

ON BEING ONE NATION UNDER GOD

*Homily delivered by the Reverend Father Bill Smith
at Holy Faith Episcopal Church, Port St Lucie,
on 5 July 2026*

Reading from the Old Testament:	Isaiah 10: 1-11
Reading from the Psalter:	Psalm 130
Reading from the New Testament:	Revelation 21: 1-8
Reading for the Gospel;	Mark 13: 1-8

It used to be, at least in the parishes in which I grew up in England, that the Godparents would give the one being baptized a copy of the Bible. Back then it was the Authorised Version, or, as it is known in the United States, the King James' Version. Then, at confirmation, the Godparents would give the candidate a copy of the Book of Common Prayer, the 1662 version.

When we went to school, each day would open with School Assembly at which the Head Teacher would oversee an act of worship, consisting of a hymn, a reading from the Scriptures, a meditation on the passage read, and some prayers ending with the Lord's Prayer and the Grace.

Should one go on to ordination, one would receive a copy of the New Testament in Greek, signed by the Bishop, authorising the Deacon to proclaim the Gospel during the celebration of Holy Communion, and then, when one was ordained Priest, one would receive a complete Bible, again signed by the Bishop, authorising one to preach the Good News of the Word of God.

There is something else we agreed to do during the ordination process, at least in the England of the 1960s. And that was to say the Offices daily, that is Morning and Evening Prayer. The first vicar I served with had us meet in the parish church at 9 a.m. each morning. The big bell in the belfry tower would be chimed five minutes beforehand, and then the vicar and I and the vergers, and usually a few parishioners would read Morning Prayer. Evening Prayer we would say individually alone.

From England I went to Jamaica where I served as the chaplain in various Anglican schools, which meant I was saying the Daily Offices because of my duties. And after Jamaica I felt called to be a worker-priest and I found myself saying the Offices by myself.

Things changed somewhat after I came to the States. For a start, the books I was using were different. I started to use the American Prayer Book of 1928, and I began to use the New English Bible. I still use an American Prayer Book of Common Prayer, but now it is the 1976 version, and I use the Revised English Version of the Bible, an ecumenical British publication approved by virtually all denominations in Britain, including the Roman Catholics.

And I do this not because I have to nor that I agreed to, but because I need that time each day to read the Office of Morning Prayer, to say some of the occasional prayers from the Prayer Book – some of which, incidentally, we shall be using as the Prayers of the People later this morning. And I read four passages from the Holy Scriptures each day and I leave nothing out. It takes me about eighteen months to get through the Old Testament and the Apocrypha, and some six months each for the Gospels and for the rest of the New Testament, and a couple of months or so to work through the Psalter.

I have read the Office in all sorts of places, and wherever I am I do this every day no matter where I might be – even on one occasion on a midnight flight out of Rio to Miami, which provoked a conversation with the woman sitting next to me who, it turned out, was a Mormon missionary! And she gave me a copy of “The Book of Mormon”. And I always include among the occasional prayers one that we shall be using in a few minutes, although I adapt it for the country I might happen to be in. This is Prayer No. 19 on page 820 of the Book of Common Prayer.

As you will hear soon, it is a prayer for the Head of State and those in civilian authority, and we pray that God, our Lord and Governor (and notice the initial capital letters in the printed text) will grant them wisdom and strength to know and to do God’s will, will fill them with the love of truth and righteousness, and will make them ever mindful of their calling to serve their nation’s people in the fear of God.

When I was with the United Nations, I was sent to all manner of countries to service conferences or to meet with governmental officials, elected or appointed. I was in Manila on one occasion, and I had to sit through a diatribe being delivered by Ferdinand Marcos during the opening session. The words were all politically correct, but when I got out on the streets of the city, a very different picture emerged. On this particular occasion I was able to take Paula and the children with me, and on a free day we rented a car and drove out into the countryside. And as we wended our way, we drove alongside a steep hill which could easily be seen from the sea, and there, carved into the hillside, was the head of Ferdinand Marcos, much like the figures on Mount Rushmore, except that Marcos was still alive and was still the President. (If you want to see a photograph of what happened to the Marcos sculpture, just go to our Holy Faith website!)

Another conference that I serviced was in Tokyo. There were delegations from all over Asia and the Pacific region, and I still recall two incidents. The first involved the leader of the Khmer Republic delegation, the No. 3 man in his country. He was accompanied everywhere by his bodyguards who did their utmost to keep him separated from us riff-raff. But one morning I was running late and I darted into an elevator just as the doors were being closed. Oh, what a disaster! For the passengers in the elevator were the Khmer delegate and his bodyguards. And there was this white man from who knows where with a brief case containing who knows what! I don’t think

I have experienced so much fear – not on my part, but that of the delegate and his bodyguards. I wished them, “Bon jour”, and left them when the elevator got to floor I wanted.

(As a total aside, let me tell you of what happened one Sunday morning at Christ Church, Bangkok. I was serving as the interim vicar at the time. Among the visitors that morning were two young women. After the service, they met with me for a while and introduced themselves as two volunteers serving with the International Red Cross in a refugee camp near Phnom Penh, the capital of the Khmer Republic. They told me how they met each morning for prayer and Bible study. They had their Bibles, but what they felt they needed were copies of the Church of England Book of Common Prayer, so that they could pray publicly for their colleagues, but also for the members of the Khmer Rouge. They told me how they believed that common prayer would help change the creators and the followers of the policies of the Khmer Rouge leadership.)

Now let us go back to that United Nations conference in Tokyo. Let us see how different was the reaction of the Head of another delegation to the conference. He was from Vanuatu, Walter Lini, that country’s Prime Minister. And he was an Anglican priest. The conference was being held over Easter weekend, so on Good Friday he and I were both skipping the afternoon session so that we might attend the 3-hour service. As we approached the grounds of the Anglican compound, he recognized me and greeted me as any good Anglican clergyman should. I told him who I was and why I was at the conference. And I commented that we had something in common, since, like him, I was a worker priest.

The Anglican compound in central Tokyo has two identical buildings on its grounds, that serve as cathedrals, one for Japanese-speakers and one for Anglophones. One is very austere; the other has the usual paraphernalia of any Anglican place of worship. And, of course, we found ourselves in the Japanese version. So, we quietly got up and left and went into the other cathedral. And there we had to sit through perhaps the worst 3-hour service we had either of us ever attended or would be likely to attend. The preacher was a young Australian priest from Darwin and he duly delivered the seven addresses, but what he had to say hardly reflected the contents of the Gospel readings. Father Walter Lini and I sat through three hours of listening to accounts of how badly the Japanese air forces had treated Darwin during a raid in the Second World War! Perhaps not the most tactful illustration of a preacher from an ANZUS Pact country as the fortieth anniversary of events in Hiroshima and Nagasaki approached.

As we left, Father Lini and I agreed we would look elsewhere for our Easter morning worship. I do not know where Father Lini went for worship on Easter Day. On Holy Saturday I bought a copy of the “Tokyo Post” in which I found an announcement about a Celebration of the Holy Communion at 10.00 a.m. on Easter morning, at St Michael’s Church in Kamakura. An enquiry at the railway station showed that this would need taking a bullet train to Yokohama and then a slow local train to Kamakura, and I would arrive shortly before 9.00 a.m. So, on Easter morning

I did that and when I got there, I searched for St Michael's. It didn't take long to find the church but it was not yet open. So, I walked around the grounds. Then a door was opened in one of the buildings and there stood a Japanese priest robed in his cassock. He asked me what I was doing and I told him that I was an Anglican priest looking for a place where I might receive the Eucharist.

Well, then there followed what I can only call as an interrogation! Where was I ordained? Who ordained me? When? What seminary had I attended? Who was the Principal? Who was the Vice-Principal? Who was the Chaplain? What was the name of the Student President? And I answered all his questions ... and then he invited me in for coffee! It turned out that he had been a student at the Seminary the year before I began my theological training! So, for the next half hour we traded experiences and then he invited me to concelebrate with him, even though I was not wearing a dog-collar and he had no robes big enough for me.

There were a few non-Japanese in the congregation, but the vast majority was Japanese and of the generation that had lived during the days of the atomic bombing of Nagasaki and Hiroshima. Yet there they were, accepting the Body of Christ from the hands of an Englishman. And later sharing Easter lunch with him. Assuredly a fine example of being part of One Nation Under God!

Let us take just one more example of presidential misbehaviour! During our time in Kenya, the President was a man named Daniel Toroitich arap Moi. He was born in 1924 of parents from one of the smaller tribes in the Rift Valley of what was then called British East Africa. He attended a school run by members of the Africa Inland Mission, an American institution based in Philadelphia, which sought to provide what it called non-denominational Christian education to indigenous Africans. On graduation, he had become a school master and he was to retain the school masterly attitude and approach of his generation for the rest of his life, even and especially after he entered the political field.

Daniel arap Moi had succeeded to the Presidency on the death of Jomo Kenyatta, a Kikuyu, the most numerous of the fifty-four tribes that make up the indigenous population. Jomo Kenyatta had been interned during the so-called Mau Mau rebellion by the colonial authorities, even though he was never convicted of anything criminal. Moi had served as Kenyatta's Vice-President for the last few years of his life. At first things went well enough, but soon enough the members of the larger tribes took exception to some of the things the new President decided should be done, things that went against the customs and traditions of many of the tribes. And he insisted on these, so much so that he declared a state of emergency.

Some of the things were quite trivial in the eyes of many people. For example, since he was the President of Kenya, he declared that nobody else in Kenya should be called "President". So, the leading figures in commercial organizations or of any institution had to use some other term, say "Chairman". That led to a big kerfuffle one year at the annual meeting of the United Nations

agency for which I worked. It was easy enough if we met away from Nairobi. Then the Chairman was the leader of the Host Country's delegation. But say a particular country chose not to host the meeting when it was its turn. Then the meeting would be held at our headquarters facilities, incidentally international territory is not subject to Kenyan law. As a courtesy, although he expected it to be so, President Moi would be invited to give the opening address at such a session. And that was fine until Bulgaria held the chairmanship. Now the chairman gets the choice of which working language would be used. Normally it would be English, but it might be French if the chairman so chose, and the head of the Bulgarian delegation so chose. Then all the notices throughout the conference chamber were in French, and the word for "Chairman" in French is "Président", with an acute accent over the first "e", if the sign is in lower case letters. But if the signage is in capital letters, the accent is dropped. So, there was the Bulgarian Chairman sitting behind a sign that read "PRESIDENT". When Moi entered the Conference Chamber and saw a white man sitting behind a sign which he read as PRESIDENT, he was livid. And it took one of his aides several minutes to calm him down and to point that the word was the French version of CHAIRMAN. For most of us all this was an amusing interlude, but Moi's sense of his own special importance was upset. It led to nothing really serious on this occasion, but that was not always the case. Other occasions led to more serious conclusions.

In the late 1980s the President realised that he had lost much public support. He called for an election but ordered changes in how it would be carried out and how the votes would be counted. As a result, the Kikuyus found that they had lost many seats in Parliament, so, some of them staged protests, peaceful protests, and found themselves arrested and held without trial. Their mothers began a sit-in in one of the public parks in Nairobi. After several days of this, it was Ash Wednesday, the President's security forces moved in on them. The Kikuyu women resorted to one of their tribe's customs and stripped to the waist, an action that held off those who would have arrested them. This gave the women the opportunity to grab their things and rush to All Saints' Cathedral nearby to claim sanctuary. The Provost of the Cathedral agreed to this and accommodated them in a basement in rooms where the ladies in the choir would normally robe. And there they stayed for eleven months, being supplied with the necessities of life, including meals, by the Cathedral's Mothers Union. When the security forces demanded entry to arrest them, the Provost locked the doors on them. The soldiers kept on hammering on the doors, and only withdrew when a large crowd of people, mostly Kikuyu, had assembled. This all got reported to the wider community, and news of it was picked up by and reported on by members of the international press corps. A few days later the Archbishop of Kenya came to the Cathedral to cleanse the building of all contamination that might have been caused by the President's men, and then the Archbishop re-consecrated the Cathedral.

In the early 1990s, after the collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe, a new balance in the relations between the United States and the East African states was created. When Moi was told this by the then US President, he was most upset, and then when the US President rashly let fall

that he preferred dealing with the Kenyan Foreign Minister, the latter knew he was doomed. He sought to escape Moi's jealous anger by fleeing to Uganda, but Moi's secret police got wind of this, removed and replaced the driver of the car the Minister hoped to flee in, and when the Foreign Minister got into the car in the darkness of a tropical night, he was driven to a secluded spot and executed.

Not perhaps so serious was the President's insistence that the main story on the front page of any Kenyan newspaper should be about him and should include a favourable picture. Similarly, the news broadcasts on radio and television each evening had to begin, "President Daniel arap Moi today ..."

And I could go on and on! He was regular in his attendance at Sunday worship and we all knew where he had worshipped any given Sunday. But it was never in a church of a major denomination with world-wide links. And there were always pictures of his leaving the place of worship, and there would almost always be a bevy of pretty African teenage girls with him – but never a picture of his wife!

And he considered himself a devout follower of our Lord Jesus Christ! Oh! How we members of the clergy of the Anglican Church of Kenya prayed for him using prayers similar to the one we shall use today during the Prayers of the People this morning.

And I could go on, but I think, I hope, you are getting the picture. People in this country, this country in which we all live, surely know that when we speak, think, dream about "Being one Nation under God" the important words are the last two – "Under God". And this is so because it is God who is unique. It is God who is the Creative Force in the entire Universe. That is what His Name in the Hebrew version of Genesis 1: 1 means. And I use the masculine pronoun because that is what the Hebrew writer used because there is no neuter in Hebrew grammar.

Our readings from the Holy Scriptures this morning underline this. As I began to listen to what it is to which I should give voice this morning, the readings for the Office for that day included the words of the prophet Isaiah and the words of Jesus in the Gospel passage that we have just heard. And these words were about the Destruction of the Holy City and of the Temple, or, rather, destructions, in the plural. The rulers of Israel and Judah might have thought that they were doing what was best for the Nation. They might urge, and even force, the people to do things their way so as to "Make Israel Great Again", but that was not the Way the Almighty had determined it should be, for the Almighty is not merely human.

We mortal humans, and especially those with political power, whether elected or usurped, must never forget Who it is Who is Immortal Divinity – and how that Person (or Trinity of Persons) chooses to go about things. And if and when we mere mortals, especially those entrusted with

authority by others, forget how the One with Ultimate Authority goes about things, should we surprised when it leads to destruction? It was so in the time of Isaiah two thousand seven hundred years ago. It was true two thousand years ago when the Incarnate One walked the Earth. And it has been so throughout history all around the World. I have seen the ruins of Ancient Babylon, and I have walked in the ruins of Ancient Athens and Ancient Rome. They were all cities, built by rulers with grandiose ideas whose way of doing things led to the destruction of the wealth of their so-called subjects.

The reading from Revelation reminds us that there really is a Jerusalem, a Temple of Peace, but that it is of Heavenly design and construction. The writer of Revelation describes that design and construction in very material terms, and he could not do otherwise. But the writer of Psalm 130, whoever that may have been, surely gets it correct when describing the pain in the hearts of mortal beings and how it is into the heart, into the mind, of each mortal human being that the Love and Concern that is Immortal and True really needs to come and dwell.

As a priest of the Church of England I could not refuse baptism to anyone, I could not refuse to wed couples who felt called to holy matrimony, and I could not refuse to bury anyone. In Ye Olden Times all these rites were conducted either in the porch of the parish church or immediately inside, close to the main doorway. I have always continued to follow those principles wherever I have served. And I have always given the elements of the Eucharist, the Holy Bread and Wine transformed – the old English word is “remembered” – into the Flesh and Blood of Jesus through words that He Himself used on the night that He was betrayed, to anyone who has come to the Table.

In Jamaica I did not ask whether you were JLP or PNP. Indeed, the parish of St Michael’s in Kingston, when I served there, included among the congregation both Donald Sangster and Beverly Anderson! Jamaicans know who they were and the political party to which each was affiliated.

In the parish of Christ Church in Bangkok one Sunday morning, I looked along a row of communicants and realized each of them came from a different country, many of which had been at war with one another in very recent times, and many of those former enemies who had just received the Body of Christ were not Anglican.

In the Cathedral of All Saints in Nairobi we shared the Elements of the Eucharist with people from any of the fifty-four tribes of Kenya, as well as with folk from dozens of other countries – diplomats and businessmen and refugees.

And here, at Holy Faith, Port St Lucie – well, look around you and see who you are! We do not care what your birth certificate or passport declare to be your earthly nationality or citizenship. We recognize you as Citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven, the true One Nation under God!

Oh! We might not all use the same language, and we might differ over the meaning of particular words in any of those languages. Our ritual practices might differ, depending on where we were nurtured in the Faith of our Forebears. But we recognize one another as siblings, sisters and brothers in the Faith, in, if you will, the Faithfulness of our One Creator. It is we, collectively, who make up the One Nation Under God at this time and in this place.

We are all of us fully aware as to Who it is Who has the real Say-so as to how each of us should live. And the Embodiment of the Creator has expressed that in Seven Words, at least in English: You shall love your neighbour as yourself.

To many that might sound like a command, but in the language of the One who first spoke those words, they are not so much a command as a promise. As citizens of the One Nation Under God we are given this Promise by the All-Powerful One that we will love one another. These are not the words of some dictator who has grabbed power for his own advantage, but rather they are words of the One Who loves the citizens of His World Order so that He was ready and freely chose to die for us so that any differences between us, you and me, are annulled, as are those between us, you and me and Him, are also annulled.

So, today, if you happen to be a newcomer or a visitor, welcome to the One Nation Under God, whoever you might be and from wherever you might have come to be here. Welcome fellow citizens of the One Nation Under God, or as Fr Rob has put it, Under God One Nation. For that is who we really are – no matter what our passport or birth certificate says we might be. Under God, we are One Nation! Praise the Lord!