

Commentary on the Gospel for Sun, Jul 7th 2013

We in the United States, are celebrating this long weekend, an historical event of separation and independence from, what was known as, “Mother England”. There are parades, speeches and the evening skies are filled with fireworks. We love our independence.

We celebrate as Catholics, an historical event of inclusion and dependence. We refer to the Church as “Holy Mother” and every time we gather to celebrate the Eucharist, there are proclamations of the Word, processions towards and away from the altar, and our days are thereby filled with the “grace works” of Christ.

We center our prayer in preparation for the Eucharist about our being included and a spirit of rejoicing, because God has taken up a divine presence among us. We can pray as well with our personal histories of distancing ourselves from God, because God keeps seeking and finding us. In Jesus, God has extended the Holy of Holies from bricks into hearts. We all have played games of independence from God and sometimes we think we have won. God does not play games, but plays to win and that victory is our joy.

REFLECTION

To understand our First Reading more fully, we have to reflect upon the centrality and importance of the Temple in Jerusalem. That building was the dwelling place of God and the reminder of the covenant of God’s fidelity. It was the foundational presence of Israel as God’s Chosen People. They were what the Temple said they were. It became the celebration place for their identity, their history and their future.

We are listening to verses from the final chapter of this complicated and lengthy series of poems, oracles, threats, history and songs of consolation. What we hear today is one such oracle calling out hope and rebirth to the nation Israel.

The Temple has been rebuilt and so the identity of the nation is reborn. The verse immediately preceding our reading, pictures God in a conception/birth posture which leads to the maternal rejoicing of our reading.

The Temple itself is in a maternal posture giving birth and consoling nourishment. The presence of God is again a blessing for all, who like young children, sit in Her lap and are comforted with her motherly gestures of faithful love. Those who find life and strength from such sustenance will live their lives as faithful children in service to their God.

We hear a rather extended “pep talk” by Jesus in today’s Gospel. As Moses selected seventy elders to guide and govern his people, so Luke positions Jesus as a Moses, sending out seventy-two advance men to make known his coming. The basic thrust of his instruction is that they are to depend on nothing nor anybody, but on the Spirit with which Jesus sends them. We hear of their joyous return and excited report of all they had done and seen.

Jesus receives their report and reminds them that what they had experience was that they belong dependently for their identity on God. Jesus is the “kingdom of God” which is close at hand. The ones sent are how that “kingdom” will be handed on. They will see and do great things, but even greater are the works that will be done through them without their knowing it.

Whenever there has been or is a rebellion for independence, whether that be a nation or a teenager, there follows a necessary search for identity. When the first thirteen rebellious colonies broke from England they then had to spend years figuring out and fighting among themselves about who they then would be. We can spend our lives making personal declarations of independence and thereby we think we are free. I remember a radio commercial about a brand of bread. The little lad told his mother he was running away from home. She asked him if he would like her to make a sandwich or two for the trip. He softly said that would be okay. Then he asked his mother if she would drive him.

As much as we love and fight for freedom personally and nationally, spiritually we have to fight to retain our sense of relational dependence upon God. While everything around us invites or urges us to shake off anything that hinders our freedom, that kind of rebellion leaves us alone with just what we wanted, our selves. Self reliance sounds psychologically healthy, religiously and spiritually it is a phrase of foolishness. We can celebrate “self-made” persons for their independent works, but they really were not self made at all.

We are given life, nourished by the loving motherly sandwiches of life. We breathe the sustaining air, receive the nurturing sun and rain and then, we can rebelliously stamp our foots and shout, “I am who I choose I am!” In the very midst of our declarations, Jesus sends elders, apostles, advancers to tap

God's foot towards us, around us and announces that the "kingdom of God is at hand for you."

We are similar to the "First Thirteen" colonies then who know from whence we came, but rebel at that kind of dependent identity. Who we are is a bit tangential to whom we will be through our own achievements. It does seem in the history of God's relationship with humanity that God expects this resistance as part of God's relational pattern with us. It seems that we struggle for our own identities by resisting and shaking off so that we can create our own kingdoms which are at our hands and for ourselves. It seems that God says, "Well, you won't know who I really am until you try to find out who you are by your own self-identifying efforts. Good luck and I will not be waiting for your return, but laboring for your emptiness to free you to look up and smile."

"Come to me, all who are burdened, and I will refresh you, says the Lord."

Larry Gillick, S.J.