

In homiletic class, we were taught usually not to preach about secular holidays, but on the assigned readings for the Sunday. However, at times there are words and acts so profoundly religious in scope hovering around us, that if we do not reach out to grasp them and challenge their meanings, they will claim us for themselves—even shake us up a bit to get our attention.

While we may value the separation of church and state in our Constitution as a protection for our freedom to worship, we can also recognize that the same value may have led us to believe that we can do what we please as followers of Christ. As much as we might want religion to influence culture, we cannot ignore the fact the American culture has also influenced religion—and at times not for the best. Freedom and patriotism may be the values that we salute this weekend. At the same time, we cannot lose sight of even higher values that reach beyond any single nation—the virtues of faith and love.

One of America's greatest gifts to the world is the concept of religious liberty. The government can not force any religion on the people, and all our citizens are free to exercise religion, according to their own wishes. But that does not mean that people of faith do not have an essential role to play in the life of our nation. We ought to be working every day to create a society that is marked by concern for the common good. We ought to be listening for the voices of those who are not being heard. We have to be speaking out against the things that are in opposition to what our forefathers fought for and to deliver their message to the world.

Some in our governing system say we are not a Christian nation, John Quincy Adams said, "The highest glory of the American Revolution was: that it connected, in one indissoluble bond, the principles of civil government with the principles of Christianity." Such was the message the United States had for the world in 1776 and for years to follow. Ours is a nation founded upon Christian principles. Our currency says, "In God We Trust." In seeking independence, our founding fathers depended upon God and they depended upon every citizen to work together to bring about this nation.

So, how does this all tie in to our Scriptures for today? However religious freedom is litigated, do we as Catholics believe that we are living "under God"? Ultimately a nation is made up of individuals, and are we, as individuals, living "under God"? If we were to live "under God," it would be the greatest gift our faith can make to our nation.

In the first reading, God calls Ezekiel to prophetic ministry, noting the people's disobedience against Him. Adam and Eve rebelled. The people rebelled at the tower of Babel. Again there was rebellion with the golden calf. Then the kings rebelled by swearing oaths of faithfulness in the names of other gods. Unfaithfulness led to their exile in Babylon.

God acknowledged to Ezekiel that his ministry and mission would be tough and, possibly, unsuccessful. However, by preaching and staying loyal, Ezekiel would show the people that God still has prophets and that the prophets still speak.

In the gospel reading, we heard that the townspeople of Nazareth rejected their native son. Nazareth was a very small town during Jesus' life. In such a

small setting everyone would have known Jesus and His parents. The older adults would have watched Jesus grow up, and they watched Him do something that was unthinkable in a small town in first century Middle East: he left home! Now Jesus was back and, according to custom, allowed to read and discuss Scripture in synagogue.

Whether it was jealousy, snobbery, close-mindedness or resentment, the townspeople in Nazareth refused to think of Jesus as anything other than the little kid who played in the streets and worked as a carpenter. They certainly did not see him as being from God. As I was studying for the diaconate, I sometimes wondered how I would be accepted in my home parish.

A prophet is not one who looks into the future, but one who has insight into the present. The biblical prophets were always members of the community who were called by God to speak to that community. It was not difficult to accept them when their message was affirming. But when they criticized the community and challenged it to repentance and reform, the messenger was often rejected along with the message. This was the case with both Ezekiel and Jesus. The prophetic responsibility was, and continues to be, a heavy one to bear. However, as St Paul states, “it is through our weakness that God’s power shines through.”

We have seen prophets in the last century. Martin Luther King Jr., Archbishop Oscar Romero, Mohandas Gandhi all of them we consider prophets now but at the time they spoke out many saw them as rebels. People who were rocking the boat and attacking conventional wisdom and all three paid the price with their lives

I believe we still have prophets today. People like Mary Ann Glendon, the pro-life Harvard law professor who rejected an award from the University of Notre Dame. Dr James Dobson who continues to be outspoken on Christian values, and the people who took a chance and started Relevant Radio and give us a chance to learn more about our Catholic faith. They all help spread the word to others who are looking to join us in our faith.

People often claim that they are the exception to the rule. I will not argue that. However, they are the exception for one and only one reason, and it is this: Very few of us have the courage to live out our convictions in such a complete and total way. We can talk the talk, but these people actually lived it - --maybe not perfectly, but passionately.

Whether we want it or not is really not our choice. For you see it is God that calls us to the prophetic role. It is God that wants us to point out systems which dehumanize and oppress. It is God that calls us to speak even to the nations about the ways of peace. Both the old and new testaments make this point many times over.

We must be careful that we think we are so familiar with both God and our country that we become incapable of hearing not only the prophets, but Jesus as well! We celebrate our independence as a nation once a year, but we celebrate our spiritual salvation everyday in the Eucharist.