



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

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www.SaintThomasChurch.org

Thursday, November 8, 2009
Remembrance Sunday

Choral Evensong for the Patriotic Societies
at 4:00pm

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A Sermon by
The Reverend Victor Lee Austin, Ph.D.
on
Revelation 21:1-7

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THE PATRIOT'S DREAM

Let me begin with a necessary, unequivocal statement. Patriotism is a good thing for human beings. This is because one of the things that God may give humans is the blessing of living in an ordered society with decent government and humane traditions. To recognize that my country has bestowed upon me gifts and opportunities and in fact did so not because of my merits but because of the simple fact that I belonged to it: to recognize this is to learn something important about me and it is at the same time to see my duty of giving thanks for my country.

The matter is similar with families. It is a good thing for human beings to honor their father and their mother. Our parents took us into their family before we did anything to measure up to their standards; they took us just because we belonged to them. To recognize this is a part of growing up, and it is a measure of our maturity whether we do in fact honor our parents. Sometimes, unfortunately, children do not have parents; and for all of us, unfortunately, our parents will have failed (to some degree) to be all that parents should be. Nonetheless, if we have parents, we should honor them, warts and wounds notwithstanding. They are ours, and we have a pious duty towards them.

I say, it is the same with the city or nation or country. Sometimes, unfortunately, people live in the chaos of disintegrating political power. And for all of us, unfortunately, our country will have failed to some degree to be all that a country should be. Nonetheless, if we have a country, a city, a nation that is ours, we should honor it, warts and wounds notwithstanding. It is our country, and we have a pious duty towards her.

God gives us to live in governed political societies because God loves us, and he wants us to flourish and be excellent human beings, and to be an excellent human being is in no way to be a loner. We need communications to be human beings. So we need infrastructure (an ugly word for something essential to our glory): roads and water lines and ships and aircraft, wires and radiowaves, and not to forget cafes, parks and meeting halls. To be human is to communicate. We need business too: industry, corporate activities that bring about large-scale human enterprises, not to mention the money that facilitates the personal exchange that meets human needs. We need arts and beauty: dance, music, elegance, the

daring leap of the swimmer off the high point, the snow-capped mountains and also the oils that capture a vision of purple light reflected on that snow. The spirit of patriotism is a spirit of thanks for all these things. It is not thanks only for the state, the institutions that provide government; the state can do only some of these things. Patriotism is thanks for the entirety of the nation that has given birth to me, its communications and business and arts and natural beauty and all its traditions and everything else that is a part of it: thanks for that, and responsibility to take my place as a citizen.

But patriotism, the good and necessary thing for us humans, is not for ever. God has given us government for this life, but this life is not for ever, and this life is not the only life. There is another country, a farther shore, a place of unflawed communications, of corporate activity unmarked by scandal, a place of perfect human exchange that needs no money, a land of creativity and bounty and high leaps, a place that we are told has no tears. Christian people rightly give their allegiance to their earthly country—for now; but Christian people even now also give their true and unqualified allegiance to that other country.

What shall we call that other country?

When Saint John the Divine looked, at the end of the book of Revelation [today's reading is Revelation 21:1-7], he saw a new heaven and a new earth. Then he saw "the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God." It was an analogy in speech. John knew the earthly Jerusalem, the city God chose to be the site of his temple, the city of great promise over which Jesus wept and at the edge of which Jesus was executed. There was that earthly city, but then—a new city, coming down from heaven; John called it, the new Jerusalem.

But others have given it other names. For my part, being a citizen of this nation, I think it is quite wonderful to imagine that that other country, the country for which we wait, is called "America." It is the analogy worked by Katherine Lee Bates into her famous poem written in the memory of what she had seen at the top of Pike's Peak in Colorado in the summer of 1892. It is about the America that we live in, its beautiful skies, its nature, its greatness, and its flaws; and it includes the petition that God give it grace and purity. But then, and perhaps you hardly notice it, the poem turns and is no longer about the amber grain, the plains, the majesties of the mountains, the frontier drive across the continent, but we are somewhere else, looking "beyond the years" to a place of "alabaster cities" where there are no tears.

This is truly the patriot's dream. Whether it's America, or Britain, or France, or Russia, or Nigeria, or Brazil, or Japan, or Mexico, or (yes) Jerusalem, our proper patriotism of thankfulness for what God has given us here (and our duty) prepares us to see and enter the heavenly city, the one that God has prepared for us, that will come down out of heaven. Will it gleam of alabaster? Why not? Will it be undimmed by human tears? Certainly.