

## The Divine Right of Kings



2 Samuel 5:3 "So all the elders of Israel came to the king at Hebron; and King David made a covenant with them at Hebron before the LORD, and they anointed David king over Israel."

As we Americans celebrate today the 245<sup>th</sup> anniversary of this country's signing of our Declaration of Independence from Great Britain, let us pause, as I mentioned in last week's sermon, to note how seriously divided this nation was at the time of the Revolution. When the Declaration of Independence was signed, historians suspect that probably less than half of the American people actually favored such a radical move. While few in this country may have been ardent monarchists, there were still enough loyalists in this country to supply 40,000 American colonists to the King's army in the Revolutionary War, 40,000 fighting against those whom we call 'patriots,' while still larger numbers, an estimated 70,000 loyalists, simply fled the country to Canada,

Nova Scotia and the West Indies. The American Revolution was not a simple case of us versus them, of Americans versus the British; this was the case of us versus us. We were a seriously divided nation at the time, and much of the conflict surrounding those events was religious in nature, which may explain while more than half the Anglican clergy in this country fled. For many Americans, the Declaration of Independence was contrary to the teachings of the Bible and was a violation of the Scripturally established doctrine of the Divine Right of Kings, the doctrine that kings and queens are given the responsibility to rule God's people by God, and that rebellion against them is forbidden. It is treasonous.

The doctrine of the Divine Right of Kings had been part of the Christian Church's teaching from the very beginning. Throughout the Bible, kings were seen as God's anointed representatives on earth. Each of them has been given his or her throne by God Himself, and to rebel against their authority is to rebel against God. The prophet Samuel, for example, declared on one occasion that "The Lord forbid that I should . . . stretch forth mine hand against (the king), seeing that he is the anointed of the Lord" (1 Samuel 24:6).

Nor did the Bible support this newfangled idea of democracy, of some kind of wider representation. There's nothing supporting democracy in the Scriptures. Read chapter 16 of the Book of Numbers, if we you doubt me. There, 250 leaders of Israel

approached Moses and his brother Aaron, asking that the existing theocracy, with Moses as their sole leader, be replaced by a more democratic governing structure, in which power would be shared more broadly. These leaders felt that the whole nation of Israel was holy, all of them, and therefore they should share in governing themselves rather than being led by a single individual (Moses) who had all power to himself. In short, they advocated a transition from a kind of monarchy, with Moses recognized as God's anointed one, to some kind of democracy or shared leadership.

What did God think of this idea? God's immediate response to their request, according to the Scriptures, was to destroy the whole nation of Israel, with the exception of Moses and Aaron. But Moses, we are told, pleaded with God that he spare the people. So, God simply opened up cracks in the earth so that the two leaders of this group, and their wives, and their children, and all their possessions fell into the cracks in the earth. God then closed the ground over them so that the victims were buried alive and perished. Then, as if that was not enough, God burned alive the remaining 250 leaders with fire from heaven. Thus, on the next day, the surviving Israelites rebelled against Moses and Aaron for such a massive loss of life. All they asked for was to share in the leadership of the people. Again, God wanted to respond by killing all of the people, except for Moses and Aaron. And Moses again persuaded God to spare the people, so that in the end God

simply sent a plague amongst them, after which an additional 14,700 people lost their lives from the plague with which God punished them. This ended any thoughts of a move towards a more democratic representation among the people of Israel under Moses.

In the New Testament, in the *Epistle to the Romans*, St. Paul wrote that earthly rulers, even though they may not be Christians, have been appointed by God to their places of power for the purpose of punishing evildoers. "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities;" wrote Paul, "for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists authority resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur damnation" (Romans 13:1-2). The First Letter of St. Peter goes on to advise its readers to "submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake: whether it be to the king, as supreme; or his governors, as sent by God to punish those who do wrong and to praise those who do right." (1 Peter 2.13-14) Monarchs were placed on their thrones for God's purposes, according to the Scriptures, and to oppose their authority is to oppose God.

Even Jesus could be quoted supporting the institution of monarchy, when for instance he declared "Render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's, and unto God that which is God's" (Luke 20:25). Or more interestingly, in the parable of the ten talents, as recorded in Luke's version of the story, where a nobleman goes off

to a distant country to gain royal power for himself and leaves his money with his slaves. Upon his return, one of the slaves who was afraid of the king returned the one talent he had been given, which the king snatches from the slave and gives it to another. Then the king declares 'But as for these enemies of mine who did not want me to be king over them --- bring them here and slaughter them in my presence.' (Luke 19)

St. Augustine, the famed Latin Church Father, elaborated on the biblical tradition in his famous work *The City of God*. While Augustine recognizes that the City of Man and the City of God may stand at cross-purposes at times, both of them have been instituted by God and both of them serve God's ultimate will. Even though the City of Man --- the world of secular government --- may seem ungodly and to be governed by sinners, even so, Augustine wrote, it has been divinely placed on Earth for the protection of the City of God.

Richard Hooker, the great Anglican theologian, eloquently expounded upon the Divine Right of Kings during the final years of the Elizabethan era. King James I of England believed that he was ordained to serve "the weal of the people" (as defined by the king), but not "the will of the people," as defined by them. Thus, this doctrine of the Divine Right of kings was scripturally well-established and an unquestionable part of the Christian Tradition --- at least until the American Revolution. So then, we shouldn't

be surprised that "Americanism" was later condemned as a heresy by the Roman Catholic Church, because of its insistence upon individual initiative as against established authority.

Thus, as we look back upon our Revolutionary history, let us not imagine that the choices were clear-cut, nor let us imagine that there was anything like unanimity among the colonists. Even though two-thirds of the men who signed the Declaration of Independence were Anglican Churchmen, most of the Anglican clergy, as noted, had fled the country at the outbreak of the Revolutionary War. By the time the war ended there were a few Episcopal priests left in New England, only four in Massachusetts, one in New Hampshire, and none in Rhode Island. It is interesting to remember that Samuel Seabury from Connecticut, our first American bishop had served as a chaplain in the British army during the war, while the Reverend Peter Muhlenberg of New York, an Anglican priest, was one of George Washington's Generals and actually led his brigade against Lord Cornwallis at Brandywine. So, in 1776, this country and this church was seriously divided amongst itself with that Declaration of Independence.

Over the centuries, the Christian Church has witnessed a variety of such dramatic social upheavals, and each time there is a divisive issue at hand, a good portion of the Church opposes the changes on high moralistic principles, with biblical authority and Christian tradition on their side. The Christian Church once

clearly argued from its Scriptures and from its long history of Tradition not only for the Divine Right of Kings, but also for the institution of slavery, and for the subjugation of woman, and for the prohibition of usury, that is the charging of interest in the lending of money. Few Christians though would argue for any of these practices today, though there is clear biblical and traditional authority to support them all. Thus, we live, and we learn about our cultural biases and the shortcomings of our forebears, and we change our traditions as we grow more in our understanding of ourselves, our faith, and our God.

So, I remind you of that past history on this Independence Day as new issues rise to the surface in the life of the Church and in the life of our nation, issues that often divide us against one another, sometimes bitterly, sometimes violently. Since I was ordained 40+ years ago, I have witnessed passionate fights in the Church over the 'new' Prayer Book, women's ordination, openly gay clergy, Islamophobia, gay marriage, trans' rights, and so, so much more. Beware I tell you, always of those self-righteous Christians who will try to argue this or that position based firmly upon clear scriptural authority or the undisputed traditional practices of the Church. For there is obviously a larger guiding principle in the life and teachings of the Church than simply the Bible and Tradition.

Perhaps it is this: "Hear what our Lord Jesus Christ saith:  
Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all  
thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great  
commandment. And the second is like unto it: Thou shalt love thy  
neighbor as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the Law  
and the Prophets." AMEN