

ORDINARY SUNDAY XIV “B” July 4/5, 2015

A week from Tuesday several priests of the archdiocese will begin new pastoral assignments. About three months ago all received an official letter of appointment from the archbishop. Having received several such letters they are very generic documents: greeting, statement of the appointment—where, beginning date and year of termination, and fraternal closing. Reading today’s selection from Ezekiel I could not help but think, “What if my letter of appointment stated: “Hard of face and obstinate of heart are they to whom I am sending you!” Upon receipt I would be contacting the archbishop for a sit-down, face-to-face, heart-to-heart discussion relating not only to the assignment but also to my promise of obedience!

Today’s Scriptures are quite blunt as they relate the obstacles, the difficulties, the sufferings, faithful followers of Jesus have encountered, do encounter, and will always encounter as they strive to be true to their commitment to Jesus, the faith of the Church, and baptism’s and confirmation’s “appointment” as witnesses/missionaries. And that is all of us! The church’s calendar of saints is peppered with martyrs, both those who literally shed their blood, as well as those who, while not killed for their witness, endured ridicule and rejection in living lives of discipleship.

However, before we look “out there” and confine our reflection to the obstacles society, culture or the world erect in regard to the challenges of living the gospel, we need to first look “in here”—to our own heart, examine our own openness to encounter by God, our own response to Jesus’ and the Gospel call to conversion. “You cannot give what you do not have” as the popular saying goes. The following true example can help frame our reflection.

As we celebrate Independence Day weekend, Thomas Jefferson, the author of the Declaration of Independence is front and center. What many of us might not know is that Thomas Jefferson produced for himself his own version of the Bible. Taking scissors Jefferson edited the gospels, selectively excising passages he agreed with and putting them into book form, while discarding the rest.

While none of us might do something quite so radical, yet Jefferson's story can serve as a mirror by which to reflect on today's Scriptures.

How open am I to "swallow" the whole Jesus, the whole gospel message? For example: In St. Matthew's account of the Sermon on the Mount Jesus says: "You have heard it said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. ... **But I say to you** love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Mt. 5:38, 44). Where am I with Jesus and his message when it comes not only to forgiving personal hurts, but larger societal issues such as the death penalty? In terms of daily living and witnessing to Jesus, who or what determines my stance? Does partisan political ideology direct my faith; or does faith and Church teaching direct my politics? Does the Gospel walk with me into the election booth, or does it remain outside? If the gospel does not cause me some, or great discomfort, then I need to reflect on how open I am to it and Jesus himself. Could it be that like the citizens of Jesus' hometown, or Thomas Jefferson, I have crafted a Gospel and a Jesus to my "image and likeness"? Could it be that while I give lip service to the faith and my church practice "looks good" and is socially acceptable, as Jesus gazes into my heart is he "amazed at my lack of faith"? Hard questions for me. Hard questions for all of us.

Today we are invited by our readings, especially from St. Paul, to lives of humility, not a false humility that devalues ourselves or grovels in fear before God, but a humility that recognizes our humanness: our giftedness, and our weakness. Whatever the "thorn in the flesh" St. Paul speaks about was (and the phrase is deliberately vague) it kept Paul from succumbing to pride and left him open to listening to the invitation of God and following God's call, even at the cost of physical or spiritual comfort. He is our hope and our example. We all need the grace to admit our spiritual prejudices, our sinfulness, and need for forgiveness; our stumbling attempts along the road to heaven. Living this way our mission of evangelization places will ring true. Pope Francis models such witness and discipleship. No wonder he is able to speak to so many so convincingly of Jesus..

We pray today for the grace of the humility of St. Paul and the strength of Ezekiel, keeping our eyes fixed on the Lord, the origin and perfecter of our faith.