

[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!