Bible Study 103

Wednesday November 15, 2023

“Seabury”

Samuel Seabury—14 Nov. 1784. Seabury was the first Episcopal Bishop and the second Presiding bishop of the church. Born November 30 1729 Seabury’s father was a Congregational minister, till he converted and was ordained deacon then priest in the Anglican Church. He was brought up in Connecticut.

The young Seabury went to Yale and graduated in 1748. Like other Anglican priestly candidates Seabury had to journey to England for Anglican Orders. He was ordained deacon by the Bishop of Lincoln and priest by the Bishop of Carlisle in 1753. He was first appointed as rector to St James New Brunswick, NJ; Rector in Jamaica NY in1757 and then St Peter’s Westchester from1766.

Seabury was from the outset a ‘loyalist,’ siding with the British against the First Continental Congress. He wrote three letters that were published under the pen of A. W. Farmer. It was a hard-headed attempt to affirm and support the Loyalist position. His letters were replied to in the Media by Alexander Hamilton. He had a certain clarity of thought and style that set him apart from others. Because his parents had slave servants, Seabury found himself tied up in that controversy.

In 1775 he was kidnapped by Patriot forces and held for six weeks on Long Island. This seemed to have a significant affect on Seabury. Come the end of the war, he moved to Connecticut and was quite prepared to accept and obey the new government. Seabury denied that he was a supporter of slavery, but for quite some time he was regarded with suspicion.

In March of 1783 a clergy meeting was held at the Glebe House in Woodbury, Connecticut. Ten clergy met and chose Seabury as Bishop. Many Anglicans had left to return to England and there were no Bishops in the 13 Colonies. Clergy and rebel Colonists realized that the church could not continue without the power to ordain new clergy. They were also concerned that ‘Apostolic Succession’ should continue, for whatever form the new church structure would take.

You have to question whether the meeting of clergy was aware that a fundamental change had already taken place and the Anglican Church of North America had died on the cross of the 1776 Revolution. On July 7 Seabury was sent to London to seek consecration as bishop. The mission was naïve in the sense that the Church of England, governed by Parliament, already considered that the 13 Colonies had burned its bridges. Seabury’s request was denied. He was told in no uncertain terms that an Anglican Bishop was bound by his oath of allegiance to the king as Head of the Church. That was no longer possible for Seabury as an American Citizen. The dye was cast.

Seabury now turned to the Scottish Episcopal Church. They were not recognized as a part of the ‘established church’ because they refused to acknowledge the Hanoverian Kings. Seabury was consecrated bishop in Aberdeen on November 14, 1784. Bishops Skinner, Petrie and Kilgrour performed the consecration.---The reaction from London was immediate. The government feared that the church in North America would now take on a totally Jacobite persuasion. Parliament now made provision for ordaining bishops from outside its shores. Seabury’s tenacity had won the day and allowed for some kind of relationship to exist between the New American Church and the older Church of England.

Returning to New London in August 1785, Seabury ordained Deacons at Christ Church in Middletown, the first on American soil. He became the Bishop of Rhode Island in 1790 and was joined by bishops White and Provoost and Madison, all consecrated in England, in 1792. The Episcopal Church of North America had begun. Amen.