

Independence

I thought I shouldn't let the 250th anniversary of the American Declaration of Independence go unmarked, even if we are a day late. If you extremely good memories, you might recall that I once brought a puppet which I acquired in San Francisco to church. Cuthbert, as I call him, is a great character. He looks very dozy, and is a bit slow, I think. He has enormous feet, which tend to get in the way. He is very good at being impatient - he can tap his feet because people aren't doing what he wants. But most of the time, he is a bit floppy. But of course, he will only do what I make him do. I have to pull the strings.

People used to think God was like that - that people were like puppets. So if things went well for you, it was because God had pulled the strings to make things go well. And if things went badly, it was because God had pulled different strings. But that isn't the story we read in the Bible. Right from the very beginning, it tells the story about how God gave people freedom to choose what to do. He didn't pull the strings. You know the story of Pinocchio - the puppet who comes to life - and does lots of wrong things. That is the sad part of something that is good. If God *did* pull the strings, we would have a lot less unhappiness in the world. But we wouldn't be the human beings he wants us to be. He gave us freedom to choose what **we** want to do. We have to learn to use our freedom well.

It's a curious thing that in the Bible we have the story of independence and dependence – and instead of being opposites, they actually go hand in hand. We believe that God is the source of our life. As Paul said to the Athenians, quoting one of their own poets 'in him we live and move and have our being'. We depend on the reliability of God's creation to sustain our life – the sun, the rain, the crops and so on. It is worth recalling there is an old Jewish saying that in the birth of a child there are three people involved – a man, a woman and the holy spirit of God. When a baby arrives, what hits us is the total dependence that child has on us – the responsibility is almost a shock. But then parenthood is about enabling that dependent baby to develop his or her rightful *independence*, so that they can live a life which is theirs, not ours. As a poster we used to have on the wall by the phone when our children were small said 'There are two gifts you can give your children – the first is roots, and the second is wings.' There is something very wrong if a child cannot cut loose from parents in due course, and live an independent life.

And that is a parallel to what God has given us. We can live our lives perfectly well, totally independent of him. He doesn't keep us tied to him – we are not the puppets we thought about earlier. He takes risks with us, and we can choose to ignore him.

The paradox is that when we choose to acknowledge our dependence on him, it is then that we find the ultimate freedom. So the first Christians talked in terms of being Christ's slaves. But they also talked of

the 'glorious liberty of the children of God.' Maybe you know John Donne's Divine Sonnet that reads like this

Batter my heart, three-person'd God, for you
As yet but knock, breathe, shine, and seek to mend;
That I may rise and stand, o'erthrow me, and bend
Your force to break, blow, burn, and make me new.
I, like an usurp'd town to another due,
Labour to admit you, but oh, to no end;
Reason, your viceroy in me, me should defend,
But is captiv'd, and proves weak or untrue.
Yet dearly I love you, and would be lov'd fain,
But am betroth'd unto your enemy;
Divorce me, untie or break that knot again,
Take me to you, imprison me, for I,
Except you enthrall me, never shall be free,
Nor ever chaste, except you ravish me.

In Baptism, we acknowledge both our freedom as God's children, and our utter dependence on him. Christ has set us free to be his servants. We gladly place ourselves in his hands, and call him Lord – 'boss'. He doesn't pull the strings, but he helps us when we are like Pinocchio and do the wrong things. He is offering his forgiveness and strength. We hear in the Gospel how Jesus enabled his disciples to act independently of him.

Maybe you know the story of the spider who built a fantastic web. It descended from the ceiling of a barn, and began to weave the most amazing, complex and very beautiful web – the best it had ever made. When it was done, the spider took a step back to admire its work. It looked a picture, except that there was a loose thread which went up from the top of the web into the darkness above. The spider was furious that it was spoiling his handiwork, so he scuttled up and cut through the offending thread. And immediately his whole web collapsed on the floor. That was the thread that attached the web to the ceiling.

Dependence – independence. The Americans threw off the yoke of British authority, and they seem to have coped, except that they don't talk English very well any more. But if we throw off the authority of God, we think we can cope. But we don't know what we are missing. Our real independence is found when we see that God is all in all for us.