

6th Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 9. July 5, 2015. Independence Day weekend.
St. Augustine's, Freeland Nigel Taber-Hamilton

Growing up in England the Church was part of the fabric of my life. I mean that in two ways:
– I was an active member of St. Saviours' Wood Green
– The Church of England was just “there” – it was so embedded in English culture that it was impossible of being able to conceive of being English without also being a member of the Church of England.

That's very different than here! There are blessings and curses to having an established Church.
– Anglicans have an automatic “in” into the halls of power – can directly influence for the common good the policies of the nation in a way that is not possible where the Church is not one of the pillars of the national institution called England.
– But with that access comes a danger that we seem not to have learned since the time of Constantine: while the Church can influence the state, the state can not only influence the Church – can coopt it. And then you can find yourself in a pretty sticky place. The Church can be expected to support the nation's institutional identity.

In 1982, following the end of the Falklands War, a memorial service was Held at St. Paul's Cathedral in London, with the then Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, in attendance. The Archbishop of Canterbury, Robert Runcie, did not believe that this service should be a celebration of victory. The Dean of the Cathedral, Alan Webster, include prayers of penitence and concern for Argentinian, as well as British casualties. Thatcher was outraged. She dressed down Runcie at the door of the cathedral after the service, and she later imposed George Carey as Archbishop of Canterbury on the Church of England - the least qualified of bishops - over one of the most remarkable bishops of the 20th Century, David Hope, then Archbishop of York. The consequences for the Anglican Communion have been disastrous, and it resulted also in our Church - the Episcopal Church - being subjected to abuse by other Anglicans.

And sometimes the Church of England is wrong, yet because of it's established position it can still propose and effect the way the state views a particular issue – or at least it can try to do so with a greater hope of success than other Churches and faith traditions. The C. of E.'s position on gays and lesbians is now, and has been, on the wrong side of history – and I believe, of Christian faith, yet for decades it held back the State's attempts at liberalization.

One of the things I celebrate on July 4th, is that our governmental institutions cannot impose their wills on our Church in this way – freedom from the oppressive influence of the Crown includes, most centrally for us, the right to practice our faith without interference from the State. It's a value that's held up as equally important as freedom of speech, freedom of the press; “or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances.” It's no accident that those freedoms are linked together - the right to freedom of religion assumes the right to assemble, speak freely, and oppose our government if it is appropriate as Christians to do so – there can be no blind allegiance to any national institution or government – to do so would constitutionally be un-American.

But before we go patting ourselves on the back too quickly, there's another side to this. Just because we are constitutionally protected from government interference doesn't mean we are incapable of cosying up to the State in unhealthy ways or – in the style of Constantine – of being co-opted into subservience to state agendas – governments are very good at manipulating people of good will to do their bidding. Freedom of religion also means freedom from blindly following values that may be important to the state but are antithetical to those values important to Christians.

It also means that we have a responsibility to challenge any individual, entity, or governmental institution who we see violating the values on which this nation was founded: Equality, justice, freedom.

Citizenship for us is a tricky thing, therefore; our first allegiance is to God, not the United States of America – as St. Paul said, “our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ” (Phil 3:20).

For us as Christians, July 4th is a day to celebrate as citizens, but only in those places where there is overlap with our heavenly citizenship.

Where, then, are those places? That's a question we should be perpetually asking! At the least, it's a commitment to justice for all; a vision of equality where all can breathe free and where the human dignity of each is respected; a vision and hope for peace and commitment to the struggle to attain it; compassionate volunteerism directed to helping those in need.

The freedom we enjoy as Americans has come at the cost of many lives. We owe a debt of gratitude and a solemn stewardship to those who have died fighting for our independence, or defending it and the principles for which it stands in the many places where a vision of freedom and democracy has been threatened.

However, The freedom found in the Gospel of Jesus Christ is of another order entirely than the freedom found in being an American citizen; even the freedom of religion. The freedom found in the Gospel of Jesus Christ isn't only the freedom to speak and think without repression, to live free of unreasonable institutional constraints, it's the freedom to enter into that greater humanity modeled by Jesus and promised by God. The freedom of the sons and daughters of God is not contingent on military protection, national security or sovereignty or even freedom to practice one's religion free of institutional restraint.

For most human beings – especially, it seems, when we come together in community and our rough edges rub against each other – there can be a gap between our principles and our actions, between our values and our behavior. This is as true for whole communities that we call nations as it is for the smaller groups that identify as belonging to each other, such as cities and towns, and such as religious communities – congregations.

It's always wise to be cautious before casting the first stone, or examining the log in our own eyes – being critical of all those things that are wrong with our nation (and there are a bunch) is a

risky thing to do for our own spiritual health if we have not also considered all those things that might be wrong with us!

So for me, on July 4th, *as a citizen* I want to say two things: “God bless the United States of America,” and “God bless the constitution that protects us from the worst extremes of the United States of America!”

What July 4th is for me *as a Christian* is this: an opportunity to celebrate what went before – the cost and the sacrifices that created this nation – but also a moment to rededicate myself to the principles on which that new birth of freedom was founded, principles which seem in many ways to have gotten lost in the last 239 years: A commitment to justice for all; a vision of equality where all can breathe free and where the human dignity of each is respected; a vision and hope for peace and commitment to the struggle to attain it.