

# ὁ λόγος παρακλήσεως: Proper 9-A (5 July 2020)

St. Thomas', Glassboro

The Rev. Todd Foster

*Time-stamp: <2020-06-30 Tue 10:21>*

## **Collect**

O God, you have taught us to keep all your commandments by loving you and our neighbor: Grant us the grace of your Holy Spirit, that we may be devoted to you with our whole heart, and united to one another with pure affection; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

*Genesis 24:34-38, 42-49, 58-67; Psalm 45: 11-18 or Song of Solomon 2:8-13; Romans 7:15-25a; Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30* **Expanded reading: Matthew 11.1–19, 25–30**

## **1 Beginning: Once upon a time...**

This weekend we celebrate Independence Day in the United States. Amusingly, the second Continental Congress actually voted to separate from the British Empire on the second day of July in 1776. But it took them two more days to finish hammering out a proclamation to that effect. So on the fourth day of July they signed and published what we now call the Declaration of Independence. Church bells rang and we celebrate a national holiday. The document which inspired that holiday begins like this:

In CONGRESS, July 4, 1776.

The unanimous Declaration of the thirteen united States of America,

When in the Course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>The Declaration of Independence, text copied from Wikipedia

## 2 Middle: Tension: destabilizing

When I preach, I like to talk a lot about the Kingdom of God. That was a particular gift from a mentor in Seattle, but also a recognition that this was Jesus' message. Over and over through the Gospels, Jesus is proclaiming the Kingdom of God. As Americans, we're used to hearing "Kingdom" as a religious term rather than a political term. But it's absolutely a political term. When we talk about a Kingdom, we're talking about a system of government, and we're talking about a king. We're talking about citizenship and allegiance, we're talking about laws and norms and commitments.

And that's exactly what Jesus' earliest disciples were expecting, wasn't it? A Messiah. A liberator. Because, sure enough, Jesus came preaching the Kingdom of God, preaching a new government over and against the government of Rome. But Jesus went far past the conventional messianic expectations of the time. Jesus was preaching a new government that concerned much more than Rome. Rome, though arguably the most powerful empire on Earth at the time, the sole superpower in the West, was yet small potatoes compared to Jesus' ambitions. Jesus was preaching a new government over and against the principalities and powers which held human beings in bondage. Jesus was preaching a reign not just over land and political jurisdictions, but over hearts and minds, allegiances and passions. Jesus was proclaiming a reign that was bigger than every hobby, every interest, every passion, every addiction, every love and every heartbreak, every hurt and every trauma.

John the Baptizer had come before Jesus, preparing the way, proclaiming God's imminent reign. John had a different preaching style than Jesus, though. John's ascetic lifestyle condemned those who lived in comfort. John's fasting condemned those who had plenty. John's sermons were caustic, condemning, calling out people individually for the ways their lives stood opposed to God. John was often seen as unhinged and too radical to take seriously. John was arrested and then beheaded because of his incautious, inflammatory preaching.

Jesus came preaching the same message, but in a different register. Jesus became known not for fasting but for dinner parties. Jesus surrounded himself with a scandalous company of tax collectors and sex workers and unschooled working men. Jesus often preached by telling stories, leaving it up to the listener to figure out what they meant and whether they were willing to hear Jesus calling *them* out, inviting *them* to change.

So as Jesus sees the crowds gathered around, these same people who had heard Jesus' cousin John preach, Jesus points to their inability to recognize truth when it is standing *right in front of them*. John came explaining things one way. Jesus came explaining things a different way. But many who heard both John and Jesus were still unwilling to receive the truth of their teaching: they were unwilling to encounter the Kingdom of God.

So Jesus compares that generation to children in a marketplace, trying to evoke a reaction from the crowd, but never getting it right. Like King George III trying to control the New World colonies based on his own wishful thinking rather than the facts on the ground, Jesus' listeners did not want to hear something new. They were looking for confirmation of what they already believed. They were unwilling to grow or change.

## 3 End: Now / not yet; Because God... therefore...

What was it that caused the Declaration of Independence to be written, that caused the colonies to rebel? King George was trying to exercise his reign over these British colonists, but he didn't understand what was actually happening. He wasn't able or willing to understand how things were changing and to grow and change in his own responses to match reality.

At first King George was able to impose his will with punitive laws and the might of arms. But that only made things worse. The colonists remonstrated with words, then with boycotts, then with civil disobedience and even riots, throwing a whole shipload of tea into Boston Harbor rather than pay onerous taxes on it. Finally, when so pressed that they decided they had no other choice, the colonists responded with outright war. They wrote the Declaration of Independence to explain this process, to document it for curious onlookers and for us, the recipients of the fruits of their actions. This, for citizens and residents of the United States of America, is our founding story.

I'm sure the colonists' Declaration of Independence sounded like a very foolish thing to King George III. Wisdom and foolishness is often a matter of perspective, the capacity to penetrate opinions and emotions and to understand the essence of what is going on.

And that's the last thing I want to point out today. When the second Continental Congress declared independence, first by passing the Lee resolution on 2 July 1776 and then by signing and promulgating the Declaration of Independence on 4 July 1776, the signers were declaring a new reality. But that new reality had not yet come in its fullness. They were living in an in-between time. There had already been skirmishes between colonial militias and British troops; the battles would only intensify over the next seven years. The reality of the United States of America as an independent nation did not begin to come in its fullness until 3 September 1783, when representatives of England and representatives of the U.S. jointly signed the Treaty of Paris.

Because Jesus died and rose again, God's Kingdom has come and we are able to live in it even now. We are able to live and work, to speak and to vote, to serve and to fellowship, as citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven. Not everyone around us yet recognizes our King, the government to which we have pledged allegiance. But that's OK. That day will come. In the meantime, we get to fight the good fight, to grow in our understanding of that kingdom which adopted us in baptism, and to rest in God's loving care.

Jesus declared independence from every power and principality which would entrap us, hold us down, perpetrate injustice in our lives or in the lives of those we love. Sometimes we may still feel the effects of skirmishes perpetrated by other, lesser kingdoms. But they don't stand a chance. We know how this will all end. That's why we can live in gratitude and confidence.

**Amen.**