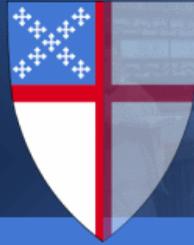


St Paul's Episcopal Church Camden, New Jersey



Summer 2010

A Message from the Rector:

Dear Friends, When I was in the Peace Corps over forty years ago I taught history in a West Indian secondary school on the island of Antigua. One of the text books we used told the story of the British Empire and Commonwealth. There was a chapter on the American Revolution telling how thirteen North American colonies broke away from the growing British Empire and claimed their independence. It was the chapter following which caused me the most amusement. It began with a statement similar to this, "In an empire which was essentially mercantile the thirteen North American colonies with their growing cities and industries were misfits anyway." Sounds like somebody's a little bent out of shape, doesn't it? But it is a perfect illustration of how the writing of history - which is the telling of a story - reveals the opinions and bias of the writer. It is not that what he said was untrue, but in his saying of it he could not help but reveal his own feelings by the way that he said it. There are such things, I suppose, as facts, but how we present the facts very much colors the message.

With the Fourth of July upon us it is interesting to think of American history and how we have been told the facts. As a small child I heard of those meetings at Independence Hall in Philadelphia on those hot summer days which led to the signing of the Declaration of Independence and pictured god-like beings which were led to drink from the deep well of self-evident truth. Later, thanks to the intervention of a stimulating high school teacher, I heard that those gathered men were very human indeed. They had self interests, bias, and blind spots. They did some good old horse trading - made compromises - to keep everybody on board and make the thing happen. In some cases they did not even seem to be aware of the full impact of some of their own most glorious prose. Hear the words of Thomas Jefferson, "All men and created equal," and remember that he not only owned slaves, but enslaved his own biological children!

As a former history teacher, I have my own bias too - about teaching history. I believe that history is an attempt to try to understand what our forebears did and why they did it - and to understand them on their own terms, not mine. In history we learn that even in their own terms or forbears have sometimes made mistakes. Like us, they were not perfect. By recognizing the flawed humanity of all of us, I am not likely to see any history - the world's, the nation's, or even my own - as being on some sort of pre-ordained glide path to glory. It is just a story. Sometimes it is inspiring, sometimes disappointing, sometimes frightening! There are certainly worthwhile lessons to be learned. For that reason I was shocked to hear that group of people in Texas have got hold of the state Board of Education and are demanding that history text books be written not to tell a story, but to be blatantly used to indoctrinate school children in the ideological preference of those same board members. What these people hope to see at the end of the day is not thoughtful people who can understand where we have come from and therefore make better decisions as they face the future, but rather

people who are passionate ideologues like themselves. I could just let it all go and say, "Well, it's Texas! That's a long way off." The fact is, Texas buys so many textbooks that it affects what books are printed and what others may be forced to use in other places because of what is available - market forces, in other words.

God is dragged into the textbook debate too. The would be revisers want it stated that God has chosen America! That God has blessed us, I have no doubt. That the leaders of the New England Puritans thought that God had set them apart, I have no doubt. But that God would call America to be his chosen place and race is too over the top for me. Our God - the God revealed in the Bible, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ - chose a people - the Jews. Through them he would reveal his Kingdom. Through them Jesus came into the world to reveal not only God's Kingdom, but the power which motivated it - love. And in Jesus all nations and races of people are invited to come together to be a new people - a people beyond race and nation, neither Jew nor Gentile, slave nor free, male nor female. Those who try to harness God to their own national wagon are very wrong. The God of the Bible can not be used for national purposes by any nation, and the people he did chose were chosen to reveal his Kingdom and not to advance their own.

As the debate about our history rages on, I have heard it said that America is a Christian country. My response is, "What is a Christian country." Does it mean a place where believers in Jesus Christ are the majority of the population? We are not that! Is it a place where the Church - the organized Christian community - has special position or privilege? We are not that! What could such a phrase mean? To me, to be a Christian is to be a follower of Jesus Christ, and to be a follower is to be a doer of the Word, not just a hearer. A Christian country would, I suppose, be a place where mercy trumped vengeance. It would be a place where giving was of more value than receiving. It would be a place where civil authority would reach out to the weak, the poor, the dispossessed, and the alien and making them the primary purpose of government. In the interest of peace a Christian country would turn the other cheek, go the extra mile, and give away the second coat. It might live in total trust in God and make no provision for amassing wealth. Have you ever seen such a place? I have not!

Because of the faithful witness of St Gregory the Illuminator, Armenia in the fourth century through edicts of its king and council declared itself to be a Christian country - the very first to do such a thing. Do you suppose that kings and councils always followed Jesus in all things? Probably not! The Roman Empire eventually declared itself a Christian country. Christ like behavior certainly did not follow, nor did their declaration slow their economic and cultural melt down. Down through the ages many have declared their tribes, nations, kingdoms and empires to be Christian and have fought and conquered in the Name of Christ. Any good historian could say with an old guy I once knew, "I've seen 'em come and I've seen 'em go!" Their record has been checkered at best - the blessings they brought balanced by their embarrassing moral failures. Historically speaking, the United States of America was perhaps the first nation to declare that it had no established religion. All religion was to be tolerated - even encouraged - but no religion would enjoy special place or privilege. Many nations have since followed suit.

The separation of Church and State may have been a shrewd move by the founders to bring together a lot of different sorts of believers into one national tent. To my mind, it is an even more advantageous move for the Christian community. There is a long and disappointing history of privileged churches using their position to enhance their own wealth and power. Their moral standing was debased. Their Christian witness compromised. As a result it became more difficult to proclaim the Good News. Inquisitions, crusades, and opulence weakened Christian witness. Those Christian people who still imagine that there is much to be gained for the glory of God by wresting control of the government had really better think again. They should read history before they are condemned to repeat it! Our place in the nation is not to control it, but to speak in love the Gospel

Truth of Jesus Christ, and to speak it to those in power. His kingdom can not be advanced by force, but by winning the hearts of men, women, and children - one by one. When enough have heard the Word and seen it in action, they will by a movement of the heart work to bring about that justice, mercy, and peace which is of the Kingdom of God. This is the way that the Kingdom comes - one person, one step, at a time.

On the Fourth of July Americans celebrate the founding of our republic - and rightly so. The nation has produced so much that is good - not least of which is the vision and hope that a nation can be built of many very different kinds of people. (Just try to describe what a typical American looks like!) What we have built here is good, but measured against the standard of the Kingdom of God we have a long way to go. It seems to me that the role of Christian people in our republic is not to wrest control of the reins of power and force others to follow our rules. But rather to present the Way of Jesus in such a fashion that others feel drawn to him and willingly and joyfully embrace his Way. As we speak the truth in love we will be called to admonish and sometimes condemn as well as encourage and bless. Above all, we need to be clear that as citizens of the Kingdom of God our primary goal is not to build mighty empires, amass great wealth, and have our way all around the world. To trumpet those kinds of things as America's glory would be wrong. We need to be clear that the true greatness of our nation - the attractive greatness - is in it's doing justice, showing mercy, and walking humbly. These are things that our Bible teaches, and they can be translated throughout the world.

Father Martin+

Website: www.stpaulscamdennj.org

Email: revmartin@stpaulscamdennj.org