

Yr. A, Proper 9
July 5, 2020
Preached by the Rev. Furman Buchanan
St. Peter's Episcopal Church
1560 Words

Lessons: Zechariah 9:9-12
Psalm 145:8-15
Romans 7:15-25a
Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

Back in the “good ol’ days” of American colonial history, in some places it was illegal to criticize the clergy—*as it should be!* In other places, people who skipped Sunday worship were fined by the vestry—*as they should have been!*¹

How is the Church even making it in the 21st century without these levers of power and control over the flock? It’s a miracle we’re still here!

What an introduction to this oracle we just heard from the Book of Zechariah: “Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem! (Behold) your king....triumphant and victorious...(and also) *humble*...riding on a donkey, (no, actually) on a colt, the foal of a donkey.”

Do you see the irony in this prophesy? Everybody knows that triumphant kings ride in chariots. Everybody knows that victorious kings mount up on war horses...*unless you follow Jesus*. Then you know that our king *did* arrive in Jerusalem on the foal of a donkey.

Still, most of us would like a couple of those levers of power and control to exert our will over other peoples’ will. We would like to impose our thoughts about how things should be.

I think about the priest at St. John’s, and what he was thinking on March 23rd.² He and his vestry opened the doors of their church to offer meeting space to some community organizers. Was he concerned about what they might say in his Church? Was he nervous whether some might condone violence or destruction of property?

The Book of Zechariah describes a Prince of Peace who is supposed to protect us from our enemies. “He shall command peace,” we are promised. “And his peaceful kingdom shall be from sea to sea.” It would be easy to interpret this as a promise custom-made for America, from sea to shining sea. But not everybody sees peace and freedom in the same light.

A man stood up in one of those pews at St. John’s and began to speak his mind about what he described as “an awful moment (facing) this country.” This is what he said. “I consider it nothing less than a question of freedom or slavery...”³ He obviously was not speaking from personal experience. I think we need to be careful about our rhetoric when we throw around words like ‘slavery’ to mean something other than the evil thing it actually was.

But it was the next thing he said which really begins to make me feel uneasy. “It is natural,” he exclaimed, “to indulge in the illusions of hope. We are apt to shut our eyes against a painful truth...”⁴ Now see, that is where my thinking diverges from his. I don’t think hope is an illusion. I believe hope is a real, powerful gift of God.

¹ Class notes, Church History II, The Rev. Dr. Don Armentrout, Spring Semester, 2004.

² Jon Meacham, *Thomas Jefferson: The Art of Power* (NY: Random House, 2012), 79.

³ Patrick Henry, Speech at St. Johns, Richmond on March 23rd, 1775, recorded in *Speeches that Changed the World* (NY: Metro Books, 2015), 120.

⁴ Patrick Henry, Speech at St. Johns, Richmond on March 23rd, 1775, recorded in *Speeches that Changed the World* (NY: Metro Books, 2015), 120.

I love that phrase we just heard from Zechariah’s prophesy: “Return to your stronghold, O prisoners of hope.” My prayer for us is that in all things—no matter how bleak they seem—we will forever remain ‘prisoners of hope.’

Benedictine Sister, Joan Chittister put it this way: “Hope is not a matter of waiting for things outside us to get better. It is about getting better *inside*...it is about allowing ourselves to believe in the future we cannot see. Hope is what sits by a window and waits for one more dawn, despite the fact that there isn’t an ounce of proof in tonight’s black, black sky that it can possibly come.”⁵

Things may have seemed hopeless to the man who spoke out at St. Johns, but others in that same church wanted to take a ‘wait and see’ approach. In times of social upheaval, there is rarely a consensus. On the one hand, there are those who favor working things out gradually. On the other hand, are those who are ready to fight...like the man, standing in St. John’s who concluded by saying this: “Is life so dear, or peace so sweet, as to be purchased at the price of chains and slavery? Forbid it, Almighty God! I know not what course others may take; but as for me, give me liberty or give me death!”⁶

You know that speech—Patrick Henry, March 23rd, 1775 in Richmond, Virginia. There were *literal* chains and slaves all around, but those were *not* the people for whom Mr. Henry was speaking out. Indeed, at that time the most fervent revolutionaries were the wealthiest colonists, according to historian, Jon Meacham. Middle- and lower-class people were slower to follow these young guys, like Patrick Henry and Thomas Jefferson, who were leading the way.⁷

I wonder if that is how the older adults felt about Jesus and John the Baptist—two *young* revolutionaries who were also crying out for dramatic change in the way *their society* was ruled and oppressed. In today’s Gospel lesson, we clearly hear the frustration Jesus felt.

He’s upset—not with a few individuals or families, but with the whole generation. He is angry with all the surrounding cities who are not doing enough to help those in need.

In terms of lifestyle, Jesus and John were utterly different. And yet, Jesus complains, “You have ignored us both. You dismissed John as demonic, and you called me a drunk and a friend of lowlifes.”

We *do that*, don’t we? We dismiss people who challenge us too much. From a safe historical distance, I can admire the bold speech of Patrick Henry; but would I have found it acceptable if I had been rector of St. John’s in 1775? From a safe historical distance, the Boston Tea Party is *easy* to celebrate; but if we had owned that property which was destroyed in an angry, defiant protest, what would we have said?

Like you, I am drawn to the second half of Jesus’ speech—the part where he invites all who are weary and carrying heavy burdens to receive rest. I love how he describes himself as gentle and humble in heart, and promises rest for our souls. Like you, I want to gloss over the first half of his speech, full of complaints, and then his audacious prayer, thanking our Father in heaven for hiding the truth from the wise and the intelligent.

Thomas Jefferson may have been the most intelligent person in all thirteen colonies. He was assigned the job of writing the Declaration of Independence. One of the things Thomas wrote into his draft of this declaration about inalienable rights was a harsh condemnation of the enslavement of the inhabitants of Africa.

⁵ Joan D. Chittister, *Scarred by Struggle, Transformed by Hope* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 110-11.

⁶ Patrick Henry, Speech at St. Johns, Richmond on March 23rd, 1775, recorded in *Speeches that Changed the World* (NY: Metro Books, 2015), 123.

⁷ Jon Meacham, *Thomas Jefferson: The Art of Power* (NY: Random House, 2012), 70.

Even though he, himself, was a slave owner, Thomas knew philosophically that the institution of slavery was utterly incompatible with the ‘self-evident truth’ that all men are created equal and endowed by God with the basic human rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.⁸

Not everyone agreed with Jefferson’s philosophy on this. In particular, South Carolina and Georgia insisted that the denunciation of slavery be eliminated from the Declaration of Independence. In the face of the overwhelming power of the British, unity among the thirteen colonies was essential, and so the practical choice took precedence over the philosophical truth—the clause opposing slavery was stricken from the document.⁹

On this Sunday closest to Independence Day, I am thankful for the bold philosophical vision which enshrined some very lofty ideals, even though they were not applied as broadly as they could have been and should have been.

Every generation (including our own) inherits circumstances they did not choose. This was true in the generation of the prophet, Zechariah; who challenged the people to follow a humble king and to remain prisoners of hope. This was true in the generation of Jesus, who challenged the people to follow his example of compassionate help for those who are weary and heavily burdened. This was true in the generation of Jefferson, who challenged the people to envision liberty and justice for all.

It is true, once again, in our generation. We have inherited blessings we did not earn, and curses we did not cause. The question for this, and every generation, is not what we received in our inheritance; but how we choose to use it, share it, and then leave it for the next generation.

This is why the question Jesus asks remains so challenging and timely, “To what will I compare *this* generation?” What are the truths that we are still not seeing? Who are the challenging people we are still dismissing? What aspects of Jefferson’s bold vision of liberty and justice for all people are we still not granting? Who are the weary and heavily burdened people we are still not helping?

This weekend I would like to ask you to do more than just celebrate what other people once did in a previous generation, as if it were an obvious thing about which everyone happily agreed. I invite you to pray for the vision and courage to see the next, challenging, humble, hopeful, and helpful thing for those who are weary and heavily burdened *in this generation*...in our generation. May we resolve to “use our liberty in accordance with God’s gracious will.”¹⁰

So, today, as we give thanks for “those in every generation in whom Christ has been honored, let us also pray that we may have grace to glorify Christ in our own day.”¹¹

Amen.

⁸ Jon Meacham, *Thomas Jefferson: The Art of Power* (NY: Random House, 2012), 105-6.

⁹ Jon Meacham, *Thomas Jefferson: The Art of Power* (NY: Random House, 2012), 105-6.

¹⁰ Drawn from the Collect for the Nation, *The Book of Common Prayer*, p. 258.

¹¹ Drawn from the conclusion of the Prayers of the People, Form II, *The Book of Common Prayer*, p. 386.