

## Two Wars of Independence

The celebration this morning of Independence Day, and the commemoration of the martyrdom of the two foremost apostles, allow us to make a very interesting comparison. On one hand, a colony of English citizens was obliged to separate from the mother country by force of arms. I think it would be safe to say that Americans had sought many other means of settling the developing tensions with the Crown, but had been met with a consistently repressive response that increased with time. Only then did Patrick Henry's famous oration find responsive hearts among his listeners. It was said that they sat for a long period of stunned silence after he finished, so powerful was the speech's effect.

The two famous disciples of Christ who are our focus today also fought a war of independence, but it was of a very different type. The enemy was invisible, and cosmic, not limited in any way to a geographical location. Furthermore, his defeat had already been accomplished by their Master and Leader, and not through force of arms. St. Paul made good use of military terminology when he described what actually had happened when Christ died on the cross: *And having spoiled principalities and powers, he made a shew of them openly, triumphing over them in it* (Col. 3:15). Paul's first century readers would have instantly perceived the vivid analogy the apostle was making between Christ's triumph over Satan and his evil angels, and the victory processions of Roman forces, when defeated foes were led for public enjoyment in a humiliating parade through the streets of the capital.

Five years after the commencement of the Revolutionary War, British forces under Gen. Cornwallis were also forced to surrender to the superior presence of their American opponents. The vanquished British general, who claimed illness, had his sword carried to the ceremony of surrender as a sign of defeat. It was a great victory for the Continental Army. But every subsequent generation has had to be prepared to defend the liberty that had been secured during the War of Independence. It is a defense that has periodically required the great sacrifice of injury and loss of life for the preservation of the vision that began with those who had possessed the courage to take the only step available to them to win that which they considered most precious.

How wonderfully alike are these two conflicts: one fought to gain independence from the oppressive tyranny of imperial rule, and the other waged by our Lord to *destroy* an unseen foe who Scripture says *had the power of death, that is, the devil*, in order to *deliver them who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage* (Heb. 2:14b, 15). Both conflicts required the yielding of that which is the greatest possession in all the world: life itself.

The two great apostles we honor today were called into the same arena of conflict, but in imitation of their Great Commander, it would not –could not-- be won by military might, for it is a battle of an entirely different order. Both saints knew that the Son of God alone could prevail in a struggle of this magnitude. It was Peter who would later write that only *the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot . . .* (1 Pe. 1:19) was sufficient to the task. But many decades after the crucifixion, after lives filled with selfless service to Christ, service at the price of great suffering, both men would follow their exalted Head in delivering themselves up to martyrdom. It is generally thought that both men lost their lives in the same year, perhaps A.D. 64, Paul by decapitation, and Peter by upside down crucifixion, under the terrible persecutions initiated by the wicked and cruel Roman emperor Nero. They were among countless thousands of Christians similarly killed, part of a tradition of martyrdom which continues to this very day.

We do well to remember that these very men in their writings, preserved for us in Scripture, often used military metaphors to describe the Christian life. St. Paul, addressing his disciple Timothy as a general might well counsel his second in command, wrote: *No man that warreth entangleth himself with the affairs of this life; that he may please him who hath chosen him to be a soldier* (2 Tim. 2:4). Timothy had been drafted through his baptism and conversion, and, like Paul, he had become a man under orders. Peter also expressed himself in such terms: *Forasmuch then as Christ hath suffered for us in the flesh, arm yourselves likewise with the same mind. Arm yourselves!* The Greek word literally means to equip yourself as with a weapon. The New Testament is filled with such lingo. Elsewhere Paul declares: *For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war after the flesh: (For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty through God to the pulling down of strong holds;) Casting down imaginations, and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ* (2 Cor. 10:3-5).

Now what does this all mean, when it comes to us? It requires training to wage effective warfare. There is perhaps no more ridiculous sight than that of a puny would-be warrior holding his weapon by the wrong end, facing away from the battle, helmet covering his eyes, setting off by himself at the sound of the trumpet! We gather here at church, at least in part, to be trained for spiritual warfare which is the continuance in our day of that losing battle Satan has waged against God's people for millennia. Our weaponry is God's Word, along with the graces we receive through prayer, our fellowship, and the sacraments. We too have been ushered into the are-

na of conflict, whether we like it or not. It is simply impossible to be a true Christian and for it to be otherwise than this.

There are a variety of positions in the field, but, as in the case of many wars, few want to occupy the front lines. And perhaps not all are necessarily called to do so. But a holy life will place you there. Those who have pared down their lives to the bare essentials of what is required to be the Lord's soldier will be taught the high standards that such a life requires, and experience the leanness, the loneliness, the sense of separation that is entailed. As St. Paul confessed, *I die daily* (1 Cor. 15:31). He was continually rehearsing in every circumstance for that which would one day be physically actualized.

Our nation was founded through the exercise of heroic virtues. These ideals could never have been mere talking points, something to just simply sit around and dream about, or presented in virtual form to be watched passively in hours and hours of TV depictions. They simply *had* to be lived out; there was far, far too much that depended upon it being so.

Perhaps we have been lulled to sleep. We do not realize what's at stake in the threats we face both as a nation which has spurned its moral base, and a church which has lost sight of eternity and the basic notion that actions, decisions, have consequences; that even *inaction* is an action.

We must stir ourselves up. If we wish to march with the Master, we must continually examine our qualifications. Only those who have fought well will be able to recount the details that have contributed to the inevitable triumph that belongs to Christ's people.

Lord, make us among them.

*In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.*