
Serving Two Masters: Christianity and Patriotism

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St. Philip's Cathedral
Atlanta, Georgia
May 25, 2008, Memorial Day Weekend
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Several years ago on Memorial Day Weekend, I was driving down a highway across the river from Washington when quite by surprise my eyes caught the cemetery at Arlington, Virginia. Thousands and thousands of small American flags on all those graves—lines and lines of them as far as the eye could see, dotting the lush green hillside with red, white and blue. I was moved beyond words and had to pull off the road. It was daunting, truly daunting.

Later the next day on that same trip to visit family and friends, I drive by another vast hill just north of Charlottesville with cross after cross after cross spread over acres of graves of soldiers killed fighting for the confederacy. Yes, sacrifice after sacrifice after sacrifice for the love of country—patriotism in its ultimate form. A certain complex feeling of forlornness, sadness, gratefulness and peculiar pride settled over me.

What is it, I asked myself, this love of country, this patriotism that literally takes us over sometimes, shapes our history, erupts in horrible violence occasionally, yet gives us deep feelings that border on nostalgia and home and pleasure.

And so today on this Memorial Day weekend in this little homily I want to share with you some struggles concerning a Christian view of patriotism. It certainly is not the only Christian view. It might not be what I thought last year or what I'll think next year, but I share this to spark your own thinking—because one thing I am sure of: The times in which we live call for some careful and intentional rethinking on this subject.

After September 11, 2001 one of my colleagues said something about the Christian response to that horror in his sermon. I don't know exactly what he said or even whether I agree with him or if it was wise on that occasion. But one of his congregation did not agree at all. So she reminded him of something. She said, "It's just as important to be an American as it is to be a Christian" she said. "And sometimes, it is even more so."

Now, needless to say, I don't agree. But I give her credit for recognizing that her brand of patriotism runs counter to the Christian faith. The Roman Empire persecuted the early Christians precisely because Christianity undermined that kind of patriotism. What Rome basically demanded was that Christians acknowledge that it's as important to be a Roman as a Christian, sometime more so. That's what the martyrs died for rather than admit.

And it wasn't just the Romans. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, one of the architects of democracy, thought Christianity was bad for government. The founding fathers of our country, particularly Ben Franklin, believed a Republic needed a religious basis, but Christianity wasn't it, not enough stick and carrot, not enough an eye for an eye, too much forgiveness and grace and love to make good citizens stay in line.

So the relationship between Christianity and patriotism has always been a bit dicey. As Christians, we do not acknowledge

patriotism as having an equal claim on us. It is never as important to be an American as it is to be a Christian for us believers.

Now when Jesus talks in the Gospel for today about the impossibility of serving two masters, it seems to me he is employing his usual hyperbole to enable his listeners to get the point. One can't serve two masters as masters with the same priorities or values. One can hold two high priorities, but ultimately one has to decide what matters most, what or who is literally the master of your hierarchy of values. So a faithful disciple can't hold Christian commitment and loyalty to country on the same level because they will be at some time or another in conflict

When country moves ahead of God in our values, then country becomes God and that's what happened in Nazi Germany and Dietrich Bonhoeffer and other Christians died resisting.

And yet to say Christianity is opposed to patriotism would be simplistic and wrong. We have to define what we mean by "patriotism". There is a brand of patriotism, a widespread, popular brand of patriotism that we do have to oppose. It is a patriotism that has little love in it. It is instead a blend of pride and aggression and militarism. It's not a love of our democratic principles. Some people who are passionately patriotic tend to have no use whatsoever for the Bill of Rights. They hold both Congress and our Courts in contempt. Nor is such patriotism a love of our people. Some self-styled patriots have only contempt for many other Americans because they are different by race, by religious or political beliefs, by sexual orientation, or the region where they live. Some even show their so-called patriotism by acts of domestic terrorism as in Oklahoma City.

Patriotism of pride and power is like rooting for a winning football team. But the world today is too precarious for the politics of sports and our status as the world's primary super power makes that brand of patriotism a dangerous thing. Bishop Dan Edwards of Nevada (whom I am dependent upon for many of the thoughts in this homily), puts it this way, "A patriotism based on the power of our pride or pride in our power is incompatible with the Christian faith, (since) the path of worldly power runs 180 degrees opposite to the Way of the Cross."

And yet I think there is another patriotism which is a kind of love, a patriotism that extends our caring beyond ourselves, beyond our families, beyond our neighborhoods and cities. It's a kind of caring for the land that makes us protect it, and for the people that makes us treat them justly. It's loving our country, not as an abstraction, not as a mere symbol, not as a flag lapel pin, not as a team to cheer for, but as a real place and real people that we nourish and defend because we enjoy and appreciate and are grateful for them. It's the kind of understanding where we begin to think in terms of "we" and not in terms of "they".

Several years ago, my wife and I took a long train trip across this country""Denver to the west coast and back across the south west to New Orleans. And what a luminous experience of our land""it's varied texture in the ground and the scenery as well as in the faces of the people... all of it a diverse beauty from glistening mountains to rosy desert, from ruddy Indian skin to urban mixtures of black, brown and pink. I've never felt such thankful patriotism, no flags or bunting or fireworks, just the exquisite land and people of America.

Such patriotism doesn't pretend we are perfect. It is not uncritical of our country or our leaders. It doesn't deny our historical or our continuing collective sins. But it is a commitment to our security, the freedom, and the well being of our land and all our people. And to the memory of all those who gave their lives and died their deaths so that we today might enjoy and celebrate and give thanks for God's gift of this land to us, not because we deserve it or even live up to it sometimes, but because of the very mysterious grace of God Almighty.

The best of our historic Christian hymns express this well, when we sing;

O beautiful for spacious skies, for amber waves of grain
For purple mountain majesties above the fruited plain!

O beautiful for heroes proved in liberating strife,
Who more than self their country loved, and mercy more than life!

O beautiful for patriot dream that sees beyond the years
Thine alabaster cities gleam, undimmed by human tears,

America! America! God mend thine every flaw; confirm thy soul in self control, thy liberty in law.
America! America! God shed his grace on thee,
And crown thy good with brotherhood from sea to shining sea.

Amen.

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