

SERMON- Independence Day (A)

Charles R. Cowherd

~~Deuteronomy 10:17-21~~

Hebrews 11:8-16

Matthew 5:43-48

St. Timothy's (Herndon)

July 5, 2026

~~Psalm 145 or 145:1-9~~

OPENING:

In order to reserve my ability to editorialize throughout the rest of the service, I am going to keep my sermon short. Or try to.

That would NOT have been the case, of course, in the time of 1776 or 1789 and onward. In fact, the entire preaching task was fundamentally different to what we are used to now.

PREACHING BACK THEN

It was more science than art, back then, that's one way to put it.

The focus for a sermon was the sharing of doctrine that was known and settled (if indeed hard for you laity to understand.) The purpose was to reiterate the content of the doctrine. The purpose was, so to speak, to "deliver the goods."

Now the elocution and delivery were important (rhetoric was highly valued).

Story about the 3 tier colonial pulpit VS. the crossing ("preaching without notes.")

Personal inspiration and style were LESS valued, more suspicious, as was emotion.

There was also a "Book of Homilies" that was authorized for the minister to deliver.

It was almost an encyclopedia where the learned pastor would go to his library, look up the appropriate topic in the index, and deliver it, accordingly, word for word.

So it's more of a *modern* phenomenon, and by that I mean the last 300 years, this idea of the preacher, who relies on the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, who combines personal study with his individualized gifts, and the needs of the congregation. This is a Romantic (capital R) style of art where a divine spark exists which is dying artistically to get out.

The old way might sound dreadfully boring, but it was just a different dynamic.

Think about it this way. We have all been at a concert when the leader of the band announces: "This is off our new album" and the crowd might groan or roll their eyes. They want the musicians to "Play the hits" and (really) play them as the audiences knows them. It is helpful sometimes, indeed, to hear what you know and you like and you want to hear again, at a concert or in a sermon.

I love preaching, I have a high view of it. It takes me time to prepare, I enjoy it. I would hate to have to deliver a pre-packaged deliverable (that was why by the way that other denominations during the 2nd Great Awakening were eating our Episcopal lunch because of the high quality of preaching among Baptists, etc.)

But I do, and you know this, quote liberally from other preachers and scholars and take stories from elsewhere. I reuse my own sermons and I use others. I attribute it all, rest assured, in the manuscript that you can find online but there is so much out there, and I don't know how much divine inspiration I have every week.

LITURGY

Notice also the *placement* of the Sermon this morning and the service.

In our normal liturgy, it is set off immediately *after* the Gospel; you have this rising tension of each lesson, then the Gospel with everyone standing (as Jesus' words and actions are proclaimed) and you continue to stand as the star of the show (the preacher!) shuffles to the pulpit, at which point after a prayer you are finally allowed to sit.

The sermon, then, is a response to the Gospel proclaimed, the climax of the Liturgy of the Word, just as the Fraction is the climax of the Liturgy of the Table.

The Preacher "breaks upon the Word of God" just as the Priest "breaks upon" the Bread.

Today, instead, we had the Gospel, then... the Creed. Usually that's after the sermon, where the Creed kind of steadies us after the oratorical brilliance of the preacher. Today the Creed comes after the Gospel—this shows the confidence and importance placed on the doctrine/ the historical faith of the church. The Response to Scripture is not: we need it explained, but rather "YES, we got it... we all should reply with the creedal formula" rather than the sermon which might lead to more questions.

ALSO, you have this curious rubric after the creed, before the sermon, on pg. 7 of your leaflet. It looks like what we would call the "Announcements" in lengthy detail. This furthers severs the Sermon from the Reading of Scripture (making it almost an afterthought... in fact, sometimes in yesteryear the sermon would take place outside the Mass.... Or even not at all. It was indeed so infrequent that Friars in Medieval days had to revive it as a church custom.)

The rubric for the Announcements demonstrate the role that the Church played in society "back then"→ the Church was not only a religious organization, but a community bulletin board, the Town Crier, the scheduler and announcer of comings & goings, who is getting married and buried, a Grand Central Station for gossip. Imagine no social media, no telephone, large distances between households, such that people came to Church to socialize and be socialized, to see and be seen. You can say "Not a good reason to come to church"

BUT story about Trinity NOLA/ EHS.

We recovered that sense of church, the need and longing for it during COVID... slightly. Sometimes I wish we had it more.

PIVOT:

Just to say a little about our holiday, I have been living in the world of 1776 and 1976 this last couple weeks and we don't live in that world.

Obviously, I think it's helpful to recall and remember and inhabit those worlds, because it allow us to live more faithfully into this one.

I have said this in my Semiquincentennial lectures every month about this moment in our history: I am struck by the differences in the tone between this commemoration and the Bicentennial 50 years ago (which I did not experience myself). Even though we as a nation were coming out of Watergate and Vietnam, there still was this sense of celebration and of unity and of the importance of marking the 200th in our national life and in our spiritual life. Gerald Ford—that faithful Episcopalian, he was a member at the church attached to the Seminary in Alexandria—happened to be President.

“Independence Day” was thus celebrated and made a feast day in the 1979 Book of Common Prayer.

This time around, we have ambivalence, questioning, confusion, anger. The reasons are legion.

The antidote for that yearning has been the 2026 World Cup—a display of international unity held in our backyard, and maybe Taylor Swift's wedding.

The antidote also is our Book of Common Prayer. Itself a revolutionary document.

The Prayer Book, the way that we worship and how we handle this dynamic between our church life and culture handles it in 4 ways:

This is what our Liturgy does for us, with us, and to us. Now and at any time.

1) Liturgy is Cross-Cultural: not a National Church. Jill Cox, Spanish-speaking service. Lord's Prayer in different languages. Book of Occasional Services. Music, but cannot be colonial. Awareness and sensitivity.

2) Liturgy is Contextual: It's specific to the congregation that is having it. KJV written not for all time but for Elizabeth audience. First BCP for a Tudor one. Liturgical inculturation adopts liturgy to local culture consistent with the Gospel. BCP 1979 introduced contemporary language. But Native Americans might have prayer to the 4 winds, music, Midwesterners have the peace and welcome at start.

Prayer C was for Star Wars, space Exploration, NZ prayer book, etc. Hip Hop Prayer Book.

3) Liturgy is Countercultural: Intercessory prayer challenges injustice and oppression. Focus on creation care.

Maybe we need to follow the rubrics more closely related to SILENCE in worship. Nowhere in our culture are things allowed to be silent! It's indicative of a mistake. Congregational singing with live accompaniment is countercultural. You are supposed to be good at singing. Only at birthdays and in the 7th inning stretch will Americans sing together. Not a concert, worship is about participation. None of us are good enough to come forward for communion. None of us are good enough singers, challenges the relentless rugged individualism of our culture

4) Finally Liturgy is Transcultural: BCP is the glue holding Anglican Communion together. The Bible does the same thing.

1979 BCP was an American Revolution BUT still even though there is Rite I and Rite II and even EOW and Prayers of the People that you can come up with on your own AND multiple Eucharistic. Still basic structure.

Word, Prayer, Table

Familiar flow with RCL. Baptism with water, Eucharist with bread and wine transcends any culture.¹

Our citizenship lives in many places but by virtue of that baptism, we transcend our earthly ones—our family ties, our national and ethnic ones—into something more remarkable and life-giving and holy.

AMEN

¹ Ruth A. Meyers. "Diversity and Common Worship" in Budwey, Stephanie A., Kevin Moroney, Sylvia A. Sweeney, and Samuel Torvend, eds. 2020. In *Spirit and Truth: A Vision of Episcopal Worship*. New York: Church Publishing, Chapter 5.