

THE GOSPEL IS NOT ABOUT “THEN,”
IT IS ABOUT “NOW.”

They took offense at Jesus, the Gospel tells us, because he led them beyond their perceptions and expectations. He sought to expand their horizons, to open both their minds and hearts. He was one of them, he knew their story, and the stories of the many around them. He spoke to them of God and of God’s presence in their life, home, and family; *and* of God’s presence in the life of others, who were not of their home, town, nation, culture, or way of life. He challenged them to love their enemies and do good to those who persecute them; to love their neighbor, every neighbor as if the neighbor were themselves. Challenging words then and now which invite, in some, a sense of “astonishment.” Who really believes those words? Where did he get all this? Who does he think he is?

Jesus would not accept a reliance on their weakness for a lack of vision; nor a reliance on their strength for self-satisfaction & contentment. He would not accept their excuses for mediocrity, security, selfishness, hatred, or self-righteousness. When Jesus spoke, they found him “too much for them.” “Leave us alone--we like things the way they are!” Many of them walked away. Jesus frightened them because he challenged them to think and act beyond the presumptions of the day; he called them to be accountable for the faith they claimed and the values they professed. Things are not fine the way they are, he told them. Too many people suffer, in too many places for too many reasons, too many sisters and brothers are judged, and unwelcomed.

His love for them was too great to “leave them alone,” or to let them isolate themselves from the others, from “the many,” from those they perceived to be different. He challenges every desire to go back to another time or age. Despite their resistance, and their fear of his vision, a fear that they might have to change their own ways and



heart, they felt and knew that a prophet of God was among them. That, perhaps, is what frightened them most. And so, the Gospel tells us, in the face of mediocrity, Jesus could work no mighty deed there. No mighty deed without vision beyond self, beyond their own community, culture, and nation. And “he was amazed” we are told, by their lack of faith, by their inability to see beyond either the past, themselves, or where they were. THE GOSPEL IS NOT ABOUT “THEN,” IT IS ABOUT “NOW!”

Jesus, the prophet is here today, perhaps amazed, as we remember and celebrate our country—a nation fashioned in diversity—made up of the “tired, poor, and huddled masses yearning to be free.” This holy and loving prophet inviting us to sing praise for the good we as a nation have done and must yet do; to remember the sacrifice so many have made for the freedom and life we have, and the work we have done to share that gift.

But the spirit of the prophet enters us, and sets us on our feet, challenging us, and our whole people, to remember the “weakness” that too many in this land, as we celebrate freedom and independence, are kept from sharing that freedom, independence, and life. There is a prophet here! He is amazed at what is going on.

This prophet speaks daringly, like Ezekiel, to *“the hard of face and the obstinate of heart...”* those who cannot hear or will not see or who run and hide from truth. In other words, this prophet challenges us, as we remember and celebrate; to open our eyes and ears, to see and hear the work that must yet be done, the freedom and equality that must still be offered; and to embrace the vision, marred when it was first uttered by a certain blindness, that all people are created equal, endowed by God with unalienable rights... all people of every race, language, and way of life, in every place.

This vision, which finds its roots in the Scriptures, is prophetic, challenging and for *“the obstinate of heart,”* frightening. THE GOSPEL IS NOT ABOUT “THEN,” IT IS ABOUT “NOW!”

The gift of freedom and hospitality we celebrate is a precious gift which must be embraced again and again, even as we recognize that there is much more left to do, remembering, we hope, with a prophet’s aching heart, the too many left behind.

During this Fourth of July Celebration, Christ the prophet speaks words of peace, justice, equality, and reconciliation. His message inspired, to some extent, the vision of our founding fathers, though they themselves did not completely grasp the implications. They sought to fashion a nation where all might live as one, even in diversity, but their vision was certainly not realized in their day, and still is not complete. That is the message of our heritage, it is our task for today and the promise and hope for tomorrow.

As we celebrate the Independence of the Nation we love we know, see, and hear prophets among us who insist on justice, equality, truth, mercy, vision, and hospitality; prophets who speak words of hope, compassion, mercy and hospitality. Prophets who challenge us, even as we celebrate with grateful hearts, to *“look into the signs of times by the light of faith.”*

Keeping us attentive to the needs of those who grieve and are in pain, as well as to those filled with joy and hope. Prophets who challenge us to move from the past and go forward into the future; prophets who call us to account for the faith we claim; and to be true to the foundation of our nation’s beginning.

On this Fourth of July, filled with gratitude, we rightly sing the praise of our Country, but in faith we also sing of *“other lands with hopes and dreams as true and high as ours.”* Faith opens our eyes to look for prophets, who challenge our ways, and “set us on our feet,” to name the strength, but also to reveal the weakness, which when named becomes the source of new strength. Prophets who move us as people forward to a time and place where all are free, welcomed and embraced in God’s unending mercy.

A place *“where prophets speak, and words are strong and true;”* where *“the outcast and the stranger bear the image of God’s face.”* A place where mighty deeds, filled with grace, happen.

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