

Bishop Bradley's Reflections on the Sunday Readings

July 5, 2020 Fourteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

On this first Sunday in July, we still find ourselves in the midst of our nation's major holiday, the Fourth of July celebrating our nation's Independence Day. This holiday is an important time for us to remember what happened 244 years ago, as our "infant nation" was "born", and began to stand on our own as a nation with a vision of unity and equality. Ever since that first 4th of July in 1776, our country has safeguarded, protected and defended our standing as a strong Democracy, dedicated to Freedom for our own citizens, beginning with the first of all Freedoms, the Freedom of Religion, and dedicated to protecting the Freedom of other countries throughout the world. And every 4th of July since that first one, we Americans proudly celebrate our identity as citizens of the United States of America.

However, I think we would all agree that this year's celebration of this important national holiday is unusual, to say the least, and filled with tensions and worries and, unfortunately, divisions among us, occasioned not only by the ongoing anxiety of the coronavirus and its continued impact on what we can do and the well-being of everyone, but also occasioned by the nearly six-weeks-long upheaval within our country occasioned by the murder of George Floyd, and the numerous protests, acts of violence, hatred and racially-motivated attacks against one another. All of this makes this Fourth of July weekend more challenging to celebrate with as much pride and joy as we would like to do.

We can be particularly grateful that the Scripture Readings we have just listened to for this Fourteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time focus our attention beyond our national boundaries, reminding us who we are as People of Faith. When we come together here, in person or virtually, we are reminded that we do so to give worship and praise to the God and Father of all People. When we gather as People of Faith, we are united in the Holy Eucharist, which makes us one in the Body and Blood of Christ.

In our First Reading, the Prophet Zechariah told us "*to rejoice heartily....to shout for joy*" because our King, the "*just Savior*", will overcome all war and conflict; He will "*proclaim peace to the nations from sea to sea*" and "*to the ends of the earth.*" Doesn't that sound like part of the Refrain from one of our most cherished patriotic songs, "*America the Beautiful*"? Remember the Refrain which states: "*America, America, God shed His Grace on thee. And crown thy good*

with brotherhood, from sea to shining sea.” It sounds a lot like Zechariah’s prophecy of the “*just and meek King*” who would come to dispel war and to “*proclaim peace to the nations*”. In spite of the daily news reports about the latest political name-calling, accusations of racist or unjust actions, or protests against various other aspects of our way of life, most people continue to long for peace; we want to work for just resolutions to our problems; we cherish and hope for a sense of unity among us. And so, the Prophet Zechariah holds out for us that sense of hope.

In today’s Second Reading from his Letter to the Romans, St. Paul also reminds us about our spiritual identity---who we are. Beyond whatever our nationality is in the “*flesh*” (our nationalities/ethnic/racial/religious backgrounds), St. Paul told us that when “*the Spirit of God dwells in you*”, we are a People united, and fully “alive” in Christ. As he would say in another place: “*In Christ, there is no Jew or Greek, slave or freeperson; all are one in Christ.*” And we can further deduce from that, in Christ there is preference to any ethnic or racial grouping---everyone is loved, valued, respected, and redeemed in Christ.

And then we heard today’s beautiful Gospel passage. The second part of today’s Gospel Reading is one of my favorite passages----and I imagine that’s true for many of you as well. Jesus extends one of the most warm and loving Invitations for us to Come to Him that we could ever hope for: “*Come to Me, all you who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest.*” But let’s not lose sight of the first part where Jesus reveals to us the sense of His own “Identity”----what gave Him the self-confidence in knowing for sure “Who” He was. In that passage, we get to “eavesdrop”, or “listen in on” Jesus’ intimate conversation with His Heavenly Father. That’s what Jesus means when He says: “*Yes, Father, such has been Your gracious will. All things have been handed over to Me by my Father. No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son----and anyone to whom the Son wishes to reveal Him.*” And of course, dear sisters and brothers in Christ, that includes all of us. Jesus came precisely to do just that----to reveal to the world Who the Father is----and to invite the world to come to Him. And for the world to come to the Father, they have to be able to do so through the Son.

And so, that’s why Jesus is able to extend that invitation to us, and all the world: “*Come to Me, ALL you who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest.*”

Is there anyone here who isn’t burdened with the labors of life? Is there anyone here who isn’t troubled in some way about past mistakes, worried about present situations, or fearful about future choices? Is there anyone here who isn’t to some degree stressed out, burned out, worn out as we are forced to keep dealing with this pandemic, and now compounded by our

own internal national conflicts? And, of course, there is the growing challenge of trying to raise families with a sense of faith and love for God, to be able to make morally sound choices, and to keep trying to avoid the growing and strong temptations to follow the ways of the world rather than the ways of God???

There are so many “voices” trying to tell us to find relief by following them, including the use of drugs, alcohol, pornography, or various other addictive behaviors. Of course, we all know, that those “releases” lead down the road to self-destruction. Jesus is the only Voice that offers us true Hope and lasting Peace---in fact, He offers us Eternal Rest. “*Come to Me!*”, Jesus promises, “*and I will give you rest.*”

So, on this special holiday weekend, in spite of how unusual this Fourth of July is, let us still truly “*rejoice*” and “*shout for joy*” as the Prophet Zechariah told us to do, and enjoy our fireworks and cookouts as well, because we realize that our lasting Freedom is rooted in God’s abiding and unconditional Love for us. Let us be “confident” in who we are, as St. Paul urged us to be: people who have the very Spirit of God dwelling within us. It’s pretty simple---all we have to do is accept Jesus’ invitation to find the true and lasting freedom from the One Whose “*yoke is easy and...burden is light.*” Then, as the “little ones” who seek the Truth, we will find Peace in this Life, and eternal Rest in the Life of the world to come.

God bless you, now and always.

Faithfully yours in Christ,

+ Bishop Paul J. Bradley