

THE FOURTH OF JULY

It is again becoming fashionable to disparage America. Jeremiah Wright, Obama's Chicago pastor, famously said: "God damn America!" It was a terrible statement. Like almost all countries America has done things for which it should hang its head in shame. But America has also done great things. As Christians we know the only righteous kingdom that will ever exist is the kingdom Jesus establishes by His blessed death and resurrection and over which He shall rule. I love our country. With all its bitter past it is still a great country. I am not blind to its faults. As a black man I have been, my people have been, the victim of its faults. But I love this country. I do not excuse her sins. My patriotism is realistic. I am like the man who has given his heart to an erratic, often violent and contradictory woman, but who remains astounded by her beauty, creativity and vision.

The Fourth of July celebrates the Declaration of Independence which declared the nation's independence from Great Britain. The document, formally adopted by the Second Continental Congress on July 4, 1776, famously includes these words: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. That to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed." The Declaration closes with these words: "And for the support of this **Declaration**, with a firm

reliance on the protection of Divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes, and our sacred Honor.” The document was written by five prominent Americans including Benjamin Franklin and John Adams, but the principal duty to draft fell to Thomas Jefferson who would come to own over 500 slaves in his lifetime and fathered 4 children with Sally Hemings, his black slave and lover for most of his adult life after his wife died. Despite these God-inspired words, Thomas Jefferson never freed more than 10 slaves in his lifetime. Such is our country, God-inspired aspirations and sin-stained performance. Such am I: God-inspired aspirations and sin-stained performance. America is like the man who, on his wedding day, truly vows fidelity and honor to his wife before the wedding guests while his mistress and their children watch.

No country can be greater than its people, its leaders. We are all deeply flawed. Thomas Jefferson was the third president of the United States. His memorial in Washington D.C. bears these words from Jefferson: “Can the liberties of a Nation be secure when we have removed a conviction that these liberties are the gift of God? Indeed I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just and that his justice cannot sleep forever.” Jefferson did not tremble enough. In his second inaugural address Abraham Lincoln said:

"One eighth of the whole population were colored slaves not distributed generally over the union but localized in the southern part of it. These slaves constituted a peculiar and powerful

interest. All knew that this interest was somehow the cause of the war. To strengthen perpetuate and extend this interest was the object for which the insurgents would rend the Union even by war while the government claimed no right to do more than to restrict the territorial enlargement of it. Neither party expected for the war the magnitude or the duration which it has already attained.

Neither anticipated that the cause of the conflict might cease with or even before the conflict itself should cease. Each looked for an easier triumph and a result less fundamental and astounding.

Both read the same Bible and pray to the same God and each invokes His aid against the other. It may seem strange that any men should dare to ask a just God's assistance in wringing their bread from the sweat of other men's faces but let us judge not that we be not judged. The prayers of both could not be answered ~ that of neither has been answered fully. The Almighty has His own purposes. "Woe unto the world because of offenses for it must needs be that offenses come but woe to that man by whom the offense cometh." If we shall suppose that American slavery is one of those offenses which in the providence of God must needs come but which having continued through His appointed time He now wills to remove and that He gives to both North and South this terrible war as the woe due to those by whom the offense came shall we discern therein any departure from those divine attributes

which the believers in a living God always ascribe to Him. 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 by the bondsman's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword as was said three thousand years ago so still it must be said 'the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.'"

America is sin-stained because we are all sin-stained. More Americans died in the Civil War than in World Wars I and II combined. I celebrate America and its grand ideals. I celebrate the brave men and women who have died on various battlefields on behalf of this country. They enable me to sit in our comfortable family room looking west to the ocean.

My feet are firmly planted on American soil, but my heart is in heaven where resides the only true King who by His might will set up the only Righteous Kingdom we will ever know. But me, I am inconsistent and faltering. I often despair at my own sins. "For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree with the law, that it is good. So now it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep

on doing. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me.”¹ Like Abraham I am “looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God.” I lurch forward clinging to the Cross, trusting in the righteousness and love of Jesus Christ. I fail, but He has succeeded for me. I falter, He stands strong. I sin, but He, the Righteous One, has born all my sins on the Cross. Scripture teaches me that I am free only to the extent I live as a slave to Christ. “My hope is built on nothing less than Jesus' blood and righteousness.”

The Declaration of Independence ends with these words: “And for the support of this Declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes and our sacred Honor.” Jesus’ declaration of independence for all those who trust in His name ends with these words: **“It is finished! Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.”**

God bless America!

Lord Jesus, come quickly!

¹ Romans 7:15-20