

**Sermon preached at the Church of the Holy Trinity, Philadelphia
on Sunday July 6th 2008 by the Reverend Alan Neale
“Are You Free?”**

Well, if you will pardon the source of the question and the British accent with which it is asked... “How was your Fourth?”

Around this time it often strikes me as a little ironic when I pray the collect for Independence Day... giving thanks for freedom (freedom originally from a distant, uncaring, demanding and tyrannical government) – but then I assure you all, I am so grateful to be here (even though I still enjoy the dubious pleasure of “taxation without representation”).

Around this time it often strikes me as a little confusing when I sing (with gusto) “My country ‘tis of thee” to the tune which once accompanied my singing of the words “God save our gracious Queen”... but then life is replete with fascinating and engaging contradictions and tensions.

But to ask the question again, “How was your Fourth?”. How did you celebrate, observe such a day of such significance?

We know what occupies some that day for, apparently, July 4th is one of the busiest single days for firefighters throughout the year... I guess alcohol and grills are not always the best companions!

We know that some watch fireworks though they may be so late and often “oohed and aahed” in drizzling rain... and is not wonderful news that Philadelphia is reckoned to provide the best firework display in the country... out shining, out exploding New York, Washington and Boston... Philadelphians, be proud.

Wendy and I observed the day by watching the HBO series “John Adams” based on the eponymous book by David McCullough. Yes, the whole series from 4pm to 1am... what an astounding production of what always seemed to be a difficult book to read; and what an exciting, winning, educative portrayal of John Adams and his times.

I would hope and pray that all of us spent some time reflecting on the nature of freedom – that it is costly, that it is fragile, that it is precious, that it is the longing and birthright of us all. “Man is born free,” opines Jean Jacques Rousseau in his Social Contract, “but everywhere is in chains”.

And to move from the sublime to the almost embarrassingly ridiculous, I cannot shake from my mind that oft-quoted question by Captain Peacock in the British television series “Are You Being Served?”... “Are you free?” and the unvarying answer by Mr. Humphries (having first confirmed a most signal absence of customers in the department store) “I’m free!”.

Without wanting to silence the lusty singing of patriotic hymns, without wanting to douse the fires of grills throughout this blessed country, without wanting to extinguish the fuse of thousands of fireworks... yes, without wanting to rain on any July 4th parade... it is surely appropriate and worthy that we ask this question of ourselves, “Are we... am I... free?”

Though a bonded servant of Abraham, the man (Genesis 24) knows an inner freedom as he performs his duties with dedication and responsibility.

Though suffering the bonds of grief, Isaac is free (sufficiently free) to recognize in Rebekah new love, new hope, new life.

Though surprised by joy and converted by grace, St. Paul shares with us (in Romans 7) what seems to be a daily (sometimes momentary) struggle to be free... “wretched man that I am, who will deliver me... who will set me free?”.

And though Jesus reveals to us (in Matthew 11) the unique joys and privileges of knowing Him and the Father, he confronts us with cold, hard facts of life... “we often carry heavy burdens”.

Time was (well, it's still in Rite I)... time was when before Holy Communion was administered and received the so-called "Comfortable Words" were read to the congregation... and these words included Matthew 11:28-30 "28Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. 29Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. 30For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light".

In these precious, powerful, comforting words Jesus our Lord speaks to us of the reality of our burdens, rest from our burdens and the call to return to our burdens.

"Come to me you that are carrying heavy burdens" – is there anyone in church today who feels that these words are irrelevant, pointless, redundant, unnecessary? Quite clearly these words resonated with St. Paul... listen to the Message translation of Romans 7:21-24 "*The moment I decide to do good, sin is there to trip me up. I truly delight in God's commands, but it's pretty obvious that not all of me joins in that delight. Parts of me covertly rebel, and just when I least expect it, they take charge. 24I've tried everything and nothing helps. I'm at the end of my rope. Is there no one who can do anything for me? Isn't that the real question?*"... "Are you free? Are you without burdens"... isn't that the real question? Friends, to be human is to accept the reality that we often carry onerous loads and feel sorely hindered... to deny this is probably to strengthen the shackles, increase the burdens that we bear... Jesus speaks to **the reality of our burdens**.

"Come to me and I will give you rest" – friends, there are times (essential times) when we need, urgently crave and require, **rest from our burdens**... to do this is not selfish, to do this is not escapism... to do this is to accept from Jesus a gift, to do this is to accept that we are not indispensable. Bishop Robinson writes this of his time at an inpatient facility for alcohol rehabilitation, "It's a bit like dying must be. Everything just stops: all your appointments are cancelled, all those loose ends are simply left untied, and you have to face your life exactly as it is that moment. And you also have to face the fact that life, in which you were so involved, goes on quite well without you". The bishop is not, we are not, indispensable... and in discovering this truth we enjoy relief and rest and freedom from our burdens.

And then... ah, and then "Take my yoke upon you... for my yoke is easy and my burden is light"... **the return to burdens!** But now there is a difference... the burdens, the yokes will not chafe nor abrade the skin, they will not cripple nor disable... no, now they are shared with our Lord who loves us and longs for our health, our well-being... our freedom!

So... are you free? am I free? Free from internal tension and external constraints... probably not in this life! But today Jesus invites us, "Come to me"... with Him we face our burdens, through Him we find rest and because of Him... we find, we discover (even to our surprise bordering on disbelief) that we can be free... that this is the goal to which we, with Him, march on!

Listen to St. Paul, "Parts of me covertly rebel, and just when I least expect it, they take charge.

24I've tried everything and nothing helps. I'm at the end of my rope. Is there no one who can do anything for me? Isn't that the real question? 25The answer, thank God, is that Jesus Christ can and does. He has acted to set things right in this life of contradictions".

Listen to Jesus, "Come to me. Get away with me and you will recover your life. I will show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I will not lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you will learn to live freely and lightly."

Thanks be to God... Alleluia, Amen.

