

Integrity -- Pent+6 B

Independence Day, a celebration of our nation, is mirrored in countries around the World on days of their own. It is a day for enjoying the good kind of pride, an allegiance with fellow citizens, forbears, traditions and institutions that make up our identity as a people -- Americans. It is a day when we remind ourselves of who we claim to be, and celebrate the ideas and events that made us this way. Having passed yesterday, our Independence Day, 2015, the 239th year of our founding, as Christians, perhaps it would be good to look at the American Experiment, the American Enterprise, at what it is we're celebrating, to try and see how it compares, how it jibes with what we desire and claim to be as followers and members of the mystical body of Christ. Presumably, there will be some kind of correlation between the identity we celebrate as Americans, and the identity we celebrate as Christians. Nobody would willingly want, or admit, let alone claim to be a different person on Sundays than during the rest of the week, so we ought to be able to draw some parallels, we ought to be able to, if not directly bind, at least identify some mutual validities between the two descriptions of ourselves, Americans and Christians.

Don't worry, I'm not going to try to explicate the ways in which Americans are best seen as political Christians, much less how Christians are best understood through the lens of the "American Experiment." But if we reserve the right and enjoy the sensations of self-identifying as both Christians and Americans, on the Fourth of July and any other time of the year it stands to reason that those two identities must be, at the very least compatible, if not entirely interrelated and mutually supportive. Life is complicated enough without having to take on a new identity every time the calendar, or the mood, or the

exigencies of the moment, or Monday morning's duties dictate an advantage to either Christianity or Americanism as the case may be. And of course we understand that all Americans aren't Christians, any more than all Christians are Americans. But today, here, our job is to clean our house, remove the cobwebs and dust bunnies of conflicting ideologies, sweep away the tendencies we all have to get excited about what feels good in any given moment, mop down the stains of ugly history and past pain, clean our house so that the grace of God – the mercy of God as today's psalmist so beautifully entreats -- may come into us and heal us and allow us a dog's chance of being the kind of folks we would like to be. Any non-Christians out there who might overhear us cogitating or deliberating about how to jibe our Christianity with our Patriotism would no doubt be delighted to know what we were doing. Hopefully they are doing something similar in the context of their spiritual frame of reference. What a back-flipping joy it would be to get to the end of our day, with our Hindu and Muslim and Jewish sisters and brothers and learn they all admit to having the same questions and conflicts and inconsistencies and frustrations and moral quandaries as do we – because they do. We pray that a day will come when we can all gently and freely acknowledge this to one another in the interest of lasting peace.

So the American Experiment is indeed a prophetic one, however uncertainly, clumsily, hypocritically and poorly realized it may at times seem or it may at times have been. The ideas that everyone is equal, that we all have the same inalienable rights, and that power belongs to the people are truly cherishable ones, because they are charitable ones. We declare and intend to extend these rights to one another, without prejudice, as an extension of our faith and hope. There is the faith that mutual goodness is a behavior that is supported and inspired by a loving God, as lived out in the life

of Jesus, there is the hope that, despite all too much evidence to the contrary, things can and will get better, if we hang in there, and this faith and hope lead to the charitable ends of treating everybody else the way we would like to be treated – not just in theory, but in the very real practice of a governed, legislated, adjudicated nation. So go our Declaration and our Constitution. When we fall short of this practice, as we all too often do, we hold up these ideals as goals and try to do better. What we can take from Ezekiel’s story today, from the psalmist, from Saint Paul and from our Gospel lesson is the courage of our convictions. Specifically, the moderation that comes from true courage. In each of these passages, the discomfort, the frustration, the fear of failure is acknowledged. But in each case the hero of the story learns from God to persist in the face of disappointment and pain and rejection. For them, the self-evident values are enough: prophecy, mercy, ministry, healing love. If they are not welcomed and accepted, so be it, they have no less validity. The integrity is in the principle and practice, not in the results of the moment. “Are we really who we say we are?” is the question to ask, not, “Did we succeed in convincing and transforming others today?” This dynamic, diverse and democratic experiment of ours, these United States have a big enough, a tough enough, an important and godly and glorious enough task in being who we claim and want to be, without demanding that others emulate us when and how we say. We offer ourselves as a living example, and if we do, we have to take every pain, make every change, strive continuously for the moderation and humility that go along with that ‘all people are created equal’ conviction here at home, with all the justice and mercy and charity those words evoke.

The temptation is to take this show on the road, and with good reason. This is a beautiful and wondrous way to live – in equality. But God knows, and we would do well to remember,

that no show is better than its rehearsals, and the best way to celebrate our Declaration of Independence from the rest of the World is to ourselves live as we would have others live.

Whether we call ourselves Christians is not the point; whether we live Christ-ian lives is. More than ever before, the most important quality for nations to have is the same as that for individuals – the awareness that everyone else has a point of view, a frame of reference, a set of convictions of their own, with validity equal to yours. What sets us apart cannot be our success in hounding, hectoring or forcing ourselves on others. What sets us apart, as Christians and as Americans will always have to be the joyful seriousness with which we intend and attempt to be who it is we say we are. God will take care of the rest.