

“Repentant Patriotism” Rev. James Brassard @ CCPC on July 3, 2005

Romans 13:1-7; Ephesians 6:12 *“Our struggle is not against enemies of flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.”*

There are two extremely powerful words that are often misused. When they are misused in combination with each other the effect can be lethal. Those words are *religion* and *patriotism*.

Thomas Jefferson, well aware of this lethal combination that caused centuries of religiously inspired wars in Europe, developed his Doctrine of the Separation of Church and State in order to protect the new American state from the competing doctrines of extreme forms of faith and to protect religion from the extremist ideology of politics. The framers of our constitution, most of them Christians, were well aware of Jesus' memorable statement when asked what his followers owe to the ruling authorities: *“Render to Caesar what is Caesar's, but to God what is God's.”* The framers took his words seriously and included the freedom of religious association and freedom of conscience in its founding document.

In a time of international conflict such as this, many worshipers will enter sanctuaries on this Independence Day weekend only to hear the unspoken, or even spoken message, that being Christian and being an American are synonymous. That is not only unfortunate, it is **dangerous for our souls and our citizenship**.

Patriotism, like fear—is a very complex emotion. In its purest form, patriotism is a love of land, loyalty to family, an affinity for a shared history of sacrifice, and common values. Our national hymns that were not written during wartime reflect that pure form. “My Country 'Tis of Thee,” celebrates a sense of sacred place and people and values and even a way of life that endears the singer to her native land. This is what C.S. Lewis called a “**virtuous** patriotism.”

Lewis lived through even more perilous times than today—the first two World Wars. He noted that too often patriotism has its “**vicious forms**,” where the stated creed is, “my country right or wrong.” Vicious patriotism can even evolve into idolatrous and demonic loyalty to the state: the classic case being Nazi Germany.

Jesus' actions and proverbial wisdom militates toward eliminating violence as a valid human response to offense and conflict.

Matthew 26:52 “All who take up the sword will die by the sword.”

Matthew 5:29 “Do not resist evildoers. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also. Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.”

These moderate voices of wisdom are hardest to hear in the gathering momentum of approaching war. In times of stress and fear, more simple and basic emotions take over. “We are right. They are wrong. We are all good and they personify evil.”

In times of national strife we too easily equate our national agenda with the will of

God. War, its causes and its resolution, is very complex.

A complex issue like war has three aspects:

- It is a crisis
- It is caused by, and in turn leads to, chronic social problems
- It is controversial and therefore polarizing.

War produces a multitude of complex causes and effects. International enmity grows toward our country. Our past dealings with other nations that have involved mixed motives and dubious means (i.e. Afghanistan, Iraq, Saudi Arabia) and have produced bad outcomes ...are remembered. Bellicosity overwhelms reason. Animosity increases and reconciliation is ever more difficult.

Christians looking for a guide for how much loyalty we owe the state have always gone to the apostle Paul's statement found in **Romans 13:1-7**. Based on an out of context reading of this scripture, the apostle Paul, the architect of Christian Church, has always been viewed as basically a conservative supporter of government as a "divinely appointed institution." This thinking produced the Divine Right of Kings. It has been more recently been used to justify dictatorships and extreme forms of democracy alike.

But in the last decade, that premise has undergone a sea change of thought, represented in a diverse group of scholars. These scholars contend that in stark opposition to the Roman gospel of peace established through piety, war and global victory, Paul preached an **alternative gospel of peace** established through covenant, nonviolence and global justice, in which **Jesus**, not the emperor, reveals the true character and the will of God.

Those who are in Christ **embody values** that are antithetical to many of the basic values of the empire, whether it be Roman or British or American. The followers of Jesus are those who constitute an alternative to the empires' practices. They spread God's salvation and peace through care of others and for the earth rather than consumerism, through acts of compassion and reconciliation, rather than military action.

The mix of Empire and Christianity always has an arrogant benevolence attached to it. Queen Victoria, under whose watch the Brits built an Empire where the sun never sat, preached that England was bringing God's law and morality to the uncivilized. This vision ended in the subjugation and exploitation of the people and resources of India and Africa. An ironic but familiar story is still told by Christians in Kenya. The Christian missionaries made inroads into Kenya in the late 1800's by opposing the slave trade which was controlled by Muslims. After Christianity established itself the British colonialists arrived. Using military might and British courts they literally stole the land and resources of Kenya. The punch line of the story goes like this. "We were told to bow our heads in prayer led by the British missionaries. When the prayer was over and we looked up, they had stolen everything we had." Bishop Peter Storey, writing in the late 40's as the Empire was crumbling lamented, "we were so sure about how good we were and how right we were. I now know how often we were bad and wrong."

There is a growing consensus among theologians that Christian faith and the American empire are bound to clash and that the Christian church must become an alternative community with a prophetic voice and a different way of life.

This conclusion is not yet shared by the average pastor or the majority of American churchgoers who increasingly tend to **merge the rightness of empire** with Christian piety.

It is a Dangerous world out there. Lots of failed states form a breeding ground for terrorist organizations. The Internet, that great international organizing vehicle which has brought various peoples together around the globe, has also been effectively used by terrorists like Ben Laden. The sad irony is that we may have trouble finding enough volunteers to fight jihadists, but recruitment is hot on the other side.

Thomas Friedman coined a phrase that figures prominently in public policy discussions. It is called "**The Curse of Oil.**" He says this about the curse in his Book, "*The World is Flat.*" "Nothing has contributed more to retarding the emergence of democracy in places like Venezuela, Nigeria, Saudi Arabia and Iran than the curse of oil. As long as monarchs and dictators who run these oil states can get rich by drilling their natural resources—as opposed to drilling the natural talents and energies of their people—they can stay in office forever. They can use oil money to monopolize all the instruments of power—army, police and intelligence—and never have to introduce real transparency or power sharing. All they have to do is capture and hold the oil tap."

"People don't change when you tell them there is a better option. They change when they conclude that they have no other option." Give me \$10 a barrel oil and I will give you political and economic reform in Moscow to Riyadh to Iran. **But If America** and its allies will not collaborate in bringing down the price of crude oil, their aspirations for reform in all these areas will be stillborn."

The same day I read Friedman's words, I picked up my copy of the Wall Street Journal which reported that thanks to aggressive "pay what employees pay" marketing campaign..a very large number of large trucks and SUV's were sold last month. The other column of the front page reports the Chinese government's efforts to buy an American Oil Company.

I find myself thinking **Donald Rumsfeld is still too optimistic** about the outlook for democracy and peace in Iraq. Rumsfeld went from a projecting that the war would be a cakewalk paid for by the oil revenues that will be quickly increased to cover the cost - to a conflict that would last 5-6 months tops. He now admits that "insurgencies tend to last, 5, 6, 8, 10 or even 12 years with high casualties."

Andrew Bacevich in his bestseller "**The New American Militarism: How Americans are Seduced by War,**" writes that we have been at war over access to Oil since the Iranian revolution in 1980. Americans have become increasingly convinced that our objectives are achievable by a regular and ongoing military conflict. We live in a country where it has become commonly accepted that war is a necessary means to preserve our consumer based economy.

How relevant do the words of **Lincoln's Second Inaugural address** seem in today's context. "*Fondly do we hope, fervently do we pray, that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue until all the wealth piled*

up by the bondsman's' two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn is paid...as was said three thousand years ago (in the Old Testament) so still it must be said, "the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether."

I hope I have convinced you about the dangers of mixing Religion and Patriotism.

But what is the good news for us locked in the in between time?

I hope this motivate us to **pray for our people to do some soul searching of our motives** and our actions, recognize how the “**grace notes**” of freedom, democracy and free markets might be masking policies that produce hatred and envy.

Where is God in times of conflict? ...besides Lincoln suggestion—waiting until we wise up and repent.

I remember a visit I made several years ago to Vatican City in Rome and a tour of St. Peter's Basilica. I had studied Renaissance History and became an admirer of Michelangelo's religious art. I visited the Sistine Chapel to view his Last Judgment fresco. I had bumped into his awe inspiring, larger than life sculpture of David in Florence. But I was most taken by his most famous marble sculpture—“**the Pietà**”—where Mary, the grieving mother of Jesus, is holding his lifeless body in her arms.

In that sculpture we witness Jesus experiencing a little of what it means to have a faith that we don't have to hold up, but holds us up.

I wrote in my journal the series of emotions I felt at the time. First, I felt that God shared the pain, the sorrow, the horror of violent death. Second, the symbol of Mary as the world's mother holding her battered sons and daughters, victim of wars and violence. Finally, the sculpture speaks of a **gentle God holding God's torn and blood red world**.

The late Henri Nouwen said the role of the church is to take the hostility of the world, all that is threatening and hostile, and transform it into hospice—a place of shelter and rest.

In a dangerous world—may the followers of Christ—here and around the globe, be a place of shelter and rest. Amen.