



**SAINT THOMAS CHURCH FIFTH AVENUE**  
in the City of New York  
*The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, Rector*  
[www.SaintThomasChurch.org](http://www.SaintThomasChurch.org)

**July 4, 2021**  
*Independence Day*

*Solemn Eucharist*  
*11am*

+  
A Sermon by  
The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, *Rector*  
*on*  
Matthew 5:43-48  
+

### **Passing the Torch**

On March 25<sup>th</sup> this year, the Olympic Torch finally began its epic journey to Tokyo for the 2020 Olympic Games due to start on July 23 – one year later than planned. Carrying the Olympic Torch, of course, is not only a great honor, it is intended to be potent symbol of international goodwill. It is also a reminder of the past, for the flame is still kindled in Ancient Olympia, Greece, and for this year's games, the flame was first lit on March 12, 2020 - just before a global pandemic changed everything. However, the organizers have cared for that flame, and it has remained lit for over a year in Tokyo as a beacon of hope.

When my wife and I first arrived in the United States to answer the call of the Vestry of Saint Thomas Church, we arrived on a ship in the way that hundreds of thousands of immigrants have arrived over many years. As we crossed the Atlantic through a storm and a fog bank, it gave us time to reflect on what we were committing ourselves to. As is tradition on entering New York Harbor after crossing the Atlantic, early in the morning, almost everybody arrives on deck as the ship passes under the Verrazzano-Narrows Bridge, in the hope that they will be the first to see the iconic image of the Statue of Liberty, holding her own torch of freedom and possibility.

As you all know, 'The Statue of Liberty Enlightening the World' was a gift of friendship from the people of France to the United States and, like the Olympic Torch, is recognized as a universal symbol of freedom and democracy. However, the National Park official website reminds us that the Statue of Liberty was given not just to celebrate the end of the Civil War and the Union, but also the abolition of slavery and to symbolize the end of all types of servitude and oppression. Unseen when standing beneath the great pedestal on which the statue stands, a shackle and chain lie at the Statue's right foot - the chain disappears beneath Liberty's robe, only to reappear in front of her left foot, its end link broken. But the National Park website contains these sobering words:

*"Although the broken shackle is a powerful image, the meaning behind it was not yet a reality for African Americans in 1886."*  
1.

It is only since I became a resident of the United States that I visited Independence Hall in Philadelphia. After a very, very long wait in line being entertained by remarkable stories shared by National Park Rangers, we were ushered in first to the courtroom and, then, the doors of the Assembly Room were opened. I have to say I had a kind of mystical experience – it felt if I had been on a pilgrimage! Here was the birthplace of not one person or even family, but of a whole nation – a nation that I was committing myself to as a priest.

What happened in that Assembly Room has challenged and changed peoples and countries all over the world – inspiring them in the cause of democracy, freedom, and justice. As the collect of the day so beautifully puts it: *“Lord God Almighty, in whose Name the founders of this country won liberty for themselves and for us, and lit the torch of freedom for nations then unborn.”*

Carrying the torch of freedom means taking seriously the responsibilities of the Founding Fathers’ hopes and aspirations. As with the National Park’s description of the Statue of Liberty, I was moved by the description of the ideals of the Constitution of the United States as described by the Library of Congress:

*“The American republic was founded on a set of beliefs that were tested during the Revolutionary War. Among them was the idea that all people are created equal, whether European, Native American, or African American, and that these people have fundamental rights, such as liberty, free speech, freedom of religion, due process of law, and freedom of assembly. America’s revolutionaries openly discussed these concepts.”*

However, as with the National Park’s description of the broken shackles on the Statue of Liberty, so the Library of Congress also reminds us that this set of beliefs was not universally held. *“Many Americans agreed with them but some found that the ideology was far more acceptable in the abstract than in practice.”*<sup>2</sup>

The torch is, therefore, passed on to another generation. As the Olympic Torch needs many, many runners for it to complete its arduous journey, so we, The People, are also on a similar journey.

I mentioned before that it felt as if I was on a pilgrimage when I visited Philadelphia. Those of you who have been on pilgrimages, perhaps to Lourdes, or Walsingham, or Santiago de Compostela, or Canterbury, or Rome, or the Holy Land itself, know that the pilgrimage is not about the final destination; rather, it is the journey itself that is the most important part. In our Pilgrim’s class each year, the last session is on the subject of prayer and spirituality, and I have a favorite slide I like to share with the class. It is of a beautiful piece of coastline and simply says, *“It’s not the destination – it’s the journey.”*

I want to share with you a little clip from a rather unusual source for Independence Day. As many of you will know, HM The Queen speaks to the Commonwealth of Nations every Christmas Day. Of course, her role is very different now than that of her third great-grandfather King George III who was pretty sore when he lost the American colonies. But Queen Elizabeth is more than a Head of State, she is also a pilgrim on a journey, and each year shares very personally with millions of people around the world, her faith in Jesus Christ and the torch that she feels she has to carry for the cause of democracy and freedom. So, let’s just listen to part of her Christmas speech from 2016 which began by reflecting on the Olympic Games that had been held that year in Rio de Janeiro. (By the way, with a dead-pan expression, she makes a very amusing self-deprecatory joke by referring to the stereotype of British athletes who for years, never seemed to win many medals!)

*[note: In the original sermon in Church, this video clip was inserted into the livestream and the congregation in church listened to the audio]*

“There was a time when British Olympic medal winners became household names because there were so few of them! But the 67 medals at this year’s games in Rio and the 147 at the Paralympics meant that the GB medalists’ reception at Buckingham palace was a crowded and happy event.

Throughout the Commonwealth, there were equally happy and joyful celebrations: Grenada, Bahamas, Jamaica, and New Zealand won more medals ahead of population than any other countries.

Many of this year’s winners spoke of being inspired by athletes of previous generations; inspiration fed their aspiration, and having discovered abilities they scarcely knew they had, these athletes are now inspiring others.

A few months ago, I saw inspiration of a different kind when I opened the new Cambridge base of the East Anglian Air Ambulance where Prince William works as a helicopter pilot. It was not hard to be moved by the dedication of the highly-skilled doctors, paramedics, and crew who are called out on average five times a day.

But to be inspirational, you don't have to save lives or win medals. I often draw strength from meeting ordinary people doing extraordinary things – volunteers, carers, community organizers and good neighbors – unsung heroes whose quiet dedication makes them special. They are an inspiration to those who know them and their lives frequently embody a truth expressed by Mother Theresa [from this year Saint Theresa] of Calcutta; she once said, “*Not all of us can do great things, but we can do small things with great love.*”<sup>3</sup>

Well, there is a delicious irony in hearing the Queen of England speaking on Independence Day from the pulpit of Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue! But, as I said earlier, her role is quite different now to that of her predecessors but I loved that phrase when she spoke about Olympic athletes looking back to those who had gone before – “*Inspiration fed their aspiration.*” Perhaps the set of beliefs of the Constitution written by the Founding Fathers of this great nation have yet to be fully realized, but their inspiration can feed our aspiration to take them from abstract ideas and put them into practice. Later in her Christmas speech of 2016, Queen Elizabeth goes on to reflect on the origins of the very word ‘inspire’ which, of course, also means taking a **deep breath** – just as any of us might do before trying to do something very hard – whether it be sport, or on the stage, or jumping out of a plane, or some other new and challenging venture. When we take a deep breath before doing something difficult, we remind ourselves that our inspiration comes from God – the breath of life that will help us do great things.

How significant that this is the Gospel passage chosen for Independence Day: Jesus said, “*If you love those who love you, what reward do you have? ...And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? ...Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.*” This is one of the hard sayings of Jesus, and it sounds very abstract and principled and far removed from our poor attempts at building a Beloved Community. But, as I often say to the choristers, and as was said to me as a child when I sang, or played my French horn, or swam, or played track and field, **‘practice makes perfect!’** and by our many small attempts to make a difference, the torch of liberty and freedom glows ever brighter.

That brings us back to the broken shackles and the fact that universal adoption of the set of beliefs of the Founding Fathers is still a ‘work in progress’- but as I also said, it is not the destination, it’s the journey that is important; striving to be perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect or, as Mother Teresa of Calcutta said, “*Not all of us can do great things, but we can do small things with great love.*”

1. [Abolition - Statue Of Liberty National Monument \(U.S. National Park Service\) \(nps.gov\)](https://www.nps.gov/abolition)
2. [Founded on a Set of Beliefs - Creating the United States | Exhibitions - Library of Congress \(loc.gov\)](https://www.loc.gov/exhibitions/founded-on-a-set-of-beliefs-creating-the-united-states)
3. [Queen's Christmas message: 'Small acts of goodness' inspire - BBC News](https://www.bbc.com/news/queen-2016-12)