
Dependence Day

Galatians 6.1-6

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on July 4, 2010 by the Revd Dr Sam Wells

234 years ago today the members of the Continental Congress adopted a statement that declared that the 13 American colonies were independent states and no longer regarded themselves as part of the British Empire. July 4 is a day that seems, for reasons that are not hard to understand, to be somewhat more fondly remembered in the United States than I have ever known it to be in Britain. Britain, a country deep in debt due to foreign wars, pursued a cynical ambition to extract soft money from its colonies, and its king, George III, lacked the wisdom to harness his subjects' loyalty and seek a compromise. What emerged was not just a new country. What emerged was a philosophy – that sovereignty lay not just in might and historic authority, but in something called natural rights, which all people, being equal, could claim, and which no one could take away from them. Most memorably these inalienable rights included life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

And all these sentiments, so resonant through the centuries that have followed, are crystallized in a single word: independence. Independence means “We are no longer a colony – we are a nation state in our own right.” But independence has come to mean more than that. Independence has come to mean “We believe in the right of the individual conscience to have freedom in all matters; we believe the individual's duly-rewarded endeavors should be unimpeded by taxes and regulation from on high; we believe that all good and worthwhile things in life derive from the honest efforts one makes on one's own behalf.” One of the questions to ask ourselves when Independence Day falls on a Sunday is, “What is the relationship between such convictions and the Christian gospel? Given that the word ‘independence’ doesn't appear in the Bible, do we proudly assume independence is something God takes pride and pleasure in, and is it legitimate and reasonable to argue that personal independence is really what Christianity is all about?”

I wonder whether you've ever attended the funeral of a family member, or whether you've been present as a friend or colleague or neighbor at such an occasion, when, in keeping with the expressed wishes of the deceased, the sound system broadcast to the congregation the dulcet tones of Frank Sinatra singing “Regrets, I've had a few; but then again, too few to mention... The record shows I took the blows, and did it my way.” This song is powerful because it elevates independence not just to the level of a virtue, but to the level of being the only virtue that really matters – the one that crowns all others. It's a deathbed universal declaration of independence, set to music. And it would be funny if it weren't so widely admired and adopted. In the hands of Thomas Jefferson, independence was the right not to be indentured to a foreign government. But by the time we get to Frank Sinatra, independence has become the right to have no regard for the wellbeing of anyone but myself, and to do whatever I please, without once having to ask permission, or ever say sorry.

I want to look at the words of St Paul in the sixth chapter of his Letter to the Galatians and recognize there the tension that was later to be enshrined in the United States' Declaration of Independence. In verse 2 Paul says, “Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.” But only a moment later, in verse 5, Paul states, “All must carry their own loads.” “Bear one another's burdens;” “All must carry their own loads.” How can these two statements possibly fit together? Let's have a look at them both a bit more closely.

We'll start with “All must carry their own loads.” When the time comes for a baby eagle to learn to fly, the eagle parent has a pretty uncomplicated way of setting about it. The young eaglet stands up on the side of the nest, whereupon its mother gives it an unceremonious shove – and the eaglet finds itself having to learn how to unfurl and flap its wings and fly, all in a sudden moment. Now that's what I call making a virtue of independence.

I once read an account of a pastor who was committed to bringing up his family in one of the more socially-disadvantaged neighbourhoods of a large American city. When his children were still quite young, he would take each one of them to the other side of town on the subway a couple of times, and then get them ready for the day when he would drive them to the far side of town, drop them near a subway station and let them make their own way home. Remember this was long before the days of cell phones.

If that's what you'd want your own children to be like, how much more would you seek for members of your church and the wider community to live lives of self-reliance. As a pastor I've frequently heard the awful experiences many people have had and the horrifying circumstances many people find themselves having to live through. There's a place, an honored place, for sympathy and understanding and gentleness and making allowances. But there comes a moment for all of us when we can no longer see ourselves primarily as victims of cruelty, neglect or bad luck. Sometimes what makes a person most admirable is their ability to say, "Hey, we all have our own stuff to get through, but you can't go through life dwelling on what might have been, and whose fault it is that it's not." I once spoke to two siblings who'd grown up together in the same troubled household. One, 25 years later, was full of bitterness and recrimination. She said "I spent my childhood fearing my mother and now I hate her." The other simply said, "I appreciate my sibling's point of view, but you can't blame your parents for everything, especially when they were trying their best – however misguided and mismatched they were in retrospect."

Some of the wisest words I ever heard came from a man who'd been forced to spend many months in solitary confinement. When asked what kept him going, he said, "I made a resolution at the beginning, as soon as I realized I could be alone for a very long time. And this was what I agreed with myself: 'No regrets; no self-pity; no false sentimentality.' And this resolution took me through months that became years until finally I saw the dawn again." Now that's what I call independence. That's a man who's had to go deep inside and find resources few of us could imagine we had. And his words, "No regrets; no self-pity; no false sentimentality," pretty much sum up for me what I'd want to feel when I stand before the throne of grace on judgment day. On that day there'll be no use blaming others or finding excuses or asking for more time or saying I didn't mean it. That's a real independence day, when I stand knee deep in my own sin and have nothing to offer but the person I have allowed Christ through the Holy Spirit to make me. And the only way to be ready for that independence day is to start preparing right now.

Let's turn to St Paul's other maxim: "Bear one another's burdens." I remember once I was in a foreign country and I had a friend who was dear to me come to visit. He hadn't been there long, and we went to the grocery store just to get a few things so we could make dinner. As soon as I put my shopping bags down on the kitchen counter I realized I'd left my wallet on the checkout at the store. I vainly searched the farthest reaches of my vocabulary to find a way of expressing my emotions in a way that was vividly descriptive without being unbecoming. But my friend said, "Leave it to me." In no time he'd called the store, located the wallet, gone and fetched it, and was back in my apartment. He took on my trouble and simply removed it from me and bore my burden. It was a small thing. But it was a beautiful thing. And it taught me a lot about bigger things.

We often use the phrase "Bear ye one another's burdens" to refer to helping each other out in times of hardship. But we forget that when Paul uses this phrase, "Bear one another's burdens," he's talking specifically about when somebody has really gone astray and let a whole bunch of people down. There's the old joke about what the inflatable teacher said to the inflatable student who'd just stuck a pin in and burst the inflatable school: "You've let me down, you've let yourself down, you've let the whole school down." Paul's talking about when one person has let their own fragility, their own foolishness or selfishness, damage a whole community, so that other people find themselves bearing the cost of a crisis they themselves did nothing to create. That's such an isolating moment – when you realize you're the one who's made life sad and miserable, not just for yourself, but for a whole host of people, maybe some or many of whom you don't even know. It's hard enough to face your own responsibility when you feel so crushed and humiliated. But it takes a very remarkable person to say, "I didn't cause this trouble, but I'm going to carry it as if I had. I'm going to bear the burden with our friend who got us into this mess, and I'm going to take the lead in helping us all see what we can do to try to make things better." Paul wants us all to be people like that.

Can you think of a time when someone has made a mess of their life and humiliated themselves and maybe brought shame on a community that you've been a part of? What did you do then? Did you avoid them, pity them, blame them, assume they'd have to clear up the mess they'd made? Did you and the Christian community turn out to be more judgemental than the society at large? Or did you seek them out, offer mercy, show tenderness, share humanity, and bear their burden, even at the cost of enduring some of the scorn and derision they were facing? If you did the latter, you fulfilled what Paul calls "the law of Christ."

For many of us, we're so deeply shaped by the language of independence, that our deepest fear, as we grow old, is of becoming a burden to our children. We've heard we must carry our own load. But we've forgotten that when Paul tells us to bear one another's burdens, he calls it "the law of Christ." According to Paul, there's nothing wrong with being a burden. It's no bad thing to be a dependent. Dependence creates relationships. When a person's sick, or breaks a bone, or has a baby, or has difficulty getting out of the house, in many cases a whole community of care gathers around them, and strangers become friends simply by bumping into one another when bringing in a meal, or having to email one another to set up a rota. If you're going to be committed to bearing one another's burdens, you have to be prepared to let other people bear yours.

Here's the difference between all carrying your own loads, which we call independence, and bearing one another's burdens. Independence expresses respect, and respect is the foundation of justice, of dignity, of equality, of all the ways human beings relate to one another. But bearing one another's burdens expresses something beyond respect. Bearing one another's burdens expresses love. Respect is a fine thing. But when you've tasted love, respect feels a bit lacking in flavor. Love should never be less than respect, but respect is a minimum, not a goal. Respect feels like a rather pale imitation of the real thing. As a pastor I sometimes wonder if people who make such a big play of respect, and are so determined to prove their independence, are somehow those for whom love has gone painfully wrong. I wonder whether we demand respect, we long for independence, when we don't dare ask for love. Maybe this is a moment to ask yourself, What do I want from others – or maybe one other in particular? Respect or love? Am I asking for the one because, deep down, I daren't ask for the other?

And when we've acquired our hard-won independence, what do we long to do with it? This seems to me the point where Paul's two maxims become one. We carry our own loads, and become independent, for one reason and purpose above all others: and that reason is, so that we may learn to bear other people's burdens. We become independent, in order that, when we love, it may come genuinely out of care and concern for the other, not our own need to be noticed and needed. We don't carry other people's every-day burdens. That would show a lack of respect for them. Instead we carry another person's burdens precisely when they have made a mess of their life and the life of those around them. In the end independence leaves us alone in the world. It can't give us the relationships that truly enrich and shape and transform our lives. Independence is fine, but the right kind of dependence is beautiful.

And so it's a good and healthy thing that one day a year we all celebrate Independence Day. But the Christian gospel is that God never has an independence day. The gospel is that God is never independent of us. God meets us precisely in the most dependent forms of tiny baby in a manger and naked dying man on a cross. And God meets us when we are most dependent – when we have become a terrible and shameful burden to others. It's a fine thing to celebrate Independence Day, and the respect that comes from it, one day a year, on one condition: that for the other 364 days of the year, we celebrate our dependence on God and our dependence on one another. Because that's more than respect. That's love. And that's what Paul calls the law of Christ.