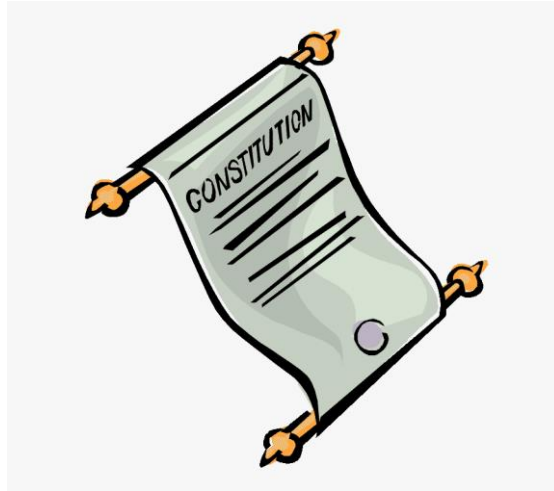


## The Heads of State



Matthew 11:16 "Jesus said to the crowd, 'To what will I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to one another, 'We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn.' For John (the Baptist) came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'He has a demon'; the Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!' Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds."

On this Fourth of July Weekend, I am very much aware of the peculiarities of the Anglican Church's requirements about exactly who and what we pray for each Sunday in the Prayers of the People. For example, we are required by rubric to pray for the Universal Church each week, for its members and its mission, and we are required to pray each week for all those who suffer or are in trouble, or for the departed. Over the years sometimes

these inclusions have been controversial. Praying for the dead was hotly disputed during the Reformation, for instance, as was prayers to the saints. We are also required to pray for 'the Nation and those in authority'. This requirement clearly goes back to the days when the monarchy was the usual form of government, and when people believed that the monarchs ruled by the divine right of kings, that is, that God gave the crown their earthly authority, and that therefore we ought to obey them as one obeys God, and pray that God would continue to bless them in their rule over us.

We, Americans, however, have long a history of resisting centralized authority. For instance, during the American Revolution when the required prayers for King George of England were read in the historic Anglican Church in downtown Boston called King's Chapel, the congregation was known to whop and holler week after week and even threw tomatoes at the prayer leader in their disdain for the King and his taxes. After the Declaration of Independence was signed, the Rector of King's Chapel simply drew a line through the mention of 'the King' in the 1662 Book of Common Prayer and wrote instead "the President." This was the beginning of the new American Prayerbook and a new way of thinking. And today you can still see that originally altered text proudly displayed in a glass case at the back of that church.

But that was not the only time that praying for the head of State has proved controversial in our nation. During the Civil War, for example, after the secession of Virginia from the United States, the Rector of Trinity Church in Portsmouth, Virginia, where I later served as Rector, began to substitute in the Prayers of the People the name of Jefferson Davis, the President of the Confederate States, where previously the congregation had prayed for Abraham Lincoln.

Soon thereafter followed the Battle of Hampton Roads, where the first ironclad ships, the Monitor and the Merrimac, famously fought each other as the Confederacy tried to break the United States blockade of this strategic Southern port. When the South failed in its efforts to break the blockade, many of the wealthier families of the Hampton Roads fled further south to safety before the impending invasion of northern troops, which did indeed follow soon thereafter. The Rector of Trinity Church, Portsmouth, the elder Reverend John Wingfield, left his son, the younger Reverend John Wingfield, behind as the priest to care for the remaining flock of Trinity, while he and his wife fled with other members of the congregation. Shortly thereafter the Union troops did indeed occupy the town and its important navy shipyard, and the younger Reverend John Wingfield even dropped references to Jefferson Davis in the Prayers of the People as 'a

courtesy to the Northern troops,' he said, as northern soldiers were now filling his pews on Sunday.

Soon, however, the commanding U.S. General Joseph Butler demanded that the priest pray in the Prayers of the People for Abraham Lincoln as President. The younger Reverend John Wingfield was perturbed at this demand, and declared that Virginia had legally seceded from the Union, and that Abraham Lincoln was thus the head of a foreign state, and that he would no more pray for Abraham Lincoln than for Queen Victoria of England, whereupon the younger Reverend John Wingfield was promptly arrested, thrown into jail for sedition, and made to publicly sweep the streets of Norfolk, Virginia, daily, in prison garb and with ball and chain, all because he refused to pray for Abraham Lincoln in the Prayers of the People, until the public outcry grew so great, even in the North, that General Butler removed him to simple house arrest, where he stayed for the remainder of the war.

Praying for the head of state, can be difficult at times and uncomfortable on occasion, and raises important theological questions about earthly authority and government. Why are we required to pray for 'the nation and those in authority' each week? What do we mean by it? For the prayer book requirements have significantly changed over the years. In the 1928 Prayerbook, for instance, the prayers of the people began with

this line "Let us pray for the whole state of Christ's Church." We prayed only for the Christian Church, both here and above. We also prayed specifically only for "Christian Rulers, that they may truly and impartially administer justice, to the punishment of wickedness and vice, and to the maintenance of thy true religion and virtue." But what about other rulers, who might not be Christian, should we not pray for them? The 'new' Prayerbook in 1976 altered the introduction to the Prayers of the People in Rite I to read "Let us pray for the whole state of Christ's Church and the world." And we also beseeched God there "to rule the hearts of those who bear the authority of government in this and every land, that they may be led to wise decisions and right actions for the welfare and peace of the world." We are no longer just praying for the Church, but now we also pray each week for the world. And we are no longer praying just for Christian rulers but for all those who bear the authority of government in this and every land. Rite II uses a variety of different words and phrases to meet the requirement of always offering intercession for "the Nation and those in authority" as well as for "the welfare of the world and the concerns of the local community." We have broadened the reach of our prayers in successive generations, thank God.

In the midst of this Election year, I urge each and every one of you to think carefully about our prayers for those in

authority. Whoever is elected President in November, I assure you that we will pray for him by name in our Prayers of the People, as the President of the United States, as we have been doing. But our President is not a monarch, and he does not rule by divine right, so we should not, I think, pray only for the President as many congregations do, simply substituting the name of the President where once we prayed for the King. The authority of government in this land does not reside in one individual, indeed it does not even reside in one branch of government. Therefore I think it is important in the Prayers of the People that we always remember to pray for the members of the Congress and the Courts as well, the Legislative and Judicial parts of our government, as we have three branches of government in this country that exercise a balance of powers amongst themselves. Likewise, we also have somewhat independent State and Local governments that rule over us, and thus we should remember them in our Prayers of the People, our First Selectman and our Governor, perhaps even the members of the Board of Selectmen and the State legislature or the local courts. Indeed as you may have noticed, I have often added prayers for the Bishop of Rome and the Patriarch of Constantinople in our prayers for the Church, as we are all part of one Body. Similarly, I have added prayers for António Guterres, the Secretary General of the United Nations and for the

representatives of that august body as a reminder that we are also citizens of the world, and not just this nation, or state, or village.

But the real power of our form of civil government is not with any of those people. It is with the voters, with those citizens who take their civic responsibilities seriously. Therefore perhaps, we should also pray for the eligible voters in this country, for they exercise the real authority in our nation, by which all the others govern us in this democracy. It is their independence that we celebrate this weekend. So when we pray today for 'the nation and those in authority' then, let us remember that we, the voters, are the ones who have the ultimate authority, and responsibility, and let us pray then that we may be led to wise decisions and right actions for the welfare and peace of the world. AMEN.