

Today I have chosen to bypass the regularly scheduled readings for this Sunday, the sixth Sunday of Pentecost, Proper 9, of our liturgical year. Instead we are using the readings our Prayer Book has appointed for Independence Day.

We have marked, and continue to celebrate, the 250th anniversary of the independence of our nation from England.

The celebration of Independence Day by the Episcopal Church has been complicated from the Church's beginnings. It was presented as a feast day of the Church in the first Prayer Book in the United States in 1786, some two years before the Constitution of the United States was ratified.

Within three years the feast day was removed from the Church's calendar in sensitivity that many of the clergy of the Episcopal Church had been, and possibly still were, loyal to the Crown and could not, in good conscience, lead the service, and its prayers.

Well over one hundred years passed before the Church re-instituted the celebration in the 1928 Book of Common Prayer. Of course, 1928 was between the two world wars, and patriotism was surely a strong current of the day.

The feast remains on the Church's calendar, and has been treated with the same honor as a Holy Day. It is one of only two civic holidays to be given such honor. The second is Thanksgiving Day. Independence Day is the only day on our calendar with a solely civic history, and focus. Neither Veterans' Day, nor even Memorial Day are accorded such an honor. In fact, neither are on the Church's calendar at all.

In its celebration of Independence Day the Church seeks to remind us of the mantle of providence, and spiritual responsibility that are inherent in the freedoms we enjoy. It is well worth considering the readings the Church has assigned to this feast day, and whether we, as a nation, as a Church, and as individuals are living up to their demands. Most particularly we can well be challenged by the call from Deuteronomy to remember the strangers in our midst for we were once strangers, and to seek to care for the orphaned, and the poor. We can also ask ourselves how we fare in light of Jesus' calling us to be perfect as our Father in heaven is perfect.

I remember travelling to Washington, D.C., with my family quite a few years ago, when both of my boys were still in school. I had not been to our nation's capital for many years prior to that trip. It had been well over a decade. Much had changed in that time, Most particular 9/11 had changed quite bit in our nation's capital.

Regardless of these changes, it is very hard to be among such places as Arlington National Cemetery, the Changing of the Guards at the Tomb of the Unknowns, Ford's Theater, and the Peterson House, the Lincoln, Jefferson, and Washington Memorials, within the Capitol Building, or standing in front of the documents of our nation's founding, and not be struck with reflection, and a sense of moral, and spiritual gravity.

On my previous visit to Washington security was not the issue of the day. People could file into a place like the Rotunda of the National Archives and gaze upon its significant artifacts. Depending on the time of year and the weather it would either be unbearably crowded or surprisingly intimate. Guards were present, and would willingly talk about the way the building and its sacred contents were secured each night.

But today metal detectors are present. Bags are searched. Guards are tight-lipped about security efforts. Visitors are lined up in front of the Rotunda in rows and a guard holds court with instructions, and directs the group into the room, the holy of holies in the Temple of Democracy. Frankly, for me, such practices added nothing to the importance of the pilgrimage but tended toward an air of humiliation that settled over the group before we were allowed to see the documents that ensure our rights.

As I waited for admittance to the Rotunda I became less comfortable. It was not because of the long line I had endured in the rain, or the hard floor or the long day behind me, and in front of me. It was because I was experiencing a mixture of feelings, as if I was about to see the Wizard of Oz, and a feeling of demeaning authority being wielded over me, and those in my group. Neither of these dynamics are worthy of liberty, and freedom. Neither are endearing, nor inspiring.

But there has been a benefit to the changes in security, and crowd control in this sanctuary. Visitors are now allowed to take their time to study the documents, and feel their significance. The atmosphere in the room is more subdued. Visitors now do not just file past these precious documents but are afforded a chance to engage them more fully, and deeply.

The Rotunda holds, from left to right, in historical order, the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights.

It seemed the Declaration of Independence drew the largest crowds during my recent visit. It has fared the worst of all of these documents.

The crowds strained to see the faded text, and signatures, though even today the audacious signature of John Hancock is quite discernible, as he intended. The Constitution also drew large numbers. It is surprisingly large, and very well preserved. It is an impressive display. If a document could be said to stand with pride, the US Constitution does, as it should.

But the Bill of Rights seemed to sit alone. As I stood in front of it only two other people joined me. I felt like announcing to all present, "Here are where your freedoms lie. This is the document that gives us the liberties we cherish, and take for granted." But, as my mother used to say, discretion is the better part of valor, and I let the emotion, and urge pass. Discretion, and the desire not to be arrested, won the day.

I quietly stepped aside to a far wall to soak in the beauty of the room.

It was in 1789 that the Church removed her feast of Independence Day. It was the same year that the Bill of Rights was created, though it would be two more years until these rights were ratified. The Bill of Rights proclaims our basic freedoms to assemble, to speak freely, to worship, and many other activities we practice with little reflection on just what blessings they bring us. But we also frequently miss the responsibilities these freedoms bring along with the responsibilities all freedoms bring.

It is the genius of the Feast of Independence Day in the Church that reminds us of these things. People of faith are not fully free, at least not in the sense as we tend to define it. We find our freedom in true service to God. We find our freedom within the reality that we are not our own but that we belong to God.

The ancient Hebrews knew that their deliverance from slavery in Egypt was actually deliverance from a tyrannical overlord into the service of a benevolent Lord to whom they had always, and truly belonged.

We, too, fought for freedom from oppression but have we lost the truer, and truest sense that we belong to God? Freedom arises from being grounded in God. Such is our great blessing. But freedom calls us to service. Such is our great responsibility as individuals, as a church, and as a nation.

It is to seek the freedom of others from oppression whether it be from a political overlord, or the tyranny of poverty, or the insidious trap of seeking only individual achievement, and success. Independence Day has passed for another year.

Offices were closed for the holiday. Grills were burning with tasty meats. Fireworks were lit for our delight. And the Church prayed. She prayed, and read about the grace of maintaining our “liberties in righteousness and peace.”

Will our freedoms endure? It is up to us, and I believe it is incumbent upon the Church to remind us, that our liberties will survive, not simply because we defend them, but because we practice them fully, and faithfully, in righteousness, and in peace as one nation, under God, with liberty, and justice for all.