

There's a wonderful line from the first Rocky movie.

Rocky says to Adrian, "To you it's Thanksgiving day, to me it's Thursday." The day was special to Adrian. To Rocky, it wasn't.

For Americans, tomorrow will be the 240th observance of Independence Day. For most of the world, tomorrow will be Monday.

In years past, I have occasionally been in other countries on July 4. It's a strange experience. No picnics or parades. No fireworks. Just business as usual. All the things I usually take for granted on July 4. It was only in their absence that I missed them.

I think all too often in our lives, it's too easy to take things for granted.

We pause today to give thanks to God for the freedoms that we've enjoyed as Americans for these past 240 years. And we need to be careful not to take these blessings for granted.

As American citizens we are the beneficiaries of incredible bounty. In 1776 the American experiment in Democracy was the exception to the rule of monarchs. Now, kings and queens with real political power have passed from the world's stage. The light of freedom kindled in Philadelphia over two centuries ago has spread to enlighten much of the world. We have much to be thankful for this July 4 weekend.

And yet, while we give thanks for this country of ours, we need to be careful to keep our priorities straight. For Christians, country does not come before God. Church and State are separate, but they are not equal. For Christians, God always comes first.

We always need to remember that it is God, and not the United States of America, in whom we need to put our ultimate trust. We have the American flag in this sanctuary. That's a wonderful thing. But we mustn't forget that it is the cross of Jesus Christ, and not the flag, that is front and center. It is the cross, not the flag, that deserves our primary allegiance. We must never confuse the primary loyalty we owe to God with our secondary loyalty as citizens of this country.

Nation states are temporary. The Kingdom of God alone is eternal.

This is always important for us to remember. Because in the United States we often think of ourselves as God's chosen nation, favored above all other peoples of the earth.

And that can be spiritually dangerous. It's presumptuous. Yes, God has blessed us, tremendously. Yes, I would say that God's hand has been at work in the past to bring us to where we are as a country. Yes, we need to be thankful for the blessings of liberty we enjoy. But we can't rest on our laurels.

It's spiritually dangerous when we take our past blessings and expect them to continue into the future, regardless of what we do. God's past blessings are not *carte blanche* to do

whatever we want in the future. The United States of America and the Kingdom of God are not the same.

Our Jewish ancestors in faith had a similar problem. They confused their call to be God's people with their identity as a nation state. And in 587 BC, they were wiped out as a nation and their capital of Jerusalem was leveled. Their leaders, the movers and the shakers of Jewish society were carried off into exile in Babylon. This was a time of severe crisis for the Jewish people. God and Country for them had been the same. But now, Country was gone. Did that mean God was gone too? Did that mean God had abandoned them as a people?

The answer from Isaiah was, "No." In the midst of exile, in the midst of the destruction of Israel as a nation, we have the words of our Old Testament lesson from the prophet Isaiah. Isaiah lived before the exile. But he was warning and preparing the people for their coming troubles. And he offers a solid place where they can stand. He says, "Trust in the LORD forever, for in the LORD GOD you have an everlasting rock."

Isaiah's message is, God deserves your primary allegiance, so put your trust in God. God is ultimately in charge. The walls of your cities may crumble. Your government may disappear. Your way of life may change. But God is ultimately in charge.

Our Epistle has a similar message. God is the ultimate authority. Governments are useful. Governments provide services for the common good. But God is the ultimate authority.

In our Epistle lesson from the 13th chapter of Romans, Paul says, "Be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God."

The message here is governments serve a useful function. Governments preserve order and prevent anarchy. Governments stand as dikes, as dams, between God's people and the forces of disorder and evil. In this way, governments serve the will of God.

However, governments don't have *carte blanche*. A government no longer serves the will of God if it stops preventing evil and starts acting in an evil manner.

This was a struggle the early Christian church had to wrestle with.

When Paul wrote in the 50s or 60's of the first century, he spoke of our Christian duty to be good citizens.

But a few decades later the situation changed. Christianity faced increasing persecution. And the early church had to reevaluate the duties they owed as citizens.

In the 90's, the Roman government crossed the line. Rome tried to put itself in the place of God. The Romans proclaimed that Caesar was Lord and God. And they declared that all citizens of the empire should publically bow down and offer religious worship to Caesar.

In the face of these changes, the early church said "No. Only God deserves our worship." And that unpopular stance led to brutal persecution of Christians.

In fact, the book of Revelation was written during this time. It encourages the church to stand fast in the face of an Empire which has crossed the line. It reminds Christians that only God deserves their worship.

In the 50's, Paul says obey the Roman authorities. By the 90's, Revelation says that Caesar is the anti-Christ and that Christians owed him no allegiance.

A similar dynamic happened in the last century in the German church. In the 1930's the German church grappled with the allegiances owed to God and Caesar, or more specifically, God and Hitler.

The great German pastor and theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, famously grappled with this issue. Bonhoeffer's writings are marvelous expressions and explorations of what it means to live the Christian life in the midst of Nazi Germany.

In 1937 Bonhoeffer wrote that one should be obedient to the government, even the Nazi government. He based his argument squarely on Romans 13.

Bonhoeffer wrote of the dual citizenship that Christians have. He wrote, "To stay in the world with God means simply to live in the rough and tumble of the world and at the same time remain in the Body of Christ, the visible Church, to take part in its worship and to live the life of discipleship."¹

In other words, live with dual citizenship. Render to Caesar that which is Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's.

But within 7 years, Bonhoeffer had to change his position. By that time it was readily apparent that National Socialism was inherently evil and needed to be opposed. Bonhoeffer knew that Nazism was so evil that one could no longer be obedient to both Hitler and God. Thus Bonhoeffer actively resisted Hitler, and was involved in the Valkyrie plot, the attempt to assassinate Hitler in 1944. Bonhoeffer was eventually hanged in a Nazi prison.

Bonhoeffer reminds us that in extreme circumstances, when governments are clearly evil and fundamentally opposed to the will of God, Christians must stand in opposition to Caesar.

Fortunately for us as Americans, in this time and this place in the history of the world, this is not a problem for us.

Yes, it's a rough season in our country. But we mustn't forget that our constitution begins with the powerful words, "We the people."

¹ Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, ch 30.

The government is not "them." The government is "us." Even if we're upset with the actions of some of those who represent us, we mustn't forget that they do represent us, and that we are part of the political process. And this also, is something to be thankful for on July 4, 2016.

But we must always remember that as 21st century American Christians we have dual citizenship. We are called to live in the 'rough and tumble' of Caesar's world while we are disciples in God's world at the same time.

We're citizens of the United States, and on this July 4 we remember the blessings, benefits, and responsibilities of that citizenship. It's hard to imagine what life without these blessings would be like, and we must never take them for granted.

But we must never forget that as Baptized Christians, we have another citizenship, a more important citizenship in the Kingdom of God.

Our country has existed for 240 years, and I pray it continues for centuries to come. But ultimate peace does not come from the Declaration of Independence. Ultimate peace does not come from the Constitution. Ultimate peace does not come from the armed forces of the United States. Ultimate peace comes from God.

Trust in God. "Trust in the LORD forever, for in the LORD GOD you have an everlasting rock."