



**Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue
in the City of New York**

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Sunday, July 4, 2004
Independence Day

Festal Eucharist
at 11am

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A Sermon by
The Reverend Park McD. Bodie
on
Matthew 5:43-48
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A SERMON FOR INDEPENDENCE DAY

You must be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.

As I prepared this sermon I cast my mind back to those summer days of my youth in an admittedly vain attempt to recall celebrating Independence Day in church. My assumption is that when it fell on a Sunday we may have used the readings for Independence Day in place of those for whatever Sunday after Trinity it was, and I did check the 1928 Prayer Book to discover that the readings from Deuteronomy and Matthew were appointed then as well as now. These readings suggest that the thinking of our forbears concerning the nation came from a distinctly radical Christian perspective, rather like the one espoused by the Episcopal Church today. Their image was not the City Set on a Hill model of the dissenters, but one they might have called 'condescension', humility before God and a respectful approach to one another, a Christian perfectionism which found its origin in the Great Commandment which they heard every time they were at Holy Communion.

It is interesting to note a few facts about the Episcopal Church in 1789, the year of publication of our first Prayer Book following Independence. William White, the first bishop to be consecrated by the Church of England without the required Oath of allegiance to the King, had been the Chaplain to the Continental Congress, and was the first Chaplain to Senate as well. The Church had been disestablished. In Virginia, where parish vestries had continued to construct new buildings and care for the poor right through the Revolution and until the early 1780's the Church had been disestablished and had all its property confiscated at Thomas Jefferson's insistence. In Massachusetts, the Congregationalist Church continued as the established church until 1836. Most Episcopal parishes in all the former colonies had no clergy. It was not a triumphant time for us despite the great number of us who had been instrumental in the movement toward Independence and in organizing the Federal government.

The response of those men who conceived the shape of our new nation, and put together our Prayer Book, our only doctrinal statement, was one of sojourners, of people who were learning a new way of life. Almost two hundred years later, the decision of the compilers of the 1979 Lectionary built on that earlier perspective by adding the reading from the letter to the Hebrews which has this evocative passage,

These all died in faith, not having received what was promised, but having seen it and greeted it from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on earth. For people who speak thus make it clear that

they are seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one.

We live in a time I would never have imagined as a person growing up during the Cold War, hard on the heels of World War II. Had someone said to me that the United States would be embroiled in a sort of religious conflict, I would have greeted it with disbelief, but here we are, and the temptation to respond to religiously worded threats with religious language is mighty. The temptation to respond to a call for a holy war with a call for holy war, as if there could be such a thing, is right before us, and there are those who succumb to that temptation. It is fortuitous, I believe, that we are celebrating Independence Day in church this year so we can hear the wisdom of our tradition, and the teaching of our Lord, who calls us to a struggle within ourselves and within our society to be so faithful to the tradition of those seeking a heavenly country that we are to follow him into a deeper understanding and practice of our inherited tradition. This following of Jesus deeper into the Law is the way, provided us by our Revolutionary forbears in their reflection on the Scriptures, that we can resist the religious violence that is before us, and resist the impulse to indulge in violence clothed in religious language ourselves.

Let's listen again to Jesus as he teaches those who have come to learn from him, after all, we have come as learners this morning, too. He says,

You have heard it said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.

Our parishioner, Jon Meacham, in his history of the wartime relationship of Winston Churchill and Franklin Roosevelt recounts that at the end of Church Parade on board *The Prince of Wales* where Churchill and Roosevelt worshiped together singing "Onward Christian Soldiers", FDR said afterward to his son, Elliott, "We are (Christian soldiers), and we will go on with God's help." This was not the rhetoric either Roosevelt or Churchill or the governments of the United States or British Empire used in furthering their cause in a conflict, which we can now look back on and see as clearly a contest between good and evil, between innocence and corruption. Wittingly or not, neither of these men indulged in what we would call today the 'dehumanizing' of the enemy, and the determination to rehabilitate the 'enemy' exemplified at the end of that conflict clearly takes into account the wisdom and commitment to the 'perfection' Jesus insists on in this Gospel. The Gospel those recent Revolutionaries chose for Independence Day.

We are currently faced with a religious rhetoric, which seeks to justify hatred, terror, and a profound disrespect for the dignity of the human person. We have before us the reality of and temptation to what Erich Fromm refers to when he writes, "There is perhaps no phenomenon which contains so much destructive feeling as 'moral indignation', which permits envy or hate to be acted out under the guise of virtue." We are to respond with love, and by that I do not mean that we not resist the violence and the evil behind it, but that as we resist that temptation to moral indignation we will take seriously the words of Jesus committed to us today. This is more than rhetoric on the part of our Lord. We are expected to resist evil with innocence, this is why we are all as appalled at the abuse of prisoners held by us as we are at the beheadings of kidnapped civilians.

Dorothy Day once quoted these words of the Archbishop of Paris, "To be a witness does not consist in engaging in propaganda or even in stirring people up, but in being a living mystery; it means to live in a way that one's life would not make sense if God did not exist." I think it summarizes the intent of the Scripture readings our Revolutionary forbears selected to celebrate the Independence they had just won, and the task they set for subsequent generations to maintain the freedoms and responsibilities for which they struggled.