

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor

*Brave and free*

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Sunday 4th July 2004, Fifth Sunday after Pentecost

*2 Kings 5:1-14; Psalm 30; Galatians 6:1-18; Luke 10:1-24*

When Rob asked me if I was able to take the services on July 4th he suggested that I might like to talk about my recent visit to America. I said I was free and perhaps I would reflect on America today and Australia's relationship with America. Then he looked a bit worried!

Today is the day the United States of America celebrates its birthday; that is why three of our hymns are either written by Americans or have American tunes.

I checked my history and confirmed that this birthday first came on 1776 when the thirteen colonies declared themselves independent of England. Or at first not all, nine for, two against, one abstained, and one was undecided. They wanted to be free of what they held to be an unjust government from abroad, and listed their grievances including being taxed without representation, not taken seriously, not being allowed to be responsible for their own destinies, and occasionally being shot at, July 4th celebrates and remembers the great words of Thomas Jefferson who was invited to write the first draft (which also had input from others):

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness. That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed. That whenever any form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute a new government, laying its foundation on such principles and organising its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness.

Now it would seem that from this small beginning not so long ago, America is learning the hard lesson that all great powers learn, or don't learn well and hence their demise, how to wisely use the power that they have so that they do not alienate their friends and enemies.

In our day of almost instantaneous mass communication, the world watches to see what will happen next. And we watch, here in Australia, often with a degree of delight in the mistakes this great power makes. We are the land of the tall poppy syndrome. It is human nature to get some satisfaction in seeing the great and mighty brought low, but is it the Christian way?

Our spiritual guide, the Bible, our readings of the day would suggest not. Before we look a little more closely at Paul's words to the Galatians, may I declare a personal interest in the matter? Many of you will know that I have just returned from a month in the US with my son and his wife and her family. I continue to find America a fascinating, extraordinary, sumptuous, land of contrasts of great wealth and poverty, of innocence and sophisticated deception, of good and evil, of generosity and meanness.

And yet is a great mystery that with all these extremes and faults, that so few Americans emigrate to get away from this land of contradictions and contrasts. Why, I don't know. But it is this not knowing, this non-understanding, that for me creates humility in the face of this mystery.

Now is it drawing too long a bow to say that there can be any connection between Paul's letter to the Galatians written nearly two thousand years ago — perhaps 55AD — and America's Independence Day?

My very sound and erudite New Oxford Annotated Bible would suggest it is not. The short introduction to the letter begins:

Often called the Magna Charta of Christian liberty, the Letter to the Galatians deals with the question whether Gentiles must become Jews before they can become Christians. Certain Judaizing teachers had infiltrated the churches of Galatia in central Asia Minor, which Paul had previously founded, declaring that in addition to having faith in Jesus Christ a Christian was obligated to keep the Mosaic law. Paul insists, on the contrary, that a person becomes right with God only by faith in Christ and not by the performance of good works, ritual observances, and the like. Paul's declaration of the principles reiterated in these six chapters made Christianity a world religion instead of a Jewish sect.

Thus the importance of the letter is hard to overestimate. Christian liberty is summed up by Paul in Chapter 5:4-6

You who want to be justified by the law have cut yourselves off from Christ; you have fallen away from grace. For through the Spirit, by faith, we eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness. For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything; the only thing that counts is faith working through love.

That was Paul's declaration of independence from Jewish religious law and authority; that was what made Christianity a world religion open to anyone in the world, and not simply a Jewish sect.

In a similar way the declaration of independence from the rule of George III, seemed to promise a better and safer life to the poor, the oppressed, and the persecuted in Europe who came to America in search of the founding fathers — promise of equality, safety and happiness. They may not have found what they came for, but they came, and mostly did not return to the lands of their birth.

It is true that European settlement in America has a dark and troubling side, but 2,000 years of Christianity has not been all sweetness and light. And European settlement in Australia has a dark and regrettable side.

There are three verses in our reading today which may well be overlooked, but perhaps they are very relevant to us, as citizens of our land, Australia, as Christians, and as neighbours of the people of the United States. They are in chapter 6:3-5.

For if those who are nothing think they are something, they deceive themselves. All must test their own work; then that work, rather than their neighbour's work, will become a cause of pride. For all must carry their own loads.

What is Paul getting at? He is rebuking conceit. He gives a recipe whereby conceit may well be avoided. We are to compare our achievement not with the work of our neighbours, today we might say America our neighbour, but with what we might have and could have done had we done our ideal best. We may be quite cheerful about our achievement if we compare ourselves with other people and nations, but when we compare it with the ideal there can never be any cause for conceit.

Twice in today's reading Paul speaks about bearing burdens. We are to bear the burdens of others, or help them to bear them, and we are to bear our own burdens.

The word which Paul uses is the Greek word for a soldier's pack or kit. There is a duty which none can do for us and a task for which we are personally responsible. There are things which no one, however kind, can do for us, and which, however much we want to, we cannot put off on to someone else. And it is this task, this task of living our lives and testing our lives against the ideal of Christian virtue that we are called to attend to.

Today the American anthem The Star Spangled Banner will be playing all over the land. It closes with the flag waving, "O'er the land of the free and the home of the brave."

Now we know that not all Americans are brave and free, but are we quite certain that we Australians, we Christians are truly brave and truly free?

If we are good, we're OK. If not, we should first focus our attention and our effort on our own individual and collective shortcomings, our own packs, our own kits, and then bearing our own and each others burdens, we will fulfil the law of Christ, and we will become brave, and we will become free.