



Christian Education

A series of Sermons and Occasional Papers
From the clergy and members
of Holy Trinity Church
Forbes Park, Makati

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Title: **"Our Native Land(s)."**
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Author: The Rev. Tyler A. Strand

Readings for this Sunday:

First Reading Isaiah 66: 10-16
Second Reading Galatians 6: 14-18
Gospel Luke 10: 1-12, 16-20

The 4th of July is an auspicious day for us. Not only is it the American Independence Day, but it also used to that of the Philippines until June 12 was chosen instead to avoid confusion. Independence Day is considered a church festival in the calendar of the Episcopal Church in the U.S. And, as if all of this weren't enough, we have also seen the inauguration of a new presidential term in this country last Wednesday. It is, all in all, a rather obvious time to preach about national pride and patriotism.

But look at our community and you will see that such a theme is not an easy one. First of all, we are a highly international group with members drawn from at least eight different countries, and the United States doesn't even represent the majority anymore! But secondly, and most importantly, the Church ought not to be in the business of endorsing any one nation over another, and it treads a fine line between being a supportive resident of local societies on the one hand, and being the voice of a religious and moral objectivity on the other. The question of the day is, "Can a Christian also be patriotic?"

The Old Testament certainly seems patriotic, but only to the people of the Jews, and only in the sense that they are a chosen race for a chosen purpose. The modern idea

of a nation-state is not presented in the Bible until the reigns of David and Solomon, and the Hebrew monarchy is always suspected by the prophets as being something God really didn't have in mind. In time of war, God is expected to fight on the side of the Jews, but gods are fighting on the other side, too, much as Homer describes things during the Trojan War.

It is only later, after the chastening experiences of the destruction of Jerusalem and the Exile in Mesopotamia that Jewish religion matured to the point of seeing its God as being not only a player on "our side" but as the only divine power in town, capable of using pagan kings like the Persian Cyrus and even Alexander the Great to work out a plan for history that is no longer limited to one race or people, but involves us all.

What does the New Testament tell us? Well, Christ was born into an occupied territory, a "non-state" ruled by puppet kings having no real power. There was no state of Israel then, and the Jesus was identified first and foremost as a Galilean: from a province of mestisos, of half-breeds and heretics. "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's" is not a glowing endorsement of a regime but a statement of practical neutrality, and Jesus is the first to tell us that His kingdom is "not of this world."

The Apostle Paul is perhaps the first Christian patriot on record: proud of his Roman citizenship, and ready to use it in his defense. He enjoins his readers to pray for the emperor and all in authority, mindful of the *Pax Romana*, the Roman Peace that kept the highways and sea-lanes safe and functional for the spread of the Good News throughout the Mediterranean world. However, Paul's citizenship finally only provided him with the right to death by beheading, rather than crucifixion, when Christ eventually had to be chosen over a jealous and increasingly hostile Caesar.

Between then and now, the Church has taken a wide variety of attitudes towards the national governments under which it has lived: the result has been crusades, pogroms and heresy trials on the one hand, or persecutions, the closing of churches and underground movements on the other.

Christians in the modern world are of two minds when it comes to religious patriotism. Europeans, both "old" and "new", are generally unconcerned about what Scripture, Tradition or the contemporary Church teach and tend to vote according to their secular consciences, rather than their professed religion. And then, there are the Americans, God love 'em, for whom religion is almost too much a part of politics, especially when that religion is over-simplistic and narrow, and when it leads to an unquestioning jingoism. Sometimes they forget that Paul's advice about supporting the government didn't imply deifying it. And that leads me to what I want to share today, in this week of patriotism and national pride.

There is nothing wrong with the love of one's country. It is, in fact, something that becomes very important especially to those of us living far from home. We remember places and people who have been important to us, lovable traits and character flaws that make our national identities unique, and we come to recognize that much of who we are is tied up in where we are from.

Loyalty to one's country is like loyalty to one's family. The best ones in a family are those fiercely loyal to it, but not ignorant or necessarily indulgent of the faults of its members. In fact, while being in a family can lead to uncritical and even unthinking support, it can also be the members of a family who can address a problem or crisis in just the right way.

There are those who hate their families, whose experience in childhood and youth have poisoned them to the individuals who are supposed to be figures of love and support. And there are those who hate their countries either through the projection of their own disappointments or because of the failure of the nation to be true to itself and its own ideals. But maturity, compassion and personal resolve can help to make the members of a family work and live with each other with better grace, and that is true about a mature approach to patriotism, too.

Nevertheless, even as the role of our families in our spiritual life must never compromise our own faith and commitment to what we know is true, so also our patriotism, however informed and balanced, must not take the place of our allegiance to a Kingdom that will outlast any and all of our earthly commitments and loyalties. That is why it is always healthy for the Christian Church to be uncomfortable with too easy an alliance between the spiritual and the secular, between religion and politics. If our native land is to have the benefit of our citizenship, it must allow us our religious conscience. And if our Christian faith is to be true to Christ's Incarnation, to His becoming part of our human life, then we must not be afraid of engaging the state in matters of morality, humanity and reason. It's not an easy balance, but it is the most effective way of being both in the world, but not, ultimately, of it.

In today's Gospel reading from Luke, we hear about the missionary work of some of the Lord's followers. We hear that they are sent out as "laborers into the harvest", but also as "lambs in the midst of wolves." If that doesn't sound like politics, I don't know what!

But we also hear that their journey is a success and that the forces of Satan are, at least temporarily, in retreat. Good news for our side! But there is one detail that I'd like you to remember from this Gospel story, and that is the number of the disciples sent out. It's not the twelve who are on this mission, but "seventy others": a group that we don't hear much about. Who are they? We don't know their names, but we do know the significance of their number, because the Jews of Jesus' time had the belief that there were just seventy different national groups in the whole, wide world. If the twelve disciples represented Israel's twelve tribes, then this group of seventy was the sign of God's work in all countries, all races, and all peoples.

And that can be the purpose of our patriotism today, or whenever our own nations celebrate their identity and history. Our country is our family, our patch, our corner of the world in which the Kingdom of God must be established. May God never let us become so jaded, so cynical, so angry that we forget where we are from and what it has meant not only to us as citizens, but as ambassadors to it of the Kingdom of God.

God bless our Native Lands!