

A Nation Founded on Christian Liberty
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The readings for today continue teachings from the Books of Samuel, from the Christ Himself as reported in the Gospel of Mark, and from Paul as communicated in his letters to the Corinthians. Yesterday, our Independence Day, celebrated the signing of the Declaration of Independence on July 4, 1776, 239 years ago. There is, of course, an obvious relationship between Books of Samuel and the Declaration of Independence: they both concern the relationships between God, the people, and kings. But there is much more to be learned, and a further relationship to the Declaration of Independence to be discovered, in the readings from Mark and the epistles of Paul.

As a short review, the Books of Samuel describe events that take place after the Israelites have been delivered by God's agent Moses out of slavery in Egypt and into the Promised Land. God has given them their basic law through Moses and God is their leader; He speaks to their priests and he helps them do such things as find water and food and victory in battles fought to defend and expand their territorial holdings.

The Israelites then existed as a loose confederation of families and tribes that had their own patriarchal ruling councils for governance. There is a census of them in the Book of Numbers, Chapter 1, Verses 1 to 54. Their unity as a whole people depended on their high priest who, by himself or through appointed judges, went from tribe to tribe to

adjudicate disputes in accordance with the laws given by God. Samuel, who turns out to be the last of these priests who speaks with God and judges the people, is astute and wise and honest and has moderate success keeping things together for a long time. Finally, things spiral out of control. What happened then is told in the reading of 1 Samuel 8 we heard four weeks ago:

When Samuel became old, he made his sons judges over Israel. ³Yet his sons did not follow in his ways, but turned aside after gain; they took bribes and perverted justice.⁴ Then all the elders of Israel gathered together ⁵and said to him, "You are old and your sons do not follow in your ways; appoint for us, then, a king to govern us, like other nations."⁶But the thing displeased Samuel when they said, "Give us a king to govern us." Samuel prayed to the Lord, ⁷and the Lord said to Samuel, "Listen to the voice of the people in all that they say to you; for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them. ⁸Just as they have done to me, from the day I brought them up out of Egypt to this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so also they are doing to you. ⁹Now then, listen to their voice; only you shall solemnly warn them, and show them the ways of the king who shall reign over them."¹⁰So Samuel reported all the words of the Lord to the people who were asking him for a king. ¹¹He said, "These will be the ways of the king who will reign over you: he will take your sons and appoint them to his chariots and to be his horsemen, and to run before his chariots; ¹²and he will appoint for himself commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties, and some to plow his ground and to reap his harvest, and to make his implements of war and the equipment of his chariots. ¹³He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. ¹⁴He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards

and give them to his courtiers. ¹⁵He will take one-tenth of your grain and of your vineyards and give it to his officers and his courtiers. ¹⁶He will take your male and female slaves, and the best of your cattle and donkeys, and put them to his work. ¹⁷He will take one-tenth of your flocks, and you shall be his slaves. ¹⁸And in that day you will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves; but the Lord will not answer you in that day." ¹⁹But the people refused to listen to the voice of Samuel; they said, "No! but we are determined to have a king over us, ²⁰so that we also may be like other nations, and that our king may govern us and go out before us and fight our battles." ²¹When Samuel had heard all the words of the people, he repeated them in the ears of the Lord. ²²The Lord said to Samuel, "Listen to their voice and set a king over them."

The books of Samuel then describe the actions of the first and second Kings, Saul and David, how they did exactly what God predicted via constant warfare, heavy taxation and tyrannical acts and attitudes (Remember Uriah the Hittite? How King David sent Uriah into the front lines of battle so that he would die and David could have his widow for himself?). On the other hand, these kings also brought conquest and wealth to a people now formed by kingship into a true nation.

By the time of Christ, however, the glory days are over. The Jews are divided, conquered, and a vassal state to a ruthless Roman Emperor, a new and bigger and foreign king, who has sent and installed a powerful army of occupation. The Jews are looking for a long prophesied Messiah who will be their new king, their own king, and bring back the glory days.

Now comes the Christ, who at the end of His life finally admits that He is the Messiah, but whose life

and teachings are a world different from bringing back the days of kingship with war, riches, victory and conquest.

In today's reading from Mark we see two things happening. First, we see Jesus late in his ministry preaching in his hometown to his own tribe and village. The people there knew him, from childhood, and saw His preaching as pretension and hypocrisy and, in Mark's words, "took offense at Him." Jesus then says to them: "Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house." These remarks disparaging of family and tribe are similar to those recorded earlier in Mark and analyzed here three weeks ago by Bob Jones. As Bob concluded, "perhaps all we can say in the end is that Jesus wasn't a family man."

Second, in today's reading of Mark we find Jesus giving the apostles authority and mandate, sometimes called the "Lesser Commission," to go out into the neighboring towns to preach and do miracles. This lesser commission is local, short-lived, and proves something of a test run because, after the murder by King Herod of John the Baptist, "The apostles returned to Jesus and told him all that they had done and taught." Mark, Chapter 6, verse 30.

Then, after the murder of Jesus Himself, after His resurrected appearance before the Apostles, comes what is called "The Great Commission," a universal and timeless mandate to "go, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you." And what is that they are to teach? The Law of Moses, to be sure, but most importantly, the Golden Rule: Do unto others as

you would have done to yourself. And, the Sermon on the Mount: "If a man strikes you, turn the other cheek." This sets up a much different set of loyalties than to home, family, tribe and nation. This is much different from war and kingship.

Then Paul explodes on the early Christian scene. Today's reading in Corinthians describes the ineffable event, and the effect, of the thunderbolt, the vision, the epiphany, the revelation he encountered on the road to Damascus. Paul says that his transcendental experience cannot be explained by a mortal to another mortal but, by way of insight, he explains that the effect of it enables his mortal self to be perfectly capable of enduring endless pain, lashings, insults and suffering to spread the good news of salvation.

But, on the road to the American Revolution what did Paul do for us, other than spread the good news? Larry Siedentop, an Emeritus Fellow of Keble College, Oxford, asks,

"Was Paul the greatest revolutionary of all times? Through its emphasis on human equality, The New Testament stands out against the primary thrust of the ancient world with its dominant assumption of 'natural' inequality. Indeed the atmosphere of the New Testament is one of exhilarating detachment from the unthinking constraints of inherited social roles. Hence Paul's frequent references to 'Christian liberty.' This was not simply an opposition to the Jewish law. It was a fulfillment, made possible by a discovery of a ground for existence antecedent to inherited social rules and roles. This is the moral atmosphere revealed when Jesus restricts even the claims of the family if the service of God requires it, something which churches have since often toned down."

I read Siedentop's book, *Inventing the Individual: The Origins of Western Liberalism*, because of the summary on the dust jacket which I thought informative and provocative. Footnote: the word "liberalism" in Siedentop's book does not carry the meaning it sometimes carries in American politics, but rather what is often called "classical liberalism," that is, a political philosophy or worldview founded on ideas of liberty and equality." Here is the summary of the thesis of this book:

"Here, in a grand narrative spanning 1,800 years of European history, a distinguished political philosopher firmly rejects Western liberalism's usual account of itself: its emergence in opposition to religion in the early modern era. Larry Siedentop argues instead that liberal thought is, in its underlying assumptions, the offspring of the Church. Beginning with a moral revolution in the first centuries CE, when notions about equality and human agency were first formulated by St. Paul, Siedentop follows these concepts in Christianity from Augustine to the philosophers and canon lawyers of the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, and ends in their reemergence in secularism --- another of Christianity's gifts to the West. *Inventing the Individual* tells how a new, equal social role, the individual, arose and gradually displaced the claims of family, tribe, and caste as the basis of social organization. Asking us to rethink the evolution of ideas on which Western societies and government are built, Siedentop contends that the core of what is now the West's system of beliefs emerged earlier than we commonly think. The roots of liberalism --- belief in individual freedom, in the fundamental equality of individuals, in a legal system based on equality, and in a representative form of government befitting a society of free people --- all of these were pioneered by Christian thinkers of

the Middle Ages, who drew on the moral revolution carried out by the early Church. These philosophers and canon lawyers, not the Renaissance humanists, laid the foundation for liberal democracy in the West."

Well, despite all of this philosophy and thought revolution, the kings kept on hanging around along with the servitude, slavery and wars and the heavy taxation that God through Samuel warned the people about thousands of years before. What to do?

Have you ever heard of the Peasant's Rebellion of 1381? I would say most people today have not. This was an armed rebellion against King Richard II of England when he was on the throne at the age of fourteen. England was just beginning to recover from the Black Death, a European-wide plague causing fully half of the entire population to die. High taxes caused by constant wars with France were crushing the people. The rebels sought to reduce taxes, to end serfdom, and to removal the King's senior officials. One of the causes of the rebellion was preaching by a radical priest, John Ball, who said this in support of the uprising:

"When Adam delved and Eve span, who was then the gentleman? From the beginning all men by nature were created alike, and our bondage or servitude came in by the unjust oppression of naughty men. For if God would have had any bondmen from the beginning, he would have appointed who should be bond, and who free. And therefore I exhort you to consider that now the time is come, appointed to us by God, in which you may (if you will) cast off the yoke of bondage, and recover liberty."

This was said in 1381, but does it not sound familiar? To me, this is a rehearsal of the American Declaration of Independence and Revolution.

Consider the similarity of these words from Dr. Joseph Warren, friend of John Hancock and Samuel Adams, and a fellow member of the Sons of Liberty, in an oration on the Boston Massacre delivered in 1775 when the fighting had already begun but before the Declaration of Independence was written:

"The man who meanly will submit to wear a shackle, condemns the noblest gift of heaven, and impiously affronts the God that made him free.. Our country is in danger, but not to be despaired of. Our enemies are numerous and powerful; but we have many friends, determining to be free, and heaven and earth will aid the resolution. On you depend the fortunes of America. You are to decide the important question, on which rest the happiness and liberty of millions yet unborn. Act worthy of yourselves."

Then consider the famous words of the Declaration itself:

"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 new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as

to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness."

Our revolution succeeded, of course, but Ball's Peasant's rebellion of 1381 did not. By the way, King Richard II rounded up the rebel leaders and executed them, 1,500 people in all, including John Ball, who was drawn and quartered, his severed head placed upon a pike and displayed at the crossroad, a plain warning to anyone foolish enough to raise his hand against the king.

The founders of this country, the signers of the Declaration of Independence, knew the Book of Samuel; they knew the outcome of the Peasant's rebellion, and many like it; they knew the consequences of a failed rebellion. Nonetheless, The American colonists defiantly named King George III of England in the Declaration as the signal cause of their discontent, as having brought war, high taxation, tyranny and destruction to their society. One must, then, consider the courage of those who signed the Declaration, pledging their lives, their fortunes, and there sacred honor in the cause of Christian Liberty.

The kings have not gone away, but I suppose the question is whose king is better and stronger. So, as a postlude, please consider the British national anthem sung even to this day:

God save our gracious King!

Long live our noble King!

God save The King!

Send him victorious,

Happy and glorious,
Long to reign over us:
God save The King!

Compare this anthem to the last verse of the hymn we sing today, "America, the Beautiful":

Our fathers' God to Thee,
Author of liberty,
To Thee we sing.
Long may our land be bright,
With freedom's holy light,
Protect us by Thy might,
Great God, our King.

Amen.

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