

14 Sunday B

July 4, 2021

St. Patrick

“And they took offense at Jesus.” Troubling words about Jesus in today’s Gospel on this Fourth of July. They found him to be a “stumbling block,” the Greek word being *skandalon*, from which we get the word “scandal.”

Ben Franklin was the ambassador to France for the newly-independent United States of America. At one elegant dinner in Paris in 1781, the guest list included the powers of the day. The dinner began with the French foreign ambassador making this toast to King Louis: “To his Majesty, King Louis, the Sun, whose shining presence radiates the earth of France.”

Not to be outdone, the British ambassador gave this toast: “To King George III, the Moon, whose brilliance lights up the skies of Britain.”

With a sparkle in his eye, Ben Franklin slowly rose from his seat and said: “I cannot give you the sun or the moon, but I give you General George Washington of the United States, the Joshua who made the sun and the moon stand still when he commanded!” (1)

It’s in the blood of politicians. They hone in on their achievements, and cleverly put down their competitors.

In this Sunday’s Gospel, however, they put down Jesus. His own hometown folk didn’t want him. And did you hear what might have been a slur in how they talked about Jesus? They said, **“Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary...?”** In his time Jews were customarily known by their father’s name—in this case, “the son of Joseph.” To call Jesus the “son of Mary” may well have been an insult, suggesting that he was illegitimate (2).

Three chapters earlier in St. Mark’s Gospel, the religious leaders in his day had already decided **“to put Jesus to death”** (3:6). Now, in today’s Gospel, Jesus’ own townspeople took offense at him, seeing him as a scandal.

The cross begins to come into focus as Jesus’ fate. He didn’t belong.

What does this mean as we celebrate our Independence Day of 1776? In that founding document, declaring “all men are created equal,” by definition women and persons of color did not belong. And recently, a critic put it bluntly about our

times, “Most people living in the United States today — certainly more than half — are not Americans in any meaningful sense of the term” (3).

On this Independence Day, let’s go back to the vision of our first President, George Washington. Writing in 1783, President Washington wrote, “The bosom of America is open to receive not only the opulent and respectable Stranger, but the oppressed and persecuted of all Nations and Religions” (4).

Indeed, Jesus teaches by his very ministry and life that the bosom of the church must be open, embracing all—indeed, truly “catholic.” Furthermore, when there are strong currents to diminish and to restrict who makes up this great experiment of democracy, no less than George Washington prods us to make America’s bosom every wider.

The Declaration of Independence, still being written, is ever calling us to be more embracing. And *our* Jesus—the One whom his own townspeople took “offense” at—calls us to welcome all into the embrace of God’s love. This Sunday, let’s allow Jesus to welcome *us* with his unconditional love.

(1) Quoted by Rev. Billy Strayhorn, “That’s All I Want,” under 14th Sunday in Ordinary Time (July 5, 2015) @www.deaconsil.com.

(2) See Daniel J. Harrington, S.J., “The Gospel according to Mark,” in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, edited by Raymond E. Brown, S.S., Joseph A. Fitzmyer, S.J., and Roland E. Murphy, O.Carm. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1990), pg. 608.

(3) Glenn Ellmers, quoted by Zach Beauchamp in “The Conservative Movement is rejecting America,” April 1, 2021, <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2021/4/1/22356594/conservatives-right-wing-democracy-claremont-ellmers>.

(4) George Washington to Joshua Holmes, December 2, 1783, Founders Early Access, <http://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu/founders/default.xqy?keys=FOEA-print-01-02-02-6127>; quoted by Jon Meacham in *The Soul of America: The Battle for Our Better Angels* (New York: Random House, 2018), pg. 82.

