

**"Our Thanksgiving"  
The Rev. James S. Ward, Rector**

**November 28, 2004**

I hope this year at Thanksgiving we've had an opportunity to revisit the great gifts we have in this country. At a time of war it is important for us to remember, in short, "what it is that we are fighting for."

"Our way of life" is certainly the answer perhaps most often identified. But by that we mean certain freedoms, freedom of choice, freedom of religion, speech, association, the freedom of women and of minorities to live as they choose without obstruction from traditional roles, stereotypes and prejudice. We might call it as the Declaration of Independence does, the freedom of the "pursuit of happiness."

Of course, along with this freedom of choice and life-style comes responsibility. That notion of the freedom of the individual to pursue their own happiness comes directly or indirectly from Western Christianity. So notions like freedom of religion come out of the enlightenment that derived from Christian theological and philosophical reflection. The responsibility that comes with that freedom is clearly set forth here in this passage from late in the letter to the Romans: "Love your neighbor as yourself." Then Paul goes on to express something essential about life in Christ and its relation to law. He says, "Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law."

This means effectively that when there is a breakdown of love, law functions to head off violence. Thus when the freedom we have in Christ is miss-used or misinterpreted or when it becomes an occasion for sin or a cause of envy or rivalry, recourse to law and to authoritarian control naturally result to maintain or to re-impose peace. But even if we should love as God loves, even though by so loving the law is fulfilled, it is not a guarantee that we can thereby avoid the violence the law is meant to head off.

Jesus after all did just this. He came to bring near to all humankind the love of God. He loved as God loves. That is why we identify him as God's own Son, because the Divine character, which is precisely Love, became available in Him. And as carefully and circumspectly as Jesus made that love manifest—remember (for example) the wedding in Cana where he wished to avoid the miraculous rescue to the feast by saying, "My hour has not come"—as much as he wished to avoid the reaction which his outrageous freedom would provoke, it is that scandal that he came to accomplish.

So when in this season we hear again the prophet Isaiah and his words as used by John the Baptist to announce the coming of the Messiah, it is not simply the themes of joy and hope that we should listen for. The joy and hope of this season of Advent are always tempered by the scandal of cross and passion. For the victory of God announced by the prophet is won in the vulnerability of God who becomes the victim of God's people.

I want to mark this turning of the season, this crowning and renewal of the year, that comes each Advent Sunday, by locating the source of the freedom for which we give thanks in the Love of God in Christ Jesus which is made known and available to us in the weakness of the cross. And I want to try to point out to you, especially after the election of our president to a second term, the danger of locating it in any of the other places we are used to finding it, like the assured righteousness of a just cause or the economic and technical superiority of our resources.

For the Episcopal Church, especially for those of us who identify with what is sometimes called the "progressive" church, the temptation is now to indulge in the freedom "for which Christ set us free." For as many of you have become aware, ECUSA has been taken to task by the Anglican Communion through the so-called Windsor Report, commissioned by the Archbishop of Canterbury to try to find a way forward through the crisis in the world wide church that was precipitated by the consecration of a Bishop in Diocese of New Hampshire openly living in a faithful, partnered relationship with another man. In addition, our General Convention passed a resolution acknowledging that many of our faithful members live in such relationships and are due the full pastoral care of the church, and a diocese in Canada has authorized a rite for use in the blessing of same sex couples.

While couched in the softest and most cordial of terms, the report calls upon us to express "regret" and establish a moratorium on such actions. It further confirms that "love," what it calls the "bonds of affection," has broken down since we have not heeded the Bishops of the Communion gathered at the Lambeth Conference in 1998 but have gone ahead unilaterally against their express resolution. And, therefore, it appeals to law, to central hierarchical authority, by calling for the adoption by every member province of a common Statement of Covenant that effectively defines the terms of our communion with each other as independent Churches. It does so to preclude such a future exercise of autonomous freedom like this recent one that has caused so much pain.

We are not likely, as a National Church, to repent of our long and prayerfully considered actions, to say we heard the Spirit wrong or we should have waited until Bishops in the developing world were ready. How could we? The words of

Paul in the Letter to the Galatians are apt here: “For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.” But we must guard against an assured sense of righteousness, a self-righteousness, that allows us to simply walk away, treat the Anglican communion as inconsequential, a mere symbol, that we can ignore if it doesn’t suit us or agree with us.

Echoing our reading today, Paul goes on in Galatians to say, “only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’” The Anglican Communion is not an optional extra. It is our union in Christ manifest globally. More than that it is a vital sign and model of how the nations, institutions and peoples of world must work together despite differences to find unity in the midst of diversity. While it may be that its unity cannot be maintained except by greater centralization in hierarchical and legal authority, I pray that a response can be found that stands firm in the freedom we have in Christ (yet with great humility) at the same time offers ourselves in love. We need to find a way to “become slaves” to one another.

No less is this a model for the administration of our president, seeking to govern what is described as a sharply divided nation in a world where our war on terror seems most effective, so far, only in creating more terrorists. We need to beware in our current crisis of locating the source of our trust and freedom in superior resources, in superior firepower.

Jesus describes the archetypal crisis, some version of which we always find ourselves in, by means of the story of Noah. That story is typical of many Bible stories from the Torah in that it is a mixture of ancient myth and a kind of story unique to the Bible. It is typical of pagan myth of the time in that God is attributed with doing violence to humanity in judgment. Plato is embarrassed by this tendency in Greek myth and criticizes Homer and the poets for it. To this day we tend to avoid the discussion of God’s supposed violent judgment on unbelievers. We do, that is, except in times of war and especially in times of war with unbelievers.

The unique kind of Biblical story is told from the point of view of the victims of persecution. In this case it would take only a very slight readjustment for the violence in the Noah story to come from the people around Noah’s family. We might say they were “swept away” by a “flood” of uncontrollable violence. In such a reading it is not God whose violence breaks out against his enemies. Rather in crisis it is the godless people’s violence that breaks out against God’s anointed. So the exodus story, so the suffering servant in Isaiah, so the story of Jesus. And in all of these stories the violence is often attributed to God.

In our cultural context the background myth for Christians has been developed in the best selling series “Left Behind.” In this series of novels the peculiarly American strain of Biblical interpretation called “dispensationalism” is the basis for a story that purports to tell of the end of the world. Characteristic of “dispensationalism” is the idea that before the end God “raptures” the true believers in Christ and the rest are then “Left Behind” while God through a series of calamities wreaks judgment on the earth ending in the Second Coming of Christ as a warrior who leads the Heavenly Host against Satan’s legions at the valley of Armageddon. All of this supposedly goes on while the true believers watch from luxury boxes in heaven.

Many of the “evangelical Christians” who are said to have carried the President to victory in the recent election are imbued with this background myth. Ronald Reagan spoke of it with great fervor. While there is very little actual Biblical support for this kind of thinking, all of us as American Christians have been formed by it to some extent. We can’t avoid it.

At its basis is the creedal affirmation that Jesus will return to judge the living and the dead. What is not orthodox though is very common is the belief that he will judge by violence and condemn unbelievers to eternal death. The biblical evidence does not have to be read that way, though often dating from the time of the Crusades the iconography is made to serve that belief. But note such counter-evidence as our own *cristus rex*. He judges the world from the cross not from a war horse; that is he judges with love and mercy as Stephen the martyr prayed “forgive them.”

Our freedom is to be found in that forgiveness not in God’s superior firepower that he will unleash on his enemies at the end. The death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is not a cease-fire in the war between good and evil that will only be finally settled by God’s ultimate weapons of mass destruction. The cross is the final word of God on sin and death; it is God’s victory manifest in the weakness of the cross. The freedom for which we give thanks is a gift of God, a gift to be shared, our pursuit of happiness is not something we can only accomplish at someone else’s expense.

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