

14th SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME – B (July 4, 2021)

“My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.” These words spoken by Jesus to St. Paul are at the heart of our second reading today. Paul writes on a very personal level here, telling the Corinthians about a strange experience he had of being afflicted by ‘a thorn in the flesh’ and of being beaten by ‘an angel of Satan’. We have no idea about the details of what Paul endured; the Bible scholars can only guess. But he does say that he experienced those sufferings so as not to become too conceited or, in our reading’s translation, ‘elated’. Paul had received many special graces and even revelations from God, and spiritual pride can very easily worm its way into the soul if one isn’t vigilant.

“My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.” Jesus’ words to Paul can sound rather strange at first, and they certainly sound countercultural. We value strength, we work hard to preserve or increase our strength—physically, mentally, and morally/spiritually as well. And on this Independence Day weekend we thank God for the blessings he has given to us as a people and a nation. Those blessings are necessarily rooted in the fact that our founding fathers were very much aware of the fact that God is the true and ultimate source of all our strength, freedom and goodness. The Declaration of Independence, signed 245 years ago today, boldly proclaims as ‘self-evident’ the truth that ‘all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness’. And at the very end of this historic Declaration they unapologetically declare their ‘firm reliance on the protection of Divine Providence.’

Our first presidents were very much of the same mind:

--George Washington said that ‘religion and morality are indispensable supports’ for our nation’s freedom;

--his successor John Adams said that ‘our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious people’;

--and his successor Thomas Jefferson declared that ‘no nation has ever yet existed or been governed without religion. Nor can it be.’

None of them, of course, advocated for a specific ‘official’ religion or denomination for the whole country—the First Amendment specifically prohibits any kind of established church. Instead, they were simply acknowledging the fact that we are not the creators or arbiters of the standards of truth and goodness and virtue and morality...because God is. We know all too well that our nation has not always lived up to those ideals; the effects of both original sin and personal sin have afflicted everyone in every nation throughout all of human history—ever since that first disobedience of our first parents.

In spite of their own flaws and weaknesses, however, our founding fathers were smart enough and realistic enough to know that the new nation they established had to be founded on the recognition of the Creator who was and is the origin of all. If we forget that God is indeed the origin and basis of our strength and the foundation of truth and virtue and goodness, then we can and will fall very easily under the illusion that we are our own strength and are not answerable to anything or anyone else. That, in turn, leads to sinful pride and its always disastrous consequences. That is true for us as individuals, as St. Paul recognized in himself; it can also

true for us as a nation. And history shows us countless examples of that throughout the world—Hitler’s Germany and Stalin’s Soviet Union are only two of many that come to mind.

Our own nation’s recent history shows how more and more individuals and institutions have been urging us to ignore God and religious faith and convictions, saying that such things have no place in public discussions and debates. One blatant example of that attitude: in April of 2020, at an early point of the pandemic, New York Governor Andrew Cuomo spoke of an improvement in his state’s situation at the result only of their actions. He said “God did not do that. Faith did not do that.” It was startling and sad to hear someone who identifies as Catholic say that God had no relevance at all in the crisis. Of course their efforts were important, but who enabled them to make those efforts in the first place if not for God? This is the same governor, by the way, who the year before signed into law a bill allowing abortion up to the very moment of birth and removed all legal protections for unborn children who somehow survived the abortion procedure. When he signed that bill, he wanted to ‘celebrate this achievement and shine a bright light forward for the rest of the nation to follow.’ No, Governor—that was no ‘achievement’, but rather a deadly tragedy that we don’t want to follow in any way. Please pray for this governor, for all in public office, and indeed for every one of us. St. John Paul II said it so powerfully in 1993 when he was in Denver for World Youth Day—he said that America needs much prayer, lest it lose its soul. That was very much the case 28 years ago; how much more true it is now.

Strength and courage are indeed important virtues to nurture and cultivate. But if they are not built on the firm foundation of God and those ‘self-evident’ truths of how and for what he has made us, then—as history shows over and over again—it is very easy if not inevitable that rulers and leaders will become tyrants.

Our closing hymn today will be ‘America the Beautiful’—and our land is indeed beautiful with its ‘spacious skies’, ‘purple mountain majesties’ and ‘fruited plain’. But notice that the title of that song is not ‘America the Perfect’, for the obvious reason that we are not at that state. That’s why the refrain of that song is actually a prayer, pleading with God to ‘shed his grace on thee’, ‘to mend thine every flaw’ to ‘confirm thy soul in self-control’, and to ‘crown thy good with brotherhood from sea to shining sea.’ That is why this song is not at all boastful or arrogant in any way. It is rather a beautiful prayer of thanks to God for the beauty with which he surrounds us; it is also and necessarily a prayer that he help us to live more bravely and genuinely the ideals and beliefs we profess and upon which our beloved nation was founded.

May God grant our nation the strength and courage we need to know and rely on his truth and providence as did our founding fathers. And may we recognize our own human weakness and sins as individuals (like St. Paul) and as a nation so that we ever more readily turn back to God and to his strength and guidance that we so desperately need. Indeed: **God bless America.** That’s also a prayer—because we most certainly need his blessing.