

July 3 & 4, 2010

St. Mary's Church – Fr. Michael Renninger

Violence was everywhere. Reasons for hope were nowhere.

It was the autumn of 1776. Even as the ink of the Declaration of Independence was still drying, our fledgling nation seemed to be on the verge of catastrophe. George Washington's army was falling apart. Disastrous losses in New York had caused many members of the militia to flee. Washington's ragtag troops were on the retreat. Congress had no idea how to pay for a revolution. Patriotic sentiment could not hold an untrained army together. Soldiers were stealing from citizens. Officers were drunk in public. Fear was everywhere.

In that frightened time, John Adams, who had almost single-handedly kept the issue of American Independence alive in the Continental Congress, went to the state house in Philadelphia to hear even more bad news about the progress of the revolution. The mood, both in Congress and among the citizens, was full of fear and doubt. As more bad news was read aloud to the members of Congress, Doctor Benjamin Rush, a founding father from Pennsylvania, leaned over to John Adams and whispered this question: "Is there any way that America can succeed in this struggle?" And John Adams whispered back: "Yes, if we fear God and repent our sins." (David McCullough, *John Adams*, page 160)

In today's first reading, we hear about another era, when violence was everywhere, and reasons for hope were nowhere. It was the 8th century before Christ. Israel – the nation which thought that it had a powerful and unique relationship with God – was on the verge of collapse. It's enemies were attacking on their own soil. The people were disgusted by their political leaders (aren't you glad we've never had to experience THAT in our own age!?) The nation was in a financial mess. It was broke, and broken. Even religious leaders seemed incompetent to deal with the questions people were asking. (and aren't you glad we never have to deal with *that* in our own age?) The people cried out, "Will our nation survive this mess?" and one man, the prophet Isaiah, shouted back the answer: "God will save you, and your heart shall rejoice, and your bodies will flourish." But, in addition to that wonderful promise from God, Isaiah called the people to conversion. If I had to summarize his preaching in four sentences, it would be this: "Observe what is right. Do what is just. Repent of your sins. And do what God says."

In many ways, Isaiah's call to conversion is echoed in today's passage from Paul's letter to the Galatians, where Paul calls us to become 'new creations,' i.e., men, women, and children who are focused on living like Christ.

Isaiah and Saint Paul both assured their listeners that God would be faithful to God's promises. But both Isaiah and Paul called US to be faithful to God, and to repent of our sins, and to change our lives.

Funny - It sounds a lot like John Adams' advice to Dr. Rush! "Yes, we could survive the revolution of 1776, if only we would fear God and repent of our sins."

If you watch enough cable TV news, you may be convinced by now that our nation is in worse shape than ancient Israel in the 8<sup>th</sup> Century BC, or worse shape than Washington's retreating army in 1776. The TV and radio prophets of doom tell us that all is lost, that the catastrophe is here, that the end is near. There are folks making a lot of money by endlessly telling you that you're going to lose all of yours!!!

Now, I don't want to sound naïve about the political, financial, and moral difficulties which we, as a nation and world, are facing in 2010. Those challenges are real, and require the best efforts of talented people, and dedicated citizens.

But on this July 4<sup>th</sup>, I have a sneaking suspicion that, if John Adams were sitting at the state house in Philadelphia, and Larry King strapped on his suspenders and whispered to him, "So, John, is there any way that this country will survive it's current crisis?" Mr. Adams would whisper back the same answer he gave in the autumn of 1776 - "yes, if we fear God and repent of our sins."

Today's Gospel shows us the key to hope and conversion. Today's Gospel shows us the key to changing the lives of individuals, nations, and the whole world. In today's Gospel, Jesus proclaims the fundamental truth for every believer: "The kingdom of God is at hand!" And, in Mark's Gospel, when Jesus makes this same proclamation, he adds this instruction: "Reform your lives and believe in the Gospel!" (Mark 1:15) God's kingdom is here. Reform your lives. Repent your sins. Stand in awe before the living God. Don't wait for others to get on board with Jesus' program. Don't wait till your whole neighborhood, state, or political party has agreed to do the same! Reform YOUR life. Now. Change YOUR life. Now. Repent YOUR sins. Now. Worship the living Lord, today, and tomorrow. Whether it is Israel in the 8<sup>th</sup> Century BC, or Washington's army in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, or the USA in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, the fundamental call is the same: Follow Christ's lead. It is in following Christ that we find our direction and our hope.

When Jesus called the 72 and sent them as his messengers, he laid claim on them. From that moment on, no one else, and nothing else, could have a higher priority in their lives, than Jesus. From that point on, Jesus was to be their greatest love, their source of wisdom, their inspiration and direction. That was their call. That is our call.

And yet, I know in my own life that I get into trouble, and I fail to live up to my potential, when I let other things take a greater priority than the Lord. Frankly, there are many days when I listen more to my favorite cable TV show than I do to Jesus. There are times when I realize that my political party is shaping my attitudes far more effectively than the Gospel of Christ. There are whole seasons in my life when I worry more about Sara Palin, or Joe Biden, or Hillary, or Barak, or Newt, than I do about Jesus, Mary, and Joseph. I am supposed to be following Christ. But I let others lead me in ways that are not life giving.

So I need to hear again, on this Independence Day, the instruction of the prophet Isaiah. “Yes, you will flourish, if you observe what is right, and do what is just.” I need to hear again the proclamation of Jesus, “God’s kingdom is here. Reform your lives, and believe in the Gospel.” We need to re-evaluate our priorities, as Jesus sends us forth as his messengers.

And, amid the patriotic music, the laughter at the bar-b-q, and the explosion of fireworks, I need to listen for the whisper of that stubborn founding father, who is telling us again today: “We will succeed, if we fear God and repent of our sins.”