

# “Christians and Politics”

Hebrews 11: 8-16

Independence Day, Boise, 2021

As you have just heard, the Gospel ordered for Independence Day exhorts us to love not only our neighbors but also our enemies. It is a hard thing to do — to desire what is best for those who are against you or have harmed you, rather than to seek revenge. Nonetheless, Our Lord includes it as a principle for His followers. But it applies to individuals, not to nations. Our Lord’s counsel in the Sermon on the Mount has been applied in different ways. I have no doubt that national independence was God’s gift, but the instrument by which it was delivered was human warfare. With the help of the French, we beat King George’s army and navy. Some Christians are pacifists, but standard Christian social ethics includes rules for waging a just war when nations go to war to settle their disputes. The command to love our enemies applies to our treatment of prisoners of war and to our conduct once a war is concluded. Our brand name is Anglican, and so we welcome British persons as members. A couple of us in this congregation are even married to one. But if you’re from across the pond, please spare us the “Happy Treason Day.” We’re here now to give thanks for our American Independence!

The OT lesson from Deuteronomy bids us to love the sojourner, and to remember that we or our ancestors were sojourners before they settled in this great land of ours. We have always had immigrants and refugees, and they continue to enrich our nation. All the Biblical exhortations to treat them well apply to us here and now. We welcome any who desire to join our congregation and partake of its life. But, as with the counsel on loving our enemies, I hasten to add that the standard reading of the Biblical instruction on the treatment of aliens is that it applies to individuals. I can’t agree with those who would use it

to advocate open borders or deny a country the right to control immigration. If everyone who desired to settle here were allowed to do so, the flood of humanity taking advantage of such generosity would cause us to lose our distinction as a nation. Here is a general principle more Christians should heed: If the application of an ethical principle is unworkable in practice, we can safely conclude that it isn't how God intends for it to be applied. The Christian religion demands difficult things of us, but that we dispense with common sense is not among them.

The Epistle today takes us in an even different direction. Abraham, following God's command, made himself an alien in a foreign land, "living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise" [Heb 11: 9]. And at this point in the passage, the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews finds in Abraham's search for a new home a type, or pattern, for the believer in the era of the New Covenant. Abraham "was looking forward," the author writes, "to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God" [v. 10]. The author is talking about New Jerusalem. So, you see, in this mental journey we have made today in our Liturgy of the Word, moving from Deuteronomy to the Epistle written to the Hebrews, we have gone from an exhortation to "love the sojourner" to the state of being one, living in exile as a matter of principle as a man or woman of faith, a man or woman who lives by promise and not by sight. Jesus is our Joshua, and we have yet to enter the Promised Land.

Do you agree with that Biblical statement about what faith requires — on this day when we give thanks to Almighty God for giving us our country, secure in its independence from every other? I've scheduled some hymns that allow us to express such sentiments we have as Americans, but the Scriptures the lectionary has ordered us to read on this our national holiday seem to pull us in the opposite direction, especially this passage from Hebrews. What gives?

Another way to frame the issue is to employ the old Augustinian concept of the two cities — the City of God, which is the Heavenly City, New Jerusalem, versus the City of Man, which for him was the Roman Empire, and for us is the United States of America. I know it is hard, if you and your ancestors have long resided in this country, to consider yourself as living in spiritual exile, and your true home as lying elsewhere. But there is a way to do that and still be a good citizen in the place where God has put us for the time being. When Jeremiah wrote to the exiles in Babylon, taken there ahead of the other Jews, he counseled them to “seek the welfare of the city” where God had sent them “into exile,” and to “pray to the LORD on its behalf; for in its welfare” they would find their own [Jer 29: 7A]. Translated into a message for Christians living in America, whether as an immigrant or as someone born here, Jeremiah was saying, “Participate in the civil affairs of your city, your state, and your country. Take an interest in your earthly home. Turn out for its parades, shoot off some fireworks, and by all means vote when there is an election. Maybe even run for office yourself to seek improvements.

But remember that your true home lies elsewhere. Visit the temple on Sundays and other days so that you are reminded that something better awaits. That helps to put our earthly politics into perspective, so that our lives are not consumed by them.

Parallel to the concept of two cities is the one of two kingdoms — emphasized especially by Martin Luther. When Christ was before the judgment seat, He said to Pilate, “My kingdom is not of this world.” You won’t get a more authoritative source than that for the idea. St Paul tells us in Romans 13 that God is sovereign over both realms. We are to obey those in civil authority as His appointed ministers. In a liberal democracy such as we have here, the citizen gets to participate in determining who those ministers of state are, and to

proclaim openly what laws he or she would like to see enacted or repealed. Each of us is a member of both kingdoms, the Heavenly and the earthly. Hence, we have our respective duties in each. Since what happens in the civil realm affects the lives of Christians, the Church wants its members to vote according to their conscience, the conscience the Church itself helped to form by its moral instruction. You are called to be a Christian all the time, not for just the hour and a half you are in church on Sundays.

But the politics of the civil realm is not part of the Church's business, and hence not a part of yours either in representing the Church. The mandate Our Lord has given this separate society we also belong to is to worship when we gather, to hear the Word preached, receive the sacraments, and tell our neighbors about the love God manifest in His Son Jesus Christ. Reforming the world, or even just improving our immediate environment through political action, is not among those tasks. That's what you are to do as citizens, acting in accordance with Christian principles in the civic sphere. The Church itself has a higher mission, and so should not participate in the world's politics, except when necessary to protect itself as an institution with normal property rights, or to protect the freedoms it needs to perform its mission, which include the right to proselytize and seek new members.

As I'm sure you have noticed, much more of American life has become politicized than it was even ten years ago. Our national politics has moved to the forefront in fields where it was once largely absent — in education, in the arts and sciences, in sports and the whole field of entertainment, in business and — not least — in the private conversations we have with family and friends. Please, dear God, let us have one institution that concentrates on the mission for which it was formed, and holds this ungodly expansion of politics into our social lives at bay. And let that institution be the Church.

In today's Psalm we sang unto God these words: "Your kingdom is an

everlasting kingdom, and your dominion endures throughout all ages.” If we really mean that when we say it, then all temporal affairs must be secondary for us.

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