

Mount Olive Lutheran Church
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The Fourth Sunday after Pentecost
July 2, 2006
Ezekiel 17:22-24

“Church and State”

by Pastor Mark E. Wangerin

Introduction

In just a few days, on July 4th, our nation will celebrate the 230th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence—a date that is usually seen as the birth of our nation. Now as the statement on the bulletin cover for today reminds us, Independence Day is not a liturgical celebration, but it is fitting to take note of the founding of our nation and to thank God for the blessings which He has bestowed upon us. The special order of service for today and many of the hymns emphasize this.

Yet the Scripture readings for today place their emphasis in a different direction. It is not contradictory to our observance of Independence Day, but it does point us to another important aspect of our lives. In recent years there has been an increasing debate about “church and state” in our country and the relationship of one to another. It is my prayer that our Scripture readings for this day will help us gain a greater understanding of “church and state” and allow us to grow in our faith by the working of the Holy Spirit. May He grant us wisdom as we heed His Word this day.

I. State or Church?

To begin our discussion for today, we look at the text in the Old Testament lesson. Now to completely understand this reading, I would encourage you to read the entire 17th chapter of Ezekiel. In reading the chapter, you might think that the words of the text apply to the state. In this case, the nation of Israel. For the preceding verses speak in the words of a parable about the rebellion of the king of Judah against Babylon, his attempt to make an alliance with Egypt, and the utter failure of that attempt. The words that immediately precede our text are words of judgment against the king and his people for their failure to keep faith with the oath they had spoken. These words of the prophet find their fulfillment in the events leading up to the destruction of Jerusalem and the deposing of the last kings of Judah by Nebuchadnezzar. They are words of judgment against the state.

But in the immediate words of the text, the emphasis shifts most decidedly. While using the same imagery of a cedar tree, it is the Lord who does something great and marvelous. “I myself will take a shoot from the very top of a cedar and plant it; I will break off a tender sprig from its topmost shoots and plant it on a high and lofty mountain. On the mountain heights of Israel I will plant it.” This prophetic vision points us to the true work of the Lord in redemption and salvation. It is a messianic prophecy, using the imagery of a shoot and branch, the imagery of Isaiah and Zechariah. The Lord will place his branch on the highest mountain and in him will grow a splendid cedar tree. We might say here that in Christ our Lord the tree will sprout and grow. In this imagery is the church growing from the root and

branch and twig who is Christ Himself.

And the Lord Jesus speaks of the same thing in the Gospel lesson for this day: "This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. ²⁷ Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. ²⁸ All by itself the soil produces grain-- first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head. ²⁹ As soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come." ³⁰ Again he said, "What shall we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe it? ³¹ It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest seed you plant in the ground. ³² Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds of the air can perch in its shade." We can say with certainty that these parables speak of the work of the Lord in his Word as he leads his people to put their faith in Jesus who is the mustard seed--to the world something that seems small and insignificant, but by whose suffering and death and glorious resurrection, life and glory and peace are ours. The young twig of the prophecy of Ezekiel has become a great and lofty cedar tree.

And through the centuries the Holy Christian Church has grown by the power of the Holy Spirit working in the word and calling us to faith for even as St. Paul reminds us in the Epistle for this day, our eternal dwelling place is not in this world, no matter how much it may seem that is the case. For our eternal dwelling place is at home with the Lord in glory. Truly we live by faith and not by sight. It is in the church that we find our salvation in the one who is the center and source and hope.

II. A Word About the State

Now we have not said much about the state have we? The Scripture lessons for today would seemingly direct our attention to our spiritual fatherland, to the hope of glory and to our eternal dwelling place not made with hands. But there is more to be said. As many of you know, I took some time last month for some travel to different places and from my experiences at the beginning and the end of the month, I would hope to share with you a few words of application. At the beginning of June I spent a weekend in New York City. It is interesting that the text for today has reference to Babylon, because I must admit that descriptive name came to mind on more than one occasion while there. Now not particularly in a bad way. For New York is a polyglot place, of many different peoples. You can hear many languages spoken on the streets. But now a question. How many of you have spent some time on a Saturday night in Times' Square in New York? That is an experience. Thousands, perhaps tens of thousands of people all walking somewhere, doing something. But what struck me was how aimless and lost it all appeared to be. There appeared to be very little purpose in it except to get from one night spot to another. And the thought did cross my mind, how many in that great crowd were lost? The power and the riches and the glitz of the state are not always all they are supposed to be. There is a most desperate need for people to hear the message of Christ, to learn of the life that is theirs in him. The following

Sunday morning in New York, I made my rounds to four different churches. And the sermon I heard on Pentecost Sunday in one of them is a reminder to us that the church also needs to be kept centered in its true life and in the truth of God's word. Because that is not what I heard there. It is a tragic reality of today that when the world, the state, needs to hear a clear and unambiguous message from the church, it often hears just the opposite. Pray for faithful messengers to proclaim God's truth.

Just last week, I took another trip for one day to Chicago. I visited the exhibit on King Tut at the Field Museum. That was another experience as well. And while there another thought struck me. You see all the beauty and intricate handiwork of the items that were buried in King Tutankhamun's tomb. They are priceless items of gold and jewels. But they are from a culture and a kingdom utterly lost. Utterly lost in two ways: first, the multitudinous gods of Egypt could do nothing for the young king. Second, he and his empire were lost in the sands of time. Indeed, the only reason thousands of visitors could today be viewing these over three thousand year old artifacts was because they had been completely buried and hidden from the roving bands of grave robbers so intent over the centuries on pillaging anything of value from the graves of Egypt. How utterly fleeting are the things of this world.

Conclusion

And so on these days as our country celebrates July 4th, may we pray for the peace of the city wherein the Lord our God has placed us. May we thank God for the blessings which have been bestowed upon this land and its people, most assuredly the blessing of freedom of worship and association which allows the church to exist and to proclaim the Gospel in this place and in this time. But the church is not dependent upon the state. Indeed, it may very well be the other way around, the existence of the state is predicated on the life of the church. For the sobering thought is that we too may one day as a nation be buried in the sands of time, if we forget the Lord our God. So we pray as we sang in the hymn just before the sermon:

God has called you out of darkness
Into His most marvelous light
Brought His truth to life within you
Turned your blindness into sight.
Let your light so shine around you
That God's name is glorified
And all find fresh hope and purpose
In Christ Jesus crucified.

In Jesus' Name. Amen.