

Independence and July 4th

On June 11, 1776, the signing of “A declaration by representatives of the United States of American in general congress” took place. The rallying cry had been “Taxation without representation,” meaning freedom from Great Britain. The final draft of the declaration was signed on July 4, 1776, and the first celebration took place a year later in Philadelphia. Independence Day was declared a national holiday in 1870.

We know a little about how that might have felt because on September 16, 1975 when Papua New Guinea received its status as an independent nation, we were there. We took part in celebrations because Australia was no longer the colonial power (under United Nations authority) governing the country. The mother country had done its best, but now it was up to the new infant.

Expectations and aspirations ran high for the new nation: books were published, songs were written, the new Prime Minister and other leaders declared great things for the nation. After all, it was a “Christian nation,” with most of the population declaring themselves as “Christian.” However, 45 years later it is an adult nation and there are widespread problems, despite the country’s economic “success.” Although political corruption, tribal warfare, lack of health and educational care for rural areas, and so on, are not uncommon, there is also a high degree of potential for the country. This is due to outstanding Christian men and women leaders—many missions educated, as well as pastors and their churches.

We should not be surprised that problems have arisen. Although the U.S. has had 260 years to get things “right,” there is political corruption, warfare, lack of health care for many, and education obstacles as well. Nevertheless, concerned citizens and churches continue to work for justice and equality. In other words, “Independence” is a two-edged sword: it can bring “freedom” and opportunity, but it can also result in widespread disenchantment and chaos.

Growing up in rural Pennsylvania, I thought of July 4th as a holiday, with parades, picnics, baseball double-headers, hotdogs and fireworks. The history of the event was marginal in my thinking. I am probably not alone and doubt if many of us think very deeply about the event, although anyone who has had military experience should be more conscious of the cost of maintaining “independence.”

We furloughed to the U.S. in July 1976 when our country was celebrating its bicentennial in a variety of ways, e.g., people in covered wagons re-enacting some of the journeys that settlers had taken. We didn’t consider it as conquest by dispossession—Native Americans, like African slaves, were simply a part of our American scenery and heritage. It was time to celebrate.

However, consider what Frederick Douglass wrote: *“Fellow-citizens, above your national, tumultuous joy, I hear the mournful wail of millions! whose chains, heavy and grievous yesterday, are, to-day, rendered more intolerable by the jubilee shouts that reach them. If I do forget, if I do not faithfully remember those bleeding children of sorrow this day, ‘may my right*

*hand forget her cunning, and may my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth!’ To forget them, to pass lightly over their wrongs, and to chime in with the popular theme, would be treason most scandalous and shocking, and would make me a reproach before God and the world. My subject, then, fellow-citizens, is American slavery. I shall see this day and its popular characteristics from the slave’s point of view. Standing there identified with the American bondman, making his wrongs mine, I do not hesitate to declare, with all my soul, that the character and conduct of this nation never looked blacker to me than on this 4th of July!” (From **The Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass, Volume II. Pre-Civil War Decade 1850-1860.**)*

One 4th of July that I will never forget took place in Houston, Texas, in 2013. We were there because Joice was undergoing treatment for cancer at the MD Anderson Proton Radiation Center. My cousin and her husband were visiting from Virginia so we went to see the Astros play baseball. At the conclusion, the roof was rolled back, and the fireworks began. It was spectacular, even if noisy and costly, and part of the baseball ticket—a bargain.

This 4th of July will be very different from any other we have ever had. The state governments will save a lot of money which I imagine (with tongue in cheek) they will quickly and gladly disperse to needy citizens.

There may be social distancing, face masks, small groups, and parades—if any—may resemble a poorly attended church service or a political rally. We pray there will be no riots or shootings, but we cannot be sure, so individuals, families, and groups will take extra precautions.

There are also people and groups of people for whom July 4th will be no different than any other day: struggles for food and justice, lack of jobs, poor health care, and so on. If we are not in these categories but know people who are, it is our Christian duty and privilege to help them. We do not need to wave flags, set off firecrackers, wear long robes or pray on the street corners to be seen; rather, with humility and gratefulness, we need to help in any practical way that we can.

This could turn out to be the best 4th of July celebration that we have, with no missing fingers or limbs due to firecrackers, no riots or tearing down statues; instead, thankfulness that we trust in God with this conviction: *“We may make our plans, but God has the last word”* (Proverbs 16:1).

On a quiet Covid-19
July 4th, 2020
Karl and Joice Franklin