



**His Excellency,  
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Diocese of Belleville**

Sermon:  
Fourteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time,  
July 4, 2021,  
St. Teresa Parish, Belleville

**“Belief and Unbelief”**

(This is the text as originally written. During the actual delivery, some passages were omitted and other comments were added spontaneously. *Nota bene*: This text has not been thoroughly proofread. Therefore, there may be errors in spelling, grammar and punctuation.)

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ:

“Lord, I do believe, help me in my unbelief!”

Belief and unbelief, faith and doubt are all around us in our religious lives, our political lives, and our everyday secular lives. Yesterday, the Church honored St. Thomas the Apostle, whose unbelief in the mystery of the resurrection was so great that he told his fellow apostles that he would not believe unless he could place his hands in the wounds of Jesus. In today’s gospel, Mark tells us of Jesus’ return to his hometown of Nazareth, where his former neighbors express their unbelief in Him and His teachings.

Today we mark 245 years since the signing of the Declaration of Independence. Events of this past year have led some Americans to express their unbelief and their doubts concerning the promise and the vision of American democracy. Social unrest has led some to speak of two Americas, one not believing in the other. Millions of citizens are in the state of unbelief about November’s presidential election, asking if it was free and fair? Thousands of Americans were so shaken by the events at the capitol on January 6 that they doubt the stability of the government and of democracy itself.

Vast numbers of Americans express their unbelief in the science of the coronavirus pandemic. Still others doubt the need or the effectiveness of the vaccine. As the United States

withdraws troops from Afghanistan, many Americans say they do not believe the deadly war was necessary. Others do not believe the departure should take place, fearing a takeover by the Taliban. And, in Surf City, Florida, hundreds of people, in shock over the collapse of Champlain Tower South, are overwhelmed by unbelief. With eyes red with tears, they express their unbelief that 124 of their husbands, wives, parents, children, and friends were buried alive under tons of concrete. Some have voiced unbelief in a loving and all-powerful God because there has been no miraculous recovery of their loved ones trapped in the ruins. Each one of you and, I myself, surely have had experiences of the tension between belief and unbelief, faith and doubt. As the saints have testified, belief and unbelief are part of the journey of the Christian life during which we encounter the nearness of God and the absence of God. As we know, the great St. Teresa of Calcutta experienced the dark night of the soul, confiding in her diary that there was a period of many years during which she doubted the existence of God altogether.

Let's look closely at belief and unbelief in verses 1-6 of today's reading from Chapter 6 of the Gospel according to Mark.

*"Jesus departed and went to His hometown."* We see immediately that unbelief causes the people of Nazareth to reject Jesus and treat Him harshly. Recall that according to Luke, 4 early in His ministry, a crowd in Nazareth tried to kill Jesus. Still, He returns to proclaim His teachings. In recent Sunday gospels, we learned that before going to Nazareth, Jesus calmed a storm, cast out evil spirits, cured a woman sick for twelve years, and raised the daughter of Jairus to new life. Now Jesus comes home, perhaps hoping the people have heard of these signs and wonders. Perhaps, this time they will welcome him.

After all Nazareth is where He grew up, learned to eat, walk, and talk, and where He prepared for His public ministry. So He is visiting people who should have known Him well. He seeks to witness to them about the Kingdom of God. They seem impressed at first, but then they show only unbelief.

*"When the Sabbath came, He began to teach in the synagogue."* Mark doesn't tell us what Jesus taught. On His first visit, Luke tells us Jesus read from the book of Isaiah which spoke prophetically about Him. Jesus then closed the book, and said, *"Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."* Immediately, the people tried to throw Jesus off a cliff.

Now, on his return to the synagogue, many listeners were astonished by Him. Their astonishment quickly soured into cynicism and unbelief. As they reflected on what they had seen and heard from Jesus, they couldn't get over the fact that He'd grown up in their midst. Since they knew Jesus from His youth, they didn't know what to make of Him. Their astonishment didn't turn to respect, but rather to unbelief.

They wanted to know: Jesus, where did you get this authority? Jesus, where did you get this wisdom? Jesus, where did you get his power? These amazing gifts were to show his former neighbors that God was at work in Him. But, the Nazarenes could not acknowledge that His power was from God. Instead, they asked, *"Is not this the carpenter?"* as if to say: Isn't this the village handy man? A common laborer? These questions reinforced their unbelief.

Then they asked: “*Isn't he the son of Mary?*” This question may have been a veiled insult. Because in Jewish culture sons were always identified by their father's name – a man was called the son of his mother only when his father was unknown. When Jesus visited a year earlier in Luke 4, the people of Nazareth spoke of Jesus as “the son of Joseph.” “*And they took offense at Him and Jesus could work no wonders there.*” Jesus was not inclined to exercise His power in such an adversarial environment of unbelief.

The passage concludes “*And He wondered at their unbelief.*” Christ was amazed by their unbelief – not at the fact of their unbelief, but the cause of their unbelief. Simply because, they thought they knew Him, they were not open to believing in Him. Of course, they really did not know him. Hence, their unbelief.

Today, as we recall The Second Continental Congress which adopted the Declaration of Independence on July 4, 1776, we do well to remember that the men who drafted the document (John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Roger Sherman, Robert Livingston and Thomas Jefferson, the primary drafter) were not known as devout churchgoing, committed Christians. They were probably deists. Their declaration never mentions Jesus Christ at all and the references to “God” are quite generic. They mention the “Laws of Nature's God,” “their Creator,” “the Supreme Judge of the world,” and “divine Providence.” These expressions reflect the kind of civil religion we hear when elected officials say, “God bless America!” or “God bless our troops!”

245 years later, we may ask, is much of the United States growing more like the Nazareth that Jesus encountered on his second and last visit as an adult? Questioning? Doubting? Mired in unbelief and not truly interested in knowing God or Christ? National surveys tell us: More and more Americans say they do not believe in God, especially the young. More and more Christians say they do not go to Church, especially the young. Some, who believe in God, believe God loves and blesses Americans and America more than God blesses other people or nations. They embrace a form of American exceptionalism. “God is on our side.” He does not love all people and all nations equally. They do not realize that God is not God the way we would be God, if we were God.

Today's celebration of the independence of the 13 original colonies from Great Britain and today's gospel reflection on belief and unbelief provide us with the opportunity to listen, learn, think, talk, pray, and act about our Catholic faith and our patriotism, our experiences of belief and unbelief, faith and doubt as Christians and as citizens.

Do we believe that, as Catholics, being the best believing Christians we can be will help us make our country the best country it can be? Do we believe Our Catholic faith and worship give us gifts that help us to be better citizens? Do we believe that, if we faithfully and courageously live out our baptismal commitments, grounded in our relationship with Jesus Christ and our Christian fellowship, we are strengthening the fabric of our nation? Do we believe that our democratic structures of Government and the credibility of the Catholic Church are facing a challenging moment in history? Do we believe that we, the members of the Christian Community, including the faithful at St. Teresa Parish, working together can strengthen and renew the conscience and the moral compass of our Church and our nation? Do we believe that the life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness we celebrate today frees us to read the signs of the

times and discern the ways God is moving us to help the “City of Man” to become the “City of God?”

Do we believe that Christian hope urges us to affirm that the best years for our country and our Church lie ahead of us and that each one of us has a part to play in making Jesus Christ truly the Light of the world? And, as we journey around the sun, may we continue to be blessed with Light, more Light, and more Light.

If you believe these things, then I invite you to pray with me each day this soul-revealing prayer of St. Augustine, Doctor the Church and Bishop of Hippo in North Africa:

“Lord, I do believe!

Help me!

Help me, Lord!

Help me, Lord in my unbelief!”

Praise be Jesus Christ! Both now and forever! AMEN!