

“Radical Independence”
Psalm 24, Acts 10.34-43
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In our early correspondence about these six weeks Russ seemed particularly encouraging about my preaching on this weekend celebrating American Independence. In all my years as a preacher I have never done this before, for obvious reasons. Once my home country tried to keep yours in a state of colonialism and you wouldn't have it. You took us on and beat us. You established independence from us and celebrated that victory again yesterday.

But here I am, a latter day Brit, representative of the old oppressive power, preaching in an American pulpit. There is something unnerving about it, at least for the preacher. Nevertheless, I come before you with all the courage of a lion, albeit one who finds himself in a den of Daniels.

I began my schooling in England in 1946, soon after the Second World War ended. One of my memories is of the globes and maps around the school, all of which, of course, were pre-war. I looked at them and noticed that so much of the world was coloured dark pink. Canada, parts of Africa, Australia, India, these countries and many more were part of the Great British Empire with its focus of power and authority in London, England. At one time, Britannia ruled the waves and much dry land as well. So Britain grew strong and wealthy as it used the resources of the colonies to advance her own interests on every occasion.

Which is to say we were an imperial power, an empire, one of a long line of nations in history who have sought empire status. Think of the list; Egyptian, Babylonian, Persian, Roman, Austro-Hungarian, Napoleonic France, Communist Russia, Nazi Germany. This is hardly an exhaustive list but it is a serious feature of the world's history, empires which have sought the control and exploitation of other nations, sometimes forcing subjection in the name of supposed imperial benevolent responsibility.

In time, of course, whatever good the empire leaders may have believed they were accomplishing, they over reached themselves in self interest. They became oppressive and inevitably provoked reactions, struggles for liberation. But since empires are basically conservative and resistant to change this usually led to violent wars of independence.

My country once caused this kind of reaction among peoples we tried to rule, albeit benevolently. One thing I can do as a Brit today is apologise for those attitudes and assumptions, that pride which caused you to fight against us with many of your people dying for the freedom and democracy that was yours by right. I am sorry this is part of my story and yours.

Struggles for national freedom go on in many places, of course, for great powers still seek economic, military and political control in their own interest, sometimes covertly. So empires rise and wane and the international *status quo* is seldom stable and long lasting. The politically wise as well as the religiously alert have always tried to read the signs of the times, the changes that are already afoot.

What would we say of our current international situation? There are several places around the world where wars are presently being fought, or threatened, some of them wars of independence.

And there is an increasing awareness of something we have known about for a long time theoretically but now face urgently. It is the fact that we live together on one small planet. There are many nations but we are all part of one world and some of the things that threaten us are of this planetary proportion and nature. It is not difficult to think of illustrations of what I mean.

A new form of influenza appears in Mexico. Fifty years ago we would have hardly known about it. Now, we do know and care because our doctors speak of a possible threatening pandemic that will cross borders and reach across the world. No nation is immune or could make itself immune. We have to face this common threat, as we have so begun to do, together.

Or take the issue of the credit crunch. How and where it began is of much less interest at the moment compared with how will the international economy recover some element of stability. Such is the nature of international finance that we have a global problem on our hands. The wrong decisions in the great markets of the world mean unemployment and social disaster for families who have never owned a share in their lives but now live with the threat of redundancy and finding their home repossessed. We have to deal with this together or we shall all be in even deeper trouble.

The most pressing and far reaching of the global issues is that of climate change, global warming. We can see the effects of these changes already and the poverty some people face in consequence. There may be arguments about what causes all this and how it is best faced but what is apparent is that no nation, no empire, can stand alone in small mindedness and simply say this is nothing to do with us and we will not join in because it is not our nation's interest so to do. We need international agreements to face an international problem or none of us and our children shall escape an unpleasant future. Independence, or empire, is a less than helpful affirmation in these matters.

What strikes me most of all these days is what a radical view the Bible and the Christian Faith takes once these kind of questions get raised. Our human story is that of empires, nation states seeking to control and exploit others. Such a history is reflected in the Bible itself. But other perspectives emerge, startling in their scope. Two amazing texts from our Bible readings suggest another vision.

We heard Psalm 24. You remember how it began. The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof, the world and they that dwell therein. Or in a blunt modern translation, the world belongs to God, the earth and all its people. Hear it again. The world belongs to God. It is not ours. Britain does not belong to the Brits, let alone its old empire. We are not the owners. We did not make the green and pleasant land with its beauty and resources, it is part of God's gift. The world belongs to God. Before we shout about our national rights, we hear this radical view in Scripture. The world belongs to God.

The earth belongs to God. Our using it as if it were ours to exploit shows only that we have not appreciated our tenant status here. We are called to be stewards of God's earth, that's the Bible's perspective. The world belongs to

God, the earth, and all its people. All its people? Yes, all its people. Here is a theme drawn out and underlined in our New Testament reading.

You will know that in the time of Jesus of Nazareth there was a deep division between people, Jew and Gentile. So sharp was the division that sometimes they would not mix at all. One of the shocking things about Jesus was that he seemed to disregard so many of the social distinctions of his day. His was an inclusive friendship, he sat and ate with anyone; Romans, Samaritans, women, children, traitors. He called everyone to share the life of the kingdom of God.

As the early church, inspired and energized by the Holy Spirit, spread into the wide world they had to face the question about just who were God's people. How were they to deal with foreigners and strangers? There comes in the book of Acts a remarkable story involving a Roman soldier called Cornelius and the Apostle Peter. Both of them receive visions to which they obediently responded.

Peter's vision is of a sheet coming down from heaven on which are all kinds of bird and animals. Peter is told to rise and take some of these for food but he refuses, not because he was a vegetarian but because he reflected his pre-Jesus upbringing. He would not touch anything unclean. And back comes the affirmation, you must not call anything that God has made unclean.

Later, when Cornelius and Peter meet and Peter starts to preach about what God has done in Jesus the Holy Spirit comes upon the gentiles, these outsiders. Can anyone hold back these people from baptism, from becoming part of the people of God, asks Peter. The obvious answer is No! Peter had had his mind changed as he had been grasped by a great truth, namely, that God has no favourites, God shows no partiality. Twice Luke tells this story in Acts 10 and 11. He presses its meaning on all his readers, as if he is saying, you really must get this essential understanding of the Christian gospel. God has no favourites, no special nation status. The good news of God is for all, that God is for all.

I fear that my country at times behaved as if we were the specially blessed favourite of God. There was even a group of people called British Israelites who thought we were a lost tribe of the house of Israel. Such a view, frankly, is near to blasphemy for it makes an idol of the nation. I was surprised after 9/11 to hear an American evangelist suggest that that disaster had come upon this nation because God had lifted his blanket of protection from over his people. I wanted to ask what God is this, for it is not the God of Jesus, the one who had and has no favourites.

No, before God, no one nation is more loved and cherished than another. Different parts of God's one earth, divided by us into nation states and empires have different resources but, remember the Bible perspective, the world belongs to God, the earth and all its people. Patriotism is an important virtue for us but, in Christ, patriotism is never enough. Might we not pray for a new generation to arise, the youth of the world, who know that, for all their proud national identities, they are world citizens, with a vision greater than that of any national success, strength and prosperity.

Here in the Bible is radical inter-dependency. It is, of course, politically and economically very challenging, inviting us to live as different people, God's

people, the God whose world this is. In the Christian vision of the rule of God there is only one table of the Lord, no separate national tables for the tribes of yesterday. Please God there rises up a new generation that will live this way.

So today let us say, in thankfulness for the history and present strength of this great nation, one nation under God, God bless America. And as those who pray with Jesus for God's kingdom to come, for God's will to be done on earth as in heaven, can we also pray, God bless Britain, Germany, India, China, Cuba, Chile, Iran, Iraq, Palestine, Israel? Can we share God's passion for all his creation, for all his children, looking to that day when they shall come from the north and the south, the east and the west, to the great banquet table of the Lord prepared among all peoples.

Or as one of the first songs I was ever taught to sing in Sunday School has it; Jesus died for all the children, all the children of the world. Red and yellow, black and white, all are precious in his sight. Jesus died for all the children of the world. Can we live out that conviction?

Or to put it in a way that Jesus would have prayed in worship, May God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face to shine upon us, that your way may be known upon earth, your saving power among all nations. Let the people praise you, O God, let all the people praise you. (Psalm 67) Free nations that work for such a vision will be blessed indeed, for they are living as the people of God, and they will be a blessing!