

A Homily/Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Robert R. Hansel on Independence Day, the Sixth Sunday after Pentecost, July 4, 2010 at The Chapel of St. Mark in Port Royal, South Carolina.

## Citizens of Heaven

A constant and recurring problem for all of us who belong to the Christian Church is that we are **aliens**. Aliens, of course, are very much in the news these days, especially since Arizona has outlawed them. I'm not sure whether we're legal or illegal aliens, but—whichever—we understand ourselves in a very important sense to be “in this world” but not “of this world.” As St. Paul puts it, we are “Citizens of Heaven.” What that means is that we find ourselves living in the United States of America (or Russia or Ghana or Venezuela or wherever) and certainly wanting to be full and responsible citizens of that particular geographical entity but, at the same time, holding an ultimate allegiance to the Kingdom of God.

Now, everything works just fine as long as there is a basic congruence, when our nation seems to be on-track as what some folks think of as a “Christian nation.” The problem arises, of course, when the laws and standards of our earthly nation differ from what we see as the standards that God expects of us as Christians. Which voice do we hear and obey?

That's not an issue at all for **some** who are Christians. There are those who understand the Christian Faith in a different way than do most of us here. For some folks the word “Christian” doesn't mean anything different than the word “American.” To them the terms are pretty much synonymous; it just means that we can feel good about our prejudices by claiming that they were God-given in the first place. You all know what I'm talking about: the squeaky clean sort who attend small Christian colleges for small Christians. In the narrow minds of many Bible-belters, anyone who is not white, Anglo-Saxon and Protestant doesn't really belong in this country anyway. How to live as a Christian in the good old USA means buying in completely. You can hear everyday on the South Carolina radio airways from the “our way or the highway bunch, the “America-Love it or leave it” crowd. That sort of American Shintoism, unfortunately has become exactly what the very word “Christian” all too often conjures up in our society these days.

But I'm not talking about such a shallow understanding of what it means to be a Christian. I'm thinking about those who take their “Heavenly citizenship” seriously, who truly wrestle with trying to square their beliefs with their politics—those who seem often to be crossways of their culture. The conflicts range over all sorts of issues and decisions. The nation declares war—but we claim to serve the Prince of Peace. The economy says that competition is the name of the game—but we always want to reach out in compassion to those who always seem to be at the bottom of the heap socially and financially. Our country says everybody can carry a gun—but we consider it wrong ever to harm or kill. Our nation says we have to drill for oil to keep industry going—but we believe that nothing should be done about the risks despoiling or destroying God's precious gift of creation. Those are just a few examples of why many people tend to see us who think of ourselves as “progressive” Christians as being out-of-step, as “bleeding hearts”, hopeless idealists, or maybe even “communist sympathizers.”

When a national holiday like this Fourth of July Independence Day comes along—when everyone else seems able uncritically and unreservedly to celebrate the greatness of our nation—is it even possible for us, as Christians, to respond and participate fully, with **no** reservations? That's what I want to spend some time this morning thinking about—looking at the distinctive perspective of those of us who, on one hand, love our nation and its heritage but, at the same time, know ourselves to be accountable to an even higher authority as “Citizens of Heaven.” In short, is it possible to hold onto BOTH; to live proudly as an American and also humbly as a follower of Christ?

Well, to take all the suspense and mystery out of it, I'll just tell you right now that my answer to that question is “Yes.” Maybe I should say, “Yes, but” is probably closer to what I actually think.

Anyone who is seeking to be a loyal citizen of the United States and also a faithful citizen of heaven needs to recognize that the one acts as a counter-balance to the other, the two always in a sort of tension. Tension, of course, is not a bad thing if it helps us be emotionally objective. Tension can help us be a little bit critical, not settling for obvious and, too often, superficial conclusions. Thinking as a citizen of heaven can help us look at our participation as citizens of our nation in deeper more complete ways that go beyond mere flag-waving.

I'd like to suggest for your consideration this morning a three-pronged or three-dimensional notion of what it means to be a loyal American. If we are going to be thoughtful and responsible citizens, it seems to me that we need to keep these three aspects of our government and politics always in our minds

1. APPRECIATION OF THE PAST
2. REALISM CONCERNING THE PRESENT
3. EXPECTATION FOR THE FUTURE

Let me say just a little about each of those dimensions.

By “**appreciation of the past**”, I mean to say that we need to have a positive regard for all those things that make our national history something we should be proud of. Insofar as this nation has given opportunity to millions, insofar as this country has sacrificed to help people oppressed or victimized, and insofar as we have protected the rights and freedom of everyone to follow the dictates of personal conscience—all that should be appreciated and honored. But, at the same time, there are chapters in our national heritage that are not so positive, things we would have to be blind or dishonest to ignore. Our brutal extermination of American Indians, the institution of slavery, and our exploitation of Immigrant people are issues that we have to acknowledge and regret. Papering those dark chapters in the American story may make us feel better but it's just not the truth we have to face. While we can appreciate the way our country

has come through such challenges, we are preserved by our honesty from worshipping the past and longing for the “good old days” that, in truth, weren't always that good.

**Realism concerning the present** means that, as citizens of heaven, we are shielded against the arrogance of thinking that one individual or one political party has a monopoly on the truth. If we are to address today's concerns and challenges we will have to learn from and draw upon the insight, skill, and experience of ALL our people. We will have to respect one another—even in our differences—and pull together if we are to preserve the environment, feed the hungry, and bring justice and freedom to those who are still enslaved all around the world. It's only in recent years that we have begun to get a realistic picture of what it means to be part of the world's population, to recognize that this planet is like a spaceship and we are all passengers. Whatever impacts one affects us all. We have lots of good things to enjoy in this wonderful nation but, then, we can't just ignore the heavy threat of unemployment, drugs, and violence. Realism is the balance that keeps us from the false extremes either of unfounded optimism or total cynicism. We are travelers on a road together and, if we are to reach our destination, we must be realistic about how to use and share our resources because we either all are going to make it or none of us will make it.

**Expectation for the future** is the quality of anticipation, faith that the future will be there for those who are trusting and hardworking enough to press on without fear. As citizens of heaven we trust that God has not created this world and its people with no purpose. The vision of a world in harmony, a world dedicated to unity, peace, and compassion fills us with expectation. No matter how dark things may appear, we believe that God calls us to move forward in hope. Expectation is the quality that convinces us that the best years are still ahead of us and, unlike Chicken Little, we remain convinced that the sky is NOT falling. For us, the world and our nation are constantly being renewed and transformed every single day so that change, far from being something to be avoided and feared, is the normal state of existence. To those who would dread each day as “the end of the world as we know it,” our response is, “Yes, thank God!”

**Appreciation** of the past, **Realism** concerning the present, and **Expectation** for the future—these are the perspectives that characterize those of us who consider ourselves to be citizens of heaven as well as citizens of this nation. I commend those viewpoints to you this day of national celebration as crucially important attitudes. Without them we are likely to lapse into complacency and self-deception. With them, we have the balance needed to see ourselves as we really are and to move forward together as a people truly united.

In the midst of all the celebration on this Fourth of July let us gather around this altar as citizens of Heaven and give thanks for the Good News that our inheritance of the Kingdom of God begins here and now, enabling and strengthening us give our very best to this nation and this world.