



# FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

“LIBERTY’S LESSONS”

Scripture Lessons: John 8:31-38

*This sermon was preached by Dr. Daniel W. Massie on Sunday, May 10, 2009 at St. Philip’s Episcopal Church, in conjunction with the annual meeting of the General Society of Colonial Wars, which met in Charleston, SC.*

First let me say what a privilege it is for me to be sharing in this service today at St. Philip’s. This sanctuary is among the most beautiful, the most historic and most sacred in all of America. I am honored to be here at any time but especially on an occasion such as this. I count your clergy as valued colleagues and many of your members as personal friends. And I am grateful to the General Society of Colonial Wars for the invitation to have a part in today’s worship as your annual meeting draws to a close here in Charleston.

In trying to choose a topic for today’s message, the significance of history came to mind. All Charlestonians are historians at heart. We honor history, preserve history and on occasion may even be able to worship history. And of course we share a love of history with the Society of Colonial Wars who perpetuate the memory of those whose labors during the Colonial period resulted in the freedom and unity we have since enjoyed as a Republic. But then again history is such a broad topic and I felt the need to narrow the focus somewhat.

So think with me for a few moments about the history of freedom? Some would argue that the history of America is actually the history of freedom and the only way to comprehend the story of this country is to see it as a continuing saga of liberation movements --- liberation from outside influence and unfair taxation, liberation from tyranny, liberation from religious persecution, liberation from poverty and ignorance. America is truly the story of freedoms gained over the generations by religious minorities, by women, by countless ethnicities and races, and by all sorts of conditions of men.

But today we live in an age that is largely a-historical. Oh, to be sure, histories and biographies are still being published and read but they largely try to describe or analyze the past without trying to make any connection to the present. Most modern historians are not what we might call philosophical historians. Philosophical historians do not simply research, expose and assess the past, but they do so with a view toward finding laws and lessons that will guide us in the present and into the future. Modern historians may well consider philosophizing about history far too subjective and risky, a bit like preaching if you will. And yet the greatest writer of history of the English language, Edward Gibbon, who wrote the massive and brilliant work The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire did not hesitate to look for clues from the past that might guide us in the present. Without apology Gibbon’s masterful work offers lessons for his own age in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and for those ages to follow. He mined lessons from Rome’s story of its rise and its fall.

Gibbon composed his work from 1776 to 1789, between the Declaration of Independence and the drafting of the American Constitution. During that time he sat as a Member of Parliament and heard all of the debates on the major issue of the day which was the freedom of the American colonies. But Gibbon in England like colonial leaders on these shores was a product of the Enlightenment. He and they had a compelling interest in antiquity and the lessons they learned were incorporated into the republic they founded.

It is difficult if not impossible to read Gibbon without examining and critiquing one's own nation. Gibbon saw in Rome's experience the weaknesses that led to its demise and if you were American or British in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, or if you are American in the 21<sup>st</sup>, you cannot escape the parallels drawn and Gibbon's reasoned perspective.

When you read about Gibbon's Rome and consider the varied reasons for its collapse --- the disintegration of family life, the breakdown of traditional ethical systems, the growth in perverse and immoral entertainment, the inordinate amount of money spent on the military machine to defend the empire, the collapse of the nation's economy, the inability or unwillingness to deal with the Middle East and its radical religious movements, and the constant changes in public policy --- well, in reading all of this you get the impression you are not reading history but hearing the evening news, albeit in far more elegant prose.

I am not saying that history is cyclical or that it repeats itself. Mark Twain once said, "History doesn't repeat itself, but it rhymes!" And so for philosophical historians and for those of us in the Judeo-Christian tradition who view sacred history in order to discover truths and lessons for the present, we at least should recognize that there is a rhyme and reason to the past, to history in general and to the history of liberty in particular.

Those who know well the history of Liberty recognize that freedom is a fragile thing and that democracies and democratic institutions are tenuous and subject to decay. Democracies often become victims of their own follies and feed upon and destroy themselves. It was true of Athens and of Rome and if we fail to learn and embrace the lessons of history it will be true of America as well. I would commend to you a more contemporary work than Gibbons. It is Glenn Tinder's wonderful book entitled Liberty: Rethinking an Imperiled Ideal.

And if you ask whether or not I think that liberty in America is imperiled in anyway I would have to say that it is. One reason it is imperiled is because so many young people today assume that it is not. Dr. J. Rufus Fears, a distinguished professor of classics and the holder of the Blankenship Chair for the History of Liberty at the University of Oklahoma often asks his students if America will survive well into the future and without exception they think that it will. Fears is not so certain, nor am I. But surely a lack of vigilance and a sense of apathy can ruin a free people for they lose the will to make the sacrifices necessary for liberty's preservation.

It happened in Rome and it may yet happen among us. The wealth that poured in to Rome eventually corrupted the government and its citizens. Elections were openly bought and sold for vast campaign contributions. Political infighting among various factions and parties was so intense that the Senate came to gridlock. Eventually the Roman people lost all confidence in their government and in their democratic and republican way of life. Rome finally reached a point where its people wanted nothing so much as peace and order and were willing to sacrifice their personal liberties to secure them. And so power was transferred to a military dictator, though they called him Emperor. The Roman emperors came to see that people would give up their liberties for "bread and circuses", as it were, for food and entertainment if you prefer. And gave it up they did. Wealth, luxury, ease and apathy help to spell the end of the Roman Empire.

During the colonial period the founders of this republic were men of the Enlightenment who studied and learned from antiquity and like Gibbon viewed history as a tool for fashioning a just, productive, and lasting nation of laws and rather than of men.

Yet another reason for acknowledging the precarious state of liberty in our time has to do with the continuing demise of religion and the growing secularization of America life. Increasingly

religion is regarded as irrelevant if not even detrimental to our life. Yet our founders from 1607 until the present generation recognized that liberty was dependent upon both truth and duty.

Truth: One day Jesus said to skeptics: “If you continue in my word you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth and the truth will make you free.” Freedom was conditional upon the preservation of truth. Some might suggest that what Jesus had in mind here was only spiritual freedom and not political or national liberty, but I contend that the two are intimately related. And even though democracy as we know it was foreign to the world of our Lord, it had its birth and derives its strength from Judeo-Christian values.

Speaking in Baltimore several years ago Pope John Paul II urged people of faith to heed America’s founding fathers and bring their religious convictions to bear on their political life. He said: “Democracy needs virtue, if it is not to turn against everything it is meant to defend and encourage ... democracy stands or falls with the truths and values it embodies and promotes.” And

Duty: Lord Acton put it this way: “No country can be free without religion. It creates and strengthens the notion of duty. If men are not kept straight by duty, they must be by fear. The more they are kept by fear, the less they are free. The greater the strength of duty, the greater the liberty.”

For some three centuries now Americans have cherished a belief, inspired by our spiritual heritage and written into our foundational documents that good government and sound religion are separate spheres but mutually dependent. We hold certain truths to be self-evident, that all people are created and endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, and among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Make no mistake about it, my friends, the one we call Creator is the “Author of Liberty”. Liberty is an endowment that God has written upon the human heart.

Freedom was God’s idea before it was man’s. From the very beginning, from Eden on if you would, our connection to the Creator was not a chain or a cage, but a willing bond of love and gratitude. The relationship between the Creator was characterized by freedom and based on trust. Adam was free to obey or disobey God, but he was not free to escape the consequences of his decision. This arrangement entailed tremendous risk on the Lord’s part, because the risk of freedom is the bondage of sin. If we are truly free, then we are free also to become enslaved. And yet, it is not God who enslaves us. Rather, when we freely choose to violate the will and the ways of God and to discard the truths of God for the opinions of man we will discover new, or rediscover old forms of bondage.

Everybody serves somebody and if it is not the living God that we serve then we will serve a God of our own making and design. Yet if we do serve the living God, then we will not be afraid to challenge or confront those lesser gods that vie for our allegiance and threaten our liberty.

At its best America has cherished a belief in freedom for all people and this belief arises from our spiritual heritage. Freedom is a foundation truth that originates not with constitution, nor the abstract philosophical notions, but with the faith that founded and fuels this free republic. In 1789, the year our constitution was ratified by the states, the second president of the United States, John Adams, wrote: “Our constitution was designed for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate for the government of any other.” Now some might challenge that statement and many do today, but there remain many of us who hold to it still. And that is precisely why I am so concerned about freedom’s future in this country. If we choose to abandon the moral and spiritual principles that brought about our existence, then our liberties as a people will eventually be lost. And why is that?

To begin with, history reveals that liberty and democracy tend to be short-lived in nations or societies where divine truth and Judeo-Christian values are either ignored or dismissed. This is because reason alone, philosophical principals alone, however noble they may be, cannot produce truth nor provide the foundation upon which liberty is built. As I indicated earlier the Romans came to a point where they were more interested in their personal comforts than in their individual responsibilities. It was only a matter of time before they desired freedom from responsibility more than freedom for responsibility. As a result the price of freedom came to be regarded as too great a price to pay and the Romans increasingly looked to the state to provide or to require what they were unwilling or unable to provide for themselves. We would do well to remember this as a people for it seems we increasingly look to our local, state and federal governments in a paternalistic way to do for us what we are simply unwilling to do for ourselves. And yet there are always hidden costs and unexpected obligations attached to our expected entitlements and services.

There is simply no public freedom apart from individual responsibility. The more we look to the state to do for us what we are incapable of doing for ourselves, the more our personal liberties are jeopardized. The more power we transfer to the state the less power we retain as individuals and the more difficult it is to reclaim what has been given away.

Yet another reason why the demise of religion portends the end of liberty is the fact is that freedom requires and rests upon truth, truth that is above and beyond the pronouncements of the state or the opinions of the public, even a majority of them. Truth is not determined by popular vote or reliable polls. Truth is not the product of executive, legislative or judicial mandate. The truth that free people must know and value is God's truth --- God's truth about the nature and destiny of human beings, God's truth about good and evil, God's truth about right and wrong. And God's truth is above and beyond all human truth conceived by men or nations. You see, the law does not determine what is true and just. Rather, the law is based on people's conception of what is true and just as God enables us to understand it. And so the law must have a moral and spiritual base beyond itself. And you can be certain that if the general public no longer can discern good from evil, or right from wrong, then the people's law will eventually follow suit.

Now I am sure that for people like us who are here today liberty has lost none of its appeal. We cherish it still and continue to sing its praises and nonetheless. But I wonder if you would agree with me that liberty's base and its foundation is rapidly eroding. If it is then this should be a cause of great concern. Evidence of individual responsibility and commitment to seeking God's truth are not necessarily hallmarks of contemporary American society. We live in an age where truth is considered a matter of opinion and morality a matter of choice. And if we cannot recapture and recommit ourselves to the truths and values that brought us into existence, than we can only assume that liberty itself will be as short-lived here as it has been in other places. America will be remembered as a noble experiment that went awry.

The psalmist declares: "Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord." America has been a blessed nation, to be sure, and we historically have had a passionate commitment to the Lord of history. If it is our desire to see our children and grandchildren enjoy the liberties and blessings which we have known and to which we have become accustomed, then we must help them and one never to forget as our hymn reminds us that the light of freedom is a "Holy Light" and that God alone "Author of Liberty" and that the future of freedom in this and all countries is directly related to the firmness of our moral and spiritual foundation.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.