

[Readings: Ez. 2:2-5; Acts 4:8-12; Psalm 124; 1 Cor. 12:7-10; Mark6:1-6]

What a Providential selection of readings we have to reflect upon on this Independence Day weekend! In our own country, we have “rebels who have rebelled against me,” “hard of face and obstinate of heart,” challenges against our religious freedom which result in “insults, hardships, persecutions and constraints.” And Catholic prophetic voices who boldly speak out, but are “held without honor” in their native place, among their own kin, and in their own house.

The theme for this Sunday’s homily on this 4th of July is simply this: “Our eyes are fixed on the Lord, pleading for His mercy.”

In a nutshell, our readings today say this: The prophet is commissioned to peddle God’s word to a tough audience. A repentant people turns to the God of mercy. Being a minister of the word comes with its own thorn in the flesh. Even Jesus Himself gets a poor reception in the one place people really knew him: back home.

Prophets had one distinct advantage. Their only task was to remain faithful to the proclamation of God’s word. They were not obliged to persuade anyone of its efficacy.

So Moses can speak to Pharaoh, whose heart was known to be hardened against him. Ezekiel brings a word to an equally obstinate nation. Jeremiah is dismissed as a madman. As the Lord warns the prophets of old, if they fail to deliver the word they are given, they will be held responsible for it.

If they deliver it with integrity, the responsibility is transferred to the hearer.

The Sunday homilist -- that’s me -- has the distinct disadvantage of having two goals: to speak the truth fearlessly and to make it inviting enough to encourage the hearers to accept it. The challenge and the invitation are delivered together as a one-two punch in a velvet glove. It’s a bit of a high-wire balancing act that can make a preacher dizzy every Sunday morning. When asked why he was so successful at debates, Abraham Lincoln said: “It’s all about diplomacy.” If you tell your opponent to go to the devil, you use words that make him look forward to the trip!”

Of course, the prophet faces consequences not likely to plague the average homilist. Jeremiah gets thrown in a cistern and is eventually murdered for his unwelcome word. Amos is obliged to skip town. Elijah ends up praying for an early death. Even Jesus is booed and hooted out of Nazareth.

Paul's cryptic remarks about his thorn in the flesh, most preachers know, is really talking about the struggle we all face between relying on our own powers rather than trusting in God. Truth is, we don't often trust God, no matter what it says on our money. We trust the money. We trust rhetoric. We put our efforts into the distractions to our faith. In the end, Paul forsook rhetoric and stuck to Christ crucified. It's a daring move. Most of us aren't ready for it. As we pray for our country, let "Our eyes be fixed on the Lord, pleading for His mercy."

On this Independence Day weekend, I would like to share a prophetic voice from Cardinal Timothy Dolan, the Archbishop of New York City. The University of Notre Dame observed the conclusion of Religious Freedom Week in the U.S. with a Religious Liberty Summit June 28-29, 2021, that invited ecumenical leaders and scholars from around the nation to discuss the various challenges to religious liberty.

Religious Freedom Week is observed June 22 to June 29 each year. The annual observance, sponsored by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, always begins on the feast of two English martyrs who fought religious persecution, St. Thomas More and St. John Fisher, and ends with the feast of two apostles martyred in Rome, Saints Peter and Paul.

Cardinal Dolan is chairman of the U.S. bishops' Committee for Religious Liberty, and set the tone for the Notre Dame conference in his keynote address, observing that religious freedom is a human right, "essential to the dignity of the human person and the flourishing of all that is noble in us."

He noted that defending religious freedom used to be "a nonconfrontational no-brainer," as American as "mom, apple pie, the flag and Knute Rockne." He knows how to play to his Notre Dame audience!

Now, he continued, defense of religious liberty has become "caricatured" as an "oppressive, partisan, unenlightened, right-wing crusade," even considered by some to be discrimination.

This false narrative must be corrected. The concept of religious freedom is enshrined in the founding documents of the United States.

Cardinal Dolan made four major points.

First, he said that we advocate for religious freedom not primarily because we are believers, but because we are "Americans, patriots, rational human beings." Religious freedom is a fact of the American experiment that has been cherished and defended by people of all faiths.

Second, religious liberty is not a conservative issue, but historically considered part of a movement that is "progressive and reforming."

Freedom of religion is "the first line of defense of/and protection of all human rights." Further, religious liberty has been "the driving force of almost every enlightening, unshackling, noble cause in American history," he said, including movements such as abolition of slavery and the campaigns for voting rights and civil rights.

Third, "religious freedom is enshrined not to protect the government from religion, but religion from the government," Cardinal Dolan explained. Thus, freedom for religion became a keystone in the country's founding documents.

Fourth, throughout most of our history, American culture welcomed religious voices in the public square, Cardinal Dolan said. Then the culture moved to neutrality before arriving at the present moment of political correctness, in which believers face "downright antagonism," he said, and the message that we must leave our conscience behind when we enter the public square.

"Religious freedom allows the church and all religious communities to live out their faith in public and to serve the good of all." On this Fourth of July, let us pray for the preservation of our precious right to religious freedom. And let us work actively to preserve, protect and defend that precious right. AMEN!

[Readings: Amos 7:12-15; Psalm 85; Ephesians 1:3-14; Mark 6:7-13]

My homiletics professor in the seminary said that a good homily can be summarized in one sentence. My homily theme is taken from a movie I have never seen, but I remember one scene and one line from it. Robert De Nero in the movie "Taxi Driver" looks in a mirror and says to himself, "You talkin' to ME? You talkin' to ME?" That is the theme of my homily today. All three readings have God "talkin'" to those whom He has called. God is also "talkin'" to you and me as you and I are called to do His will.

If you are a Christian, if you are a Catholic, there is a very good chance that you have been told by someone else at some point in your life, in your past, that "God has a special plan for you." That "God has a special plan for your life." I try to keep tuned in to God as often as I can throughout the day to see what small plans He has for me, and how they fit in the bigger picture of my call to the priesthood and my ministry as your pastor. These words, "God has a special plan for you," can be reassuring words because it means that God is in charge of things and that there is some purpose behind the things that happen to you.

So, what is God's plan for YOU, specifically? And what choice DO you have in all of that? And how does God's plan for your life mesh with God's plans for other people? After all, you're not the only person who's been told that God has a plan for his or her life! God is never too busy to be concerned about the lives of each one of us.

The plan that we hear in our Second Reading is even greater than that. The "predestination" St. Paul talks about is not what some Protestant or Pentecostal theology suggests. "You are already predestined to be either in Group One which goes to Heaven, or Group Two, which goes to Hell. So whatever you do in this life doesn't matter." That's NOT the Catholic understanding. God has predestined us to have eternal life and glory, but it is up to us to respond to that invitation with faithfulness and dedication to our calling. Let's take a look at the kind of people God calls and how they respond in our three Readings.

There is a dramatic difference in the profession of preacher (the apostles in our Gospel), the prophet (Amos, in our First Reading) and St. Paul (in our Second Reading). They are all in three different styles, situations and settings. Just as you and I and all of come with different styles, situations and settings.

Amos is living and working in the kingdom of Israel during the first half of the 8th Century B. C. Amos has no experience as a prophet. He is a shepherd, and a “dresser of sycamore trees,” which means to pinch the fruit on the branches so that it opens up and bears fruit. These sycamore trees are much smaller than the sycamores in our country. Its fruit is small and bitter, but the trees are plentiful in the Middle East. Its fruit is known as poor people’s fruit, for those who cannot afford more exotic or expensive fruit.

But, as young and inexperienced as he is, Amos is still called beyond what he thinks he is capable of doing: “Go and prophecy to my people Israel!”

In the same way, when Jesus summons and sends His apostles to minister, He sends them to places and people unknown to them, without even the barest essentials for their journey. They were not to pack a lunch or even take a snack. They were not to take money, debit cards or travelers checks. They carried no suitcases; they had no hotel reservations. If I had to travel that way, I would just DIE! It took me a 20-foot U-Haul truck just to move me from New Baltimore to Warren!

The Apostles carried nothing, so they had to rely completely on the kindness, generosity and hospitality of the people they would visit. In turn, the gifts they did carry and share with their hosts, were God’s word, God’s forgiveness, and God’s healing. If they were not welcomed, they would shake the dirt off their feet as a sign of judgment. I know a pastor who did this when he left his parish assignment sooner than expected, having had a very poor welcome by those who wanted to see him gone. One or two parishes in the Archdiocese even had three pastors in twelve months! They and their message were not welcome by the communities to which they were sent.

Were you ever placed in a situation where you had to tell someone something that you or they did not agree with, and that disagreement caused a

conflict in your relationship? How did that experience change YOU?

Do you ever think about what sort of life you might have lived, had you not responded to what the Lord is calling you to continue to do and to be? Any regrets? If you are living the life God's wants you to live, there really should not be any regrets. But even if there are, bring them to the Lord. He understands.

My niece asked me one time what was the one thing in my life that God has given me that I have never regretted and that has brought me the greatest satisfaction in my life. I answered that it is this – my vocation to the priesthood and my ministry in the parish. I have not regretted it for one day, because I know that I am doing what GOD wants me to do with my life. Not what I thought I wanted to do with my life. And it is a WONDERFUL life!

St. Paul speaks of us being chosen by God, blessed, loved, holy, and destined for adoption. Do you really believe this? If our very reason for being here in this place and at this time in history is to praise God's glory, how faithful and fruitful are we to that call? Are we doing what we are called to be doing?

We have divine assurance that we are not alone in the call. God is with us. He sustains us with the Food for the journey from Heaven, and with each other. AMEN!

[Readings: Jeremiah 23:1-6; Psalm 23; Ephesians 2:13-16; Mark 6:30-34]

Authority. I used to think that authority was rebelled against only by children, teens, and young adults. Now, as we become more educated and sophisticated, it seems that people of all ages – “from eight to eighty” or “one to one hundred” -- are saying, “No one is going to tell ME what to do!” Or, to give at least some leeway, “Tell me why I should do what you are telling me to do, or why I should believe what you are telling me to believe.”

Authoritative attitudes don't help the situation. Remember when we were growing up, and Mom or Dad would say to us: “Do you hear me?” I was too young to respond: “Is that a rhetorical question? I'm not deaf. You are not mute. Yes, I heard you!” Had any of us kids responded that way, Bang! Zoom!

Or how about this one: “Because I said so!” That would end the discussion or the debate. “Because I'm your father!” “Because I'm your mother!” Reason enough.

Why is it then, that when God's Word says so, or the Church says so, we still question their authority? Are we smarter than God? Are we smarter than 2000 years of experience as a Church? How ludicrous, self-serving and pompous it is when we think that way.

Taking our cue from Jesus, we see that approachability is the key to effectiveness in ministry. Unlike some of the other religious leaders of His day who kept a “proper” distance from sinners and from the ritually unclean, Jesus moves easily among people of every social class and both genders. He touches the sick, converses with sinners and empathizes with the voiceless, the marginalized, and all who were looked down upon as being “un-cool” and unimportant. As Pope Francis would say, Jesus smells like His sheep.

Rather than assume a position of authority, Jesus allows His message to be authoritative while using a manner of delivery that was gentle, even meek. Rather than make His importance felt by demanding honors, Jesus serves the needs of other in such a manner that they feel important – important to Him and important to God.

Jesus is always truthful. Jesus does not hesitate to acknowledge sin, hypocrisy and injustice where He finds them. But rather than condemn sinners, He invites them to be transformed by the truth. In all He does and says, Jesus chooses to reflect the mercies of a loving God. He is patient with the weaknesses and failures of those He chooses to share in His ministry. Jesus helps each of His disciples become their best selves in His presence. He does not coerce or force them. Each is free to respond to His loving overtures or not. Jesus leads with strength and conviction, but not with force. For that reason, some of his audience does not believe that He is the true Messiah.

Jesus is a shepherd, not a sovereign. Even when we call Him King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

Contrast this to what Jeremiah cries about in our First Reading. From the very time that David was anointed by Samuel, the authority of the rulers of Israel and Judah was divinely intended to be shepherd-like in nature. Ruling in God's name and as God's appointed and anointed representatives, the Jewish rulers were to reign wisely, doing what was just and right for all, from the least to the greatest. Rather than scatter and separate, antagonize or alienate, Israel's shepherd-leaders were to gather, to protect and to ensure the security of those under their care.

Unfortunately, the majority of these rulers proved to be a huge disappointment, choosing themselves over their people and sovereignty over service. For that reason, God promises a personal intervention. A descendant of David would be raised up to shepherd the people wisely and well. This of course, is fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

What kind of a world would we have if our secular and political royalty saw themselves as shepherd-leaders instead of political powers? So many of our medieval saints were kings and queens, princes and princesses who saw their authority as having been given to them not by popular vote but by divine ordinance. Some of our leaders see themselves as gods and not as servants.

Once that crown was on their head, the royal saints of old realized not how much politics, power and prestige they had, but that one day the crown

would be removed and placed at the footstool of a Divine King. That they would have to stand before Him on Judgment Day to make an accounting of what they did with what they had been given. I don't remember the last time in recent history that a President, a Supreme Court Justice a member of Congress, or a Governor or Mayor spoke such words.

Back to the Gospel. Jesus and the disciples have been on mission. And now it is time for a rest. Our Lord, as any good pastor does, calls the disciples back together for a [retreat](#). For leisure. But word spreads quickly.

Crowds gather. They are hungry for the words that Jesus preaches. They are hungry for the healing that he offers.

His heart is moved to pity. In Latin, we refer to this as *miser cordia*. It is the mercy of the heart, the kindness of God reaching out to the gathered crowds. During a Holy Year of Mercy called by Pope Francis in 2015, a song was composed based on the Gospel of Luke: "Be Merciful as the Father is Merciful:" *Misericordes Sicut Pater*. Jesus sees their suffering, and He begins to teach.

Jesus interprets the Scriptures, speaks in parables and announces the kingdom of God. He is teaching about things that matter. He is the shepherd of the sheep that were once without a shepherd, leading them into a world of truth, goodness and beauty. He calls them and us to let our hearts be moved by the suffering of my brothers and sisters. To offer a comforting word, not indifference, to act, not only to speak to those most in need.

St. Paul reminds us in our Second Reading that each human person has within themselves the struggle between good and evil, between service and violence, between sin and grace. Paul tells us that in the redeeming flesh of Christ, the former division is now past. The wall is down. All blends into one. And it is redeemed, made holy. Isn't it a lot easier for you and me to let go and let God help us to heal, to be whole and holy again? To be His shepherd leaders in our Church, in our family, in our parish community, and in our country? AMEN!

[Readings: 2 Kings 4:42-44; Psalm 145; Ephesians 4:1-6; John 6:1-15]

A man I know grew up believing his grandma was actually with Jesus when he fed the 5,000. He came to that belief because whenever that particular Gospel would be read, everyone in the family whispered, "Grandma musta' been there!" And they would laugh. They all knew that no matter how many people arrived for dinner -- even unexpectedly -- that everyone ate and there was always plenty left over. "My family was never rich," my acquaintance said, "especially when my mom was growing up, but they never felt poor, either."

Jesus knows the feeling of relief when the hungry are fed. Anyone who has served in a soup kitchen sees sad, uncomfortable and even ashamed people holding empty plates. Then they see a transformation take place. The plates, now brimming with food, don't hold only food; they also carry a sense of renewed hope for another day. They see faces that say, "Someone cares. Someone cares enough to feed me."

How much more does Jesus Christ Himself care for us! You and I are nourished at every Mass. But then, we are not called to sit passively and rest in our comfort and pleasure. We are called to be family for one another.

Speaking of family, it should come as no surprise that Pope Francis has established a World Day for Grandparents and the Elderly.

Its first observance is today, a date chosen because it's the closest Sunday to the feast of Sts. Joachim and Anne, Mary's dad and mom, Jesus' grandpa and grandma. In a lot of ways, the Church has the pope's grandmother to thank for this new annual observance. And, it's a way Francis is showing appreciation for his own grandmother and paying tribute to her memory.

For those of us who may be elderly, and I have to include myself, because I am no longer middle aged, as I will be 67 in October, and I don't think I will live to be 137 years old!, this moment is an opportunity to reflect upon how we may continue to answer the Lord's call in our lives. In his message commemorating the day, Pope Francis, being 84 years old himself, seemed to write less as the Holy Father and more as a peer to the elderly.

He describes how, no matter the season of life, the Lord remains close to his people with “new possibilities, new ideas, and new consolations.”

He writes, “I was called to become the Bishop of Rome when I had reached, so to speak, retirement age (he was elected at age 78!) and thought I would not be doing anything new. One’s vocation never ends -- and for the elderly that vocation is “to preserve our roots, to pass on the Faith to the young and to care for the little ones.” “It makes no difference how old you are, whether you still work or not, whether you are alone or have a family, whether you became a grandmother or grandfather at a young age or later, whether you are still independent or need assistance,” he continued. “Because there is no retirement age from the work of proclaiming the Gospel and handing down traditions to your grandchildren. You just need to set out and undertake something new.”

As he’s noted: “The words of grandparents contain something special for young people. And they know it. The words that my grandmother gave me in writing the day of my priestly ordination I still carry with me, always, in the breviary. And I read them often, and they do me good.”

Yes, the world has changed so much since the 1930s and ’40s when Pope Francis was a boy, but some things haven’t. Some things never will.

Families, neighborhoods, parishes and communities are multigenerational. And those who are grandparents, those who are elders, are called to play a role, to live a vocation, by helping those who are younger. From preschoolers to “middle-agers.” And those who are younger would be wise – and would have the opportunity to become wiser -- if they open their arms, their hearts, minds and souls to the lessons and love the elderly can share. Want to share.

After the death of an elderly relative, it’s so common for a member of a younger generation to sadly say, “I wish I had asked ... I wish I had listened more ... I wish I had better appreciated” This July celebration can be a reminder to ask, to listen, and to appreciate.

If you’re a grandparent, an elder, the same holds true for the world of your childhood, of your teen, young adult and middle-age years.

Living through that time, those times, has presented many, many opportunities. Some of you may have rushed to meet and enjoyed the challenge.

Other events that you would have done just about anything to avoid, were thrust upon you. They are the crosses, large and small, that have dotted your life on earth. Welcomed or unwelcomed, they were the seeds that, over time, over prayer, became the wisdom you have today -- that is, the knowledge blessed and transformed by the Holy Spirit. Again and again, they've been your "personal Pentecosts." And now, like the apostles, you're to go out and share what you know, what you received.

Or, for elders who are completely or almost completely homebound, to stay in and share what you know. To pray for and offer a helping hand -- and sometimes a well-meant and gentle nudge -- to a member of a younger generation. Then, too, it's one of the best ways to show your appreciation for the grandparents and elders who did just that for you when you were young. It's a truly blessed way of paying tribute to their beloved memory.

Grandparents and the elderly are also, or can be, powerful influencers. By what they say and what they do. By how they lived and how they're living now. Simply put, by what they value.

Grandparents have more power than they realize. As does the elderly man or woman who lives down the block (or always sits in that pew at Mass) and has a kind word for little ones. And not-so-little-ones.

Young people: Spend a little time with a member of the senior generation --if only a few minutes -- and you can come away with a grain of wisdom, a glimpse of perspective, that can brighten your day, ease your worries and, maybe, even deeply enhance your life. Plus, you will be making that senior's day. You will have given them a tremendous gift, bigger than you can possibly imagine ... until you yourself are an old-timer. You bring Jesus to them.

Every time all of us are nourished by His Body and Blood, every time we gather around the table of the Eucharist, we become His hands and feet, His eyes and ears, His heart and soul in a Church and a world that is very, very hungry indeed.

That's where St. Paul's reading from the Letter to the Ephesians comes in. It's the end of the letter, and as usual, Paul makes his final point of the letter his hope, his dream and his heartfelt prayers for the infant Church. This is what he says and I am paraphrasing here:

Abused people are hungry for that kind of gentleness which only you can provide. Feed them with your gentleness.

There are those whose bodies and spirits are giving in to the hunger of illness, disease and old age. They need to be nourished with the food of your patience. Feed them with your patience.

Those who feel unloved, unvalued and unwanted need to be fed with the great love you have kept hidden in your heart. Feed them with your love.

Those who seek to divide and conquer need to know and experience the peace that only you can bring. Feed them with your peace.

This week, you will encounter someone whose eyes are begging for your spiritual or physical help. It's real and it's desperate. The power is in your heart and in your hands. In your home and in your wallet. In your own lingering hunger, which will only be satisfied and filled in no other way than this. AMEN!