of real hospitality, though, is to offer it in God’s way, graciously and totally freely, whatever the possible downside, to whoever asks for it. Caputo points to the story in Luke’s Gospel of the banquet as an illustration of who it is whom God offers his own hospitality to. You may recall the story. The one throwing the party had to go out into the street and invite strangers to get people to come to it. The story is preceded by this observation by Jesus to a Pharisee to whose home he has been invited for a Sabbath meal:

He said also to the one who had invited him, “When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.”

Isn’t that another reminder of the words of that young Jewish woman whose poem graces the beautiful statue in New York Harbor. Though we may certainly disagree about the long-term effects of uncontrolled immigration, and the best way to make residents of less prosperous nations economically viable enough to wish to remain where they are – as most Europeans certainly are today – when we consider those who have already come here to make better lives for themselves and their families, let us reflect on what attitude the Gospel calls us to have towards them, that those words on the statue might ring as true for the ones who arrive today by whatever route, and that this city on a hill may truly be a light to the rest of the world.

In Christ’s name we pray. AMEN