

Bishop Bradley's Reflections on the Sunday Readings

January 31, 2016 Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time

On this Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time, we come together on the very last day of January. Tomorrow begins the shortest month of the year, though this year this month will be one day longer than usual since it's a leap year. Tuesday of this week is the beautiful Feast of the Presentation of the Lord and the 40th day after Christmas. But Tuesday is also the day known by most of the world as "Groundhog Day," when Punxsutawney Phil will predict whether there will be six more weeks of winter, or if we might have an early spring. Of course there are many other more professional prognosticators to rely on than Punxsutawney Phil's opinion to know if there will be an early spring. But as we all know, people's opinions can be pretty fickle, and change at the drop of a hat.

Isn't that what we just heard about in the Gospel passage just a few moments ago? St. Luke told us that Jesus had come to the synagogue in his hometown of Nazareth, where he faithfully went every Sabbath, but as He was beginning His public ministry, He was asked to speak for the first time. After He had read a passage from the Prophet Isaiah, He simply said: "*Today, this passage is fulfilled in your hearing.*"

St. Luke told us that the people "*all spoke highly of Him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth.*" That was because Jesus had said something *very* profound--very dramatic----very authoritative: For someone to say that a scriptural prophecy, made by one of the most revered prophets of the Jewish tradition a thousand years before that, was now fulfilled in the One who had just read them---namely Jesus himself---well, that was quite a mouthful.

So, they were amazed. *But* then they began to think about who Jesus was. "*Isn't this the son of Joseph?*" In other words, "we know this young whipper-snapper.; we've watched him grow up here in Nazareth; who does he think he is?" Jesus began to try to teach them who He really was, but they not only closed their minds; they became filled with fury. **Their** opinions dramatically changed from thinking this was the "hometown hero" to seeing Him as a heretic---a blasphemer! Jesus' public ministry had only just begun, and the people were already trying to kill him by dragging him to the edge of the hill so that they could throw him off the cliff. But Jesus simply walked through their midst and began His journey to other villages where people would have more openness to His Good News.

How fickle, we human beings are; how quickly our opinions can change.

We heard about another prophet in our First Reading this morning---the prophet Jeremiah. What beautiful words God used to call Jeremiah to be His prophet to the nations: *“Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you....I dedicated you.....I appointed you.....I loved you. Stand up now and go; tell them all that I command you.”* God was very honest with Jeremiah and told him that his message would not be popular. And of course, we know that is the universal truth: anyone who speaks God’s Truth will usually not be very popular, and would not rate high in most people’s opinion polls. But God also promised Jeremiah that even though *“they will fight against you”* they will *“not prevail over you....because I am with you to deliver you”*, says the Lord.”

That is what gave Jeremiah the strength of his convictions---knowing that he was speaking the Truth, and knowing that God was with him.

That is also what gave Jesus His strength to stand up to His family members and hometown friends and neighbors who had turned against Him. Jesus knew that His Father loved Him with a love that was divine, a love that was powerful and unconditional.

And, dear friends, that should be what gives us great comfort and strength as well as we try to live as people of faith in this increasingly secularized society because that is the way God loves each of us!

That is what we heard St. Paul “singing” about in that beautiful Second Reading this morning that we’re all so familiar with. St. Paul was simply telling us that as God loves us, so are we called to love others. The love of Christ is deeper, stronger, and more real than the human love that simply is rooted in our emotions---when we love because we feel like it, or *when* we feel like it. Love at that level can be shallow and sharp, or as St. Paul said, can be like *a resounding gong or a clashing cymbal”*. The love that St. Paul talks about ---- the love of Christ---is more than an emotion; it’s an intention----it’s a choice---it’s a decision---an act of the will for the good and well-being of an-other no matter what the personal cost might be.

It’s speaking up for what is right, it’s standing up for what is Truth---it’s being willing to be one who speaks for God, even if our hometown friends and neighbors turn against us. It’s a married person remaining faithful to their spouse no matter what the standards of society tell us is ok. It’s parents who realize it’s important to teach their children in the ways of God---in the ways that have eternal consequences for how they get to Heaven, and not just raising them

according to the standards that will get them a good living and some passing happiness in this world. It's we as citizens who refuse to allow human laws to trump **any** of God's laws.

It's we as human beings realizing that Jesus has shown us how to treat all other human beings with respect, with compassion, extending forgiveness in the face of injury, rather than choosing to settle accounts with violence, to end relationships and hold life-long grudges, or to try to throw someone we used to love and admire off the edge of the hill.

Just as Jeremiah was able to do what God called him to do because he knew that the Lord God was with him. And just as Jesus was able to do what God sent Him into the world to do---to bring salvation to the world---because He was so secure in His Father's love for Him. So too for each of us. Because of who we are, God's sons and daughters, and brothers and sisters in Christ, through baptism----we can **choose** to love----we can **decide** to love because we too realize how precious we all are in God's sight. Jesus taught the Truth, no matter what the popularity or opinion polls showed. We're followers of Jesus---we're Disciples of Christ. We listen to the Truth----we speak the Truth----our actions are rooted in the Truth----because we follow Jesus, who is the Truth.

In the final analysis, when we stand before the Judgment Seat of God, which we will all do someday, He won't ask us if we watched the Super Bowl, or even played in the Super Bowl; He won't ask us if we were # 1 on the popularity charts or in the public opinion polls. He will only ask us if we lived our lives according to Jesus' example and if we followed Jesus: Who shows us the Way, teaches us the Truth, and leads us to eternal life.

God bless you now and always!

Faithfully yours in Christ,

+ Bishop Paul J. Bradley