

## Like rain falling on the land

Psalm 72:1-8

July 3, 2005

Tomorrow, our nation, our homeland, the United States of America, will celebrate its 229th birthday. Two hundred and twenty-nine years! What a short, short time! Your great-grandfather's great-grandfather could well have been alive when the Declaration of Independence was signed. Our church is only a few generations younger than the nation itself, and we have church members still living who have witnessed well more than half of this church's life span!

We Americans like to think of our nation as the crowning achievement of the evolution of human politics and culture, but our youthfulness itself should give us pause and keep us humble. When we recall other great cultures -- Greek and Roman, Egyptian and Babylonian, Chinese and Mayan, even the more recent juggernauts of England and Spain -- we realize that our history is but a brief chapter in the story of the history of the human race. That should keep us humble. That and the fact that the history of the human race isn't over yet! We do not know what the future will bring -- to this nation or to the world of nations, those nations in existence today and those yet to be.

Our nation is an experiment ...

- It is an experiment in representative government.
- It is an experiment in multicultural society, a society with no core ethnic identity, but instead a society born out of many cultures and intentionally welcoming new citizens from many cultures.
- It is an experiment in pluralism, not founded on the basis of any one religious doctrine, not promoting nor establishing any one particular religious faith, yet at the same time welcoming the practice of faith and tacitly acknowledging our dependence as people and as a nation on Almighty God.
- It is an experiment in the rule of law, fashioning a government and a society where law itself gets the last word, not whoever happens to be bigger or stronger or wealthier or more influential.

So ... how has this American experiment fared?

In many respects, it has been an unparalleled success ...

- We are driven by an economic engine that is the envy of the rest of the world. Our market economy has become the dominant model other nations work to copy.
- We have paved the way to the future with unmatched technological achievements in transportation and energy production, space exploration and medicine, information technology and communications technology.
- We are the military superpower. No other nation or coalition of nations can match us strength for strength.
- People come from around the globe to be educated at our institutions of higher learning and to do research in our laboratories.
- We are a worldwide champion of human rights and a primary source of aid -- technological, intellectual, and financial -- to developing nations.
- We have led the way in setting aside lands for preservation within our own borders and in raising awareness of the risks human development poses to the common environment on which all life depends.

There is much, so much, of which we may be proud.

But our successes are also tempered with failure, ways in which the realities of our national life fail to live up to the vision of the American experiment.

- We may be a nation of many cultures, but we remain a nation deeply divided along racial and ethnic and religious lines.

- We promote cultural diversity, but the prevailing "American culture" that we enjoy and export to the rest of the world is a rather bland and homogenous and lowest-common-denominator kind of culture. Think reality television, fast food, much of popular music.

- We promote a free press as one of our highest ideals, but the strange paradox is that as the number of news outlets grows, the variety and diversity of news and opinion that are readily accessible are greatly diminished. Flip the channels, leaf through the papers! They are all covering the same stories in much the same ways.

- We champion environmental stewardship, but we are by far the world's greatest polluter and the world's biggest consumer of limited energy resources.

- We proclaim "liberty and justice for all," but is that true? Does every person within our borders receive equal justice, comparable liberties?

- Do we truly have a representative government, a government by the people, or do we have a government by the few? How are the really important decisions made and by whom? Who gets to set the agenda in American politics? The people or the lobbyists? Citizens or special interests? Just folks, or folks with lots of money or lots of influence?

- Are we governed by the rule of law? Or when "national security" is at stake or when a favored objective is stymied, does the rule of law go out the window? On how many occasions in our lifetimes have our leaders, Democrat and Republican alike, placed themselves above the law to do what they wanted to do?

- And like every dominant power in history, we are tempted by empire. Because we can, we do. It is all too easy for us to exercise undue influence, to try to fashion the rest of the world in our own image and for our benefit.

So tomorrow, on July 4, I will be both proud and humble as I remember our nation's birthday. I do love my noble but flawed homeland, and because I do, I pray for her future. I pray with hope, because the true genius of the American experiment is its flexibility. We are guided by a constitution that elaborates overarching principles, not fixed rules. Our system allows us to respond and adapt to changing conditions and changing times. We are always reforming ourselves.

So I pray with hope. But as I pray for this nation, I pray not so much for its sake and its future. I pray for the sake and the future of the kingdom of God! I pray "*Thy kingdom come!*" ... not "*This kingdom endure!*" I pray, as Paul suggests, so that we may live a quiet and peaceful life, and so that all people will come to know the truth and experience for themselves the goodness and grace of God, in this world and the next! I pray for this nation and its leaders so that we will not get in the way, but will in some way serve the purposes of the kingdom of God.

And when I pray -- or when you pray -- the words the Hebrew people used to pray for their leaders are most appropriate:

*Teach the king to judge with your righteousness, O God;  
share with him your own justice,  
so that he will rule over your people with justice  
and govern the oppressed with righteousness.  
May the land enjoy prosperity;  
may it experience righteousness.*

*May the king judge the poor fairly;  
may he help the needy and defeat their oppressors.*

*May the king be like rain on the fields,  
like showers falling on the land.  
May righteousness flourish in his lifetime,  
and may prosperity last as long  
as the moon gives light.*

There are three key words in this prayer, each of them repeated several times over -- justice, righteousness, and prosperity.

Justice ... righteousness ... prosperity -- in Hebrew: *mishpat* ... *tsadiq* ... *shalom*.

I mention the Hebrew words because the words, *justice* and *righteousness* and *prosperity*, are but English translations of the original Hebrew of the psalm, and the meaning of the Hebrew words is in some ways rather different from the words we use to translate them.

*Share with the king your own justice, so that he will rule over your people with justice ...*

*Mishpat* is God's justice, God's judgments, God's laws, God's way of doing thing ... and God's justice is not blind! God's justice is not impassionate or impartial, but passionate and partial. God takes sides. God takes the side of the poor, God helps the helpless, God defends the weak, God champions the cause of the widow and the orphan and the alien. Those who trample on the rights of the poor are called unjust by God's prophets.

*May the king govern the oppressed with righteousness ...*

In the same way, *tsadiq* is God's righteousness, God's goodness, God's way of showing kindness. Being righteous for the Hebrews was not so much about not doing evil, but about doing good. Righteousness is active kindness, ready mercy, practical compassion. What the good Samaritan in Jesus' story did for the mugging victim was righteousness. So governing the oppressed with righteousness means defending them, helping them, taking up their cause. This is what the Hebrews prayed their king would be: a champion of the poor.

But isn't that what government is for anyway? The strong and the wealthy don't need government to defend them. They just want government to stay out of their way. Government is a compact, a cooperative arrangement, in which a community pledges to protect and provide for all of its members, especially for those who would not fare well otherwise.

And that brings us to the third Hebrew word, *shalom* ...

*May the land enjoy prosperity ...*

The translation -- *prosperity* -- is not wrong, but it is much too narrow. *Shalom* is health and prosperity, well-being and peace. *Shalom* is faring well!

The Hebrews prayed that the leadership of their king would promote *shalom* ... *shalom* for the people and *shalom* for the land.

*May the king be like rain on the fields, like showers falling on the land ...*

What a wonderful expression! *Like rain falling on the land ...* I pray that our leaders would be like rain falling on the land. May they be advocates for the health and well-being and fruitfulness and peace of all our people, and of the land itself. That's what I will pray on the occasion of our nation's birthday ...