



BISHOP SAMUEL SEABURY AND THE AMERICAN CHURCH

Sermon preached by Bishop Scott McLaughlin (retired),
For Independence Day,
Sunday, July 8, AD 2001

Our celebration of Holy Communion this evening is in remembrance of Independence Day, and to the glory of God in honor of Samuel Seabury (November 30, 1729 – February 25, 1796), the first Bishop of the United States. Bishop Seabury's life has a message for us today, and the week of the 4th of July is a perfect time to reflect upon the history of our Way of Faith on this continent.

Before the American Revolution the Church found itself in a very difficult position. In some places, like the Carolinas and Virginia, the Church was established by law, as the State religion. Even if you weren't a member of the Church, your taxes were spent in support of it, and to pay the salaries of its ministers. We bristle at that kind of thing today (although my tax money is spent in ways I profoundly disagree with), and the situation was not the same in other parts of the continent. People who left the Church of England, and in many cases came to America to escape State Religion settled Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, Maryland, and other colonies.

Those outside the Church did not necessarily believe in religious tolerance, however. The Puritans settled in New England, not because they believed in religious freedom, but because they failed in their attempt to take over the Anglican Church, and immigrated to America in order to enforce their own brand of Christianity on these shores.

Secondly, the Americans were colonists, and operated under the mercantile system. That's an economic system whereby raw materials were sent from the colonies to the Mother country, where manufacturing took place, and finished goods then flowed back to the colonies for purchase. The Church operated in much the same manner. A man called into Holy Orders had to leave America and hazard the dangerous sea voyage to England, to be trained there and ordained before returning to the colonies. And, most of the priests here were sent from England by missionary societies, whose selection of fit persons for ministry was limited.

Third, and most important, there were no Bishops in America, and none were sent to the continent even as Episcopal visitors. There was no one here who could ordain or confirm. For two hundred years, Anglican Christians had to do without the fullness of the Apostolic ministry, and the lack of Bishops placed the Church—even when established by law—in a precarious and weak position.

Officially, America was under the Episcopal supervision of the Bishop of London. Through the years, of course, efforts were made to secure the episcopacy for America, one man being designated as the Bishop-elect of Virginia in the early 1700's. But these efforts never came to fruition. Listen to the sad state of affairs in this letter, sent to the Bishop of London from St. Anne's Parish, New Jersey, in 1718: "For want of Episcopacy being established amongst us, and that there has never

been any Bishop sent to visit us, our churches remain unconsecrated, our children are grown up and cannot be confirmed But, more especially for the want of that sacred power which is inherent to your apostolic office, the vacancies which daily happen in our ministry cannot be supplied for a considerable time from England, whereby many congregations are not only become desolate, and the light of the Gospel therein extinguished; but great encouragement is thereby given to sectaries of all sorts which abound and increase amongst us; and some of them pretending to what they call the power of ordination, the country is filled with fanatic preachers, debauching the good inclinations of many poor souls who are left destitute of any instruction or ministry.”

But these pleas fell on deaf ears. The cause is simple enough to understand. A Bishop, in the English system, was not only an ecclesiastical authority, but represented also the power of the Crown. His presence in the American colonies would have been tantamount to a claim of right over all parishes, all church properties, and all ministers, of whatever stripe or persuasion. Imagine the reaction of the Puritans to a Bishop landing on Plymouth Rock! Indeed, to English eyes, an American episcopate would have brought about an instant political revolution. And so no Bishop was sent, even to those colonies where the Church was established by law. Politics took precedence over the Faith. The irony is that political revolution came anyway! No one knows how history—political as well as religious—might have been changed on this continent if a colonial Episcopacy had been established.

Then came the Revolution. Oddly, the Revolution leadership included nominally Anglican Churchmen who were actually Deists. Their political ideals took precedence over the claims of the Gospel. Deism—the belief in a distant and impersonal God who is knowable only by Reason—profoundly affected the Church in the United States. Most Anglican clergy, however, were staunch Tories who remained loyal to the King; many fled to Canada to escape persecution. Anglican churches were looted; many were burned down. At the end of the Revolution it was very doubtful that a branch of the Anglican Church would be found on these shores.

At the end of the War ten of the fourteen remaining clergymen in Connecticut took council on “Lady-Day” (The Feast of the Annunciation of the Blessed Virgin Mary), March 25th, 1783. There they made choice of the Revd Dr. Samuel Seabury as their Bishop. The Anglican clergy of New York, and those still scattered throughout New England joined in the election of Seabury. He was instructed to risk the voyage to England, there to apply to the Archbishop of Canterbury to be consecrated, and failing that, to go north into Scotland and see if the Bishops of the Scottish Episcopal Church would help the fledgling American Church. Seabury arrived in England on July 7th. He remained in England a year, seeking consecration. When all doors were closed, he went to Scotland.

Seabury had spent a part of his youth Scotland, and had attended services of the Scottish Church. In Scotland, the Church was not the State religion: the national Church of Scotland was Presbyterian, and the Anglican Faith was practiced only by a small but determined remnant, known as the Scottish Episcopal Church. These Bishops, long persecuted by their own people and forgotten by their Episcopal Brothers in England and Ireland, responded to the needs of American Churchmen. Samuel Seabury was consecrated a Bishop in Aberdeen, Scotland, on the 22nd Sunday after Trinity, November 14, 1784, by Kilgour, Bishop of Aberdeen and Primus of the Church; Petrie, Bishop of Ross and Murray; and Skinner, Bishop-Coadjutor of Aberdeen. November 14th is thus “Independence Day” to American Anglicans.

The next day, the Church in Scotland entered into a Concordat with Bishop Seabury, stating that the new American Church was in Communion with her, creating a “Bond of Union” between the two Churches. The Scottish were known for their liturgical scholarship, and the Church had committed herself to using the most ancient forms of worship in her Prayer Book. The Concordat urged Seabury to use all of his persuasive ability to ensure the Church in America would use the Scottish Communion Office. Article 5 of the Concordat reads: “As the celebration of the Holy Eucharist, or the Administration of the Sacrament of the Body and Blood of Christ, is the principle Bond of Union among Christians, as well as the most solemn Act of Worship in the Christian Church, the Bishops aforesaid agree in desiring that there may be as little Variance here as possible. . . . In this capital Article therefore of the Eucharistic Service in which the Scottish Bishops so earnestly wish for as much Unity as possible, Bishop Seabury also agrees to take a serious View of the Communion office recommended by them, and if found agreeable to the genuine Standards of Antiquity, to give his sanction to it. . . .”

In the meantime, while Seabury was across the ocean, clergy in the Middle and Southern States met and elected Bishops-elect of their own, and in 1787, White of Pennsylvania, and Provoost of New York were consecrated at Lambeth Palace, the Archbishop of York acting as Presenter of the Americans, and the Archbishop of Canterbury as the Chief Consecrator. Observers at the time, and historians today, agree that the action of the Scottish Bishops in consecrating Seabury forced the English Bishops to act. But by their act, the Church of England ceased to be simply the Reformed Catholic Church of one nation: now began the formation of a global Communion of Anglican Christians.

Yet the American Church still faced many obstacles to survive. There developed a rivalry between those consecrated by the English Bishops and Seabury with his Scottish consecration. Much of the rivalry stemmed from the Revolution. Ironically, the Americans consecrated by the English had remained in the States, at least tacitly supporting the Revolution, while Seabury, consecrated by the Scottish, had served as a military Chaplain to the British army during the Revolutionary War!

Further, the Americans who were consecrated by the British Bishops had imbibed the Deistic and Rationalist tendencies of the Revolutionaries—here political theory once again rivaled the Faith.

In 1785 Dr. White (later Bishop White) of Pennsylvania led a hasty revision of the Book of Common Prayer, made necessary by the changes in civil government. But liturgical revision didn’t stop there: the Athanasian Creed was dropped—and it is still missing from American Prayer Books; the Nicene Creed was discarded—they no longer believed in the Virgin Birth or the other miracles confessed in the Creed; the Apostles’ Creed was altered—the statement of Christ’s descent into Hell was thrown out; the Baptismal service was altered so that any idea of Regeneration was cut out from the Sacrament. The so-called “Bishop White Book” of 1785 was a Deist’s delight, and was rejected by the Archbishop of Canterbury as heretical. Interestingly, it became, and still remains, the first Book of Common Prayer of the Reformed Episcopal Church.

The only Bishop in America who understood the danger these changes represented was Samuel Seabury. One of our scholars has written that, in the second Charge to his clergy, Seabury “alluded to the growth of liberal heresies that, *even then*, threatened the American Church, and spoke of a mutilated Prayer Book revision which, *even then*, the liberals were attempting to impose upon it. Seabury wrote: ‘And now, Reverend Brethren, that you may see how necessary it is for you to exert yourselves in support of the Holy Catholic Faith, let me request you to direct your attention

particularly to this country; and when you observe how low some have set the doctrines and principles of religion—how others are depressing the Offices, corrupting the Government, and degrading the Priesthood of Christ’s Church—on the one side—his divinity denied on the other—two of the old Creeds, the guards of the true Faith against Arianism and Socinianism, thrown out—the descent of Christ into Hell, the invisible place of departed souls, by which his perfect humanity, and our perfect redemption, of soul, as well as of body, are ascertained, rejected from the Apostles’ Creed—Baptism reduced to a mere ceremony, by excluding from it the idea of regeneration—and you will own with me, that the strongest obligations lie upon us, to hold fast, and contend earnestly for, the faith as it was once delivered to the Saints—to abide by the government, support the doctrines, retain the principles, explain the true nature and meaning of the sacraments and offices of the Church, and endeavor to restore them to that station and estimation, in which the primitive Christians placed and held them.”

Fortunately, the “Bishop White” Book was rejected, and due to Seabury’s unflagging efforts, the Communion service in the American Book of Common Prayer (at least until 1979) was remarkably patterned after the Scottish Communion Office.

It seems, upon reflection, that Anglicanism has been both the favorite and the victim of the State: all too often political realities and social theories have replaced the “Holy Catholic Faith.” Again, in a certain historical sense, there have always been two Anglican Churches on these shores: one that toadies to wealth, to social position, and to political power in service of the State and another that owns its allegiance to the Lord Christ and His Church, fulfilling its role as the true native branch of the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church in this nation. And when once these two “churches” remained organically one, they are now jurisdictionally separate around the world: the Orthodox Anglican Communion in the service of Christ, and the Canterbury Communion which all too often eagerly places itself in the service of the dark and tyrannical notions of an increasingly profane culture.

The contrast is easily seen in today’s Episcopal Church—feminism has displaced the Gospel and Prayer Book revision has been the means by which the displacement was made. And, sadly, the Scottish Episcopal Church today is one of the most liberal of all the branches of the Canterbury Communion. One of my great convictions about our ministry is that we are what the Episcopal Church should have become, (or remained, depending on your age or point of view), and thus Bishop Seabury’s words are a fair warning to us, and a reminder of the strongest obligations we have: “to hold fast, and contend earnestly for, the faith as it was once delivered to the Saints.”

Let us thank God for the “wonderful grace and virtue declared in all his saints, who have been the choice vessels of his grace and the lights of the world in their several generations”, especially our forefathers in the Faith: Bishop Seabury, the Scottish Bishops, and the untold thousands of American Churchmen who have never tired of their duty; and that we in our generation may have grace to maintain the Faith in righteousness and peace. Amen.