

14th Sunday in Ordinary Time – July 6-7, 2019
Saint Mary's Church, Richmond VA
Fr. Michael Renninger

It was a dark time for the Continental Army. In the winter of 1777, the British Army was warmly ensconced in Philadelphia, occupying the very city where the Declaration of Independence had been written. Out in Valley Forge, George Washington struggled to keep his freezing army together.

But a New England Minister named Abraham Keteltas stood in his pulpit one Sunday morning. He announced from the pulpit that God was fighting against Britain “the way that God fights against Hell.”

In other words, this American preacher declared: *God is on our side!*

But in Britain that same weekend, an Anglican clergyman assured his British congregation that God was the one who had given the Red Coats so many victories that year.

Both nations thought that God was on their side. Who was right?

In World War One, American troops were told that God was on their side. But every soldier of the Prussian army wore a belt buckle which said “Gott mit uns.” God is with *us*. Who was right?

During the American Civil War, a clergyman said to President Lincoln, “I trust that God is on our side.” To which Abraham Lincoln famously responded: “Sir, my concern is not whether God is on *our* side; my greatest concern is to be on *God's* side, for God is always right.”

Throughout most of history, people make their decisions – about life, about love, about money, about war - and *then* they announce that ‘God is on our side.’ Often, they haven’t consulted God at all about their decisions.

Which is why Abraham Lincoln’s comment to the minister is so refreshing: “Sir, I’m not concerned with the question of whether or not God is on our side. The greatest question is: Are we on God’s side? Are we doing what God wants? Because,” Lincoln said, “God is always right.”

I recently spoke to a friend of mine. He goes to Mass every week. A friend of his, who has stopped going to church due to the headlines about scandals, asked him – “why do you still go to Mass each week?”

And he responded: “I go to Mass because every time I receive communion, I remember Who is in charge.”

Every time I receive communion, I remember Who is in charge.

We need to remember Who’s in charge. If I make self-centered decisions, and then declare that God is on my side, then life is really all about *me*.

Or, I could start each day pondering, “What does *God* want to do today? How would God respond to what’s happening in the world? Can I respond that way?”

If I do that, then my life has a different starting point. The starting point is *God*. And the most important question becomes: “Am I on God’s side today, doing what God wants me to do today, standing for what is right, as God defines what’s right?”

In today’s first reading, we hear from the Prophet Isaiah. Please remember: in the Bible, prophets are not ‘predictors of the future.’ Prophets have an inescapable a call from God:

Prophets are invited to see the world as God sees, to feel what God feels, to love as God loves.

In the Bible, God has chosen to care about this earth which God made. God has chosen to freely love people. So, when we laugh, God’s heart is lightened. When we cry, God’s heart is heavy.

A prophet is called to see the world from God’s perspective, and to care for people the way that God does. The prophet discovers that God has a special distaste for injustice, and a lack of patience with our willingness to hurt one another.

In other words: a prophet is someone who knows that God is *in charge*... and that God *cares*.

In today’s first reading, the people of Israel are coming out of one of their darkest experiences. Enemies had crushed their nation and carried thousands into exile.

At first, the Jewish people could not comprehend such an outcome. After all, they were convinced that God was on their side. They were, after all, ‘the chosen people.’

But slowly they realized – yes, God was on their side, *but they had not been on God’s side*. They thought that they could live selfish lives, ignoring the poor, killing the most vulnerable, carrying out injustice, ignoring faith... because God would *always* be on their side.

But after their defeat, the Jewish people realized – we need to be on God’s side. We need to love as God loves. We need to see the world as God sees the world. We need to allow God’s heart to beat within us. We need to let God’s love flow through us because that is the only thing which will bring the desert back to life.

Eventually, God brings them home to Jerusalem. And Isaiah speaks a word of comfort to those who now wanted to let God be in charge. “As a mother holds her child in her lap, so will I hold you, my children, close to me You will flourish,” Isaiah says, “if you seek to be God’s servant.” If you let God be in charge.

In today’s Gospel, Jesus sends his disciples out two by two, side by side. He instructs them to proclaim the kingdom. And he wants them to do this ministry according to his instructions. They are to proclaim the Good News, not only in what they say, but how they live.

In the days ahead, listen to how often people talk about ‘which side they are on.’

We divide ourselves by picking sides: “I’m on mom’s side; I’m on dad’s side; I’m on the conservative side; I’m on the liberal side; I’m on the immigrants’ side; I’m on the law & order side.”

The world does not need any more false dividers. The world needs prophetic Christians who do the hard work of striving each day to be on God’s side.

In the ongoing debate about immigration policy, there are lots of folks who declare that God is on their side. Some hold up pictures of suffering parents and children who are trying to cross the border, and they announce, “God is on our side.”

Others hold up photos of people who have been the victims of criminal acts perpetrated by illegal immigrants and they loudly declare, “No, God is on our side!”

And I wonder: is anyone willing to listen to the wisdom of God?

Right now, in the Middle East, Jewish, Christian and Muslim teenagers die on a daily basis, thanks to ancient hatreds. All sides are shouting, “God is on our side.” No. God is crying out, “come to me.”

Right now, families struggle due to financial difficulties. Marriages fracture due to pain and human weakness. Children receive less meaningful attention from parents, parents who use technology to replace actual parenting. Many don’t know how to deal with addiction or mental health issues. Many have lost all interest in faith.

The daily grind grinds us down, while Jesus invites us to stand by his side, and follow his lead.

In just a few moments, it will be time to receive holy communion, which is the sacrament of the Lord's presence.

But have you noticed? In order to receive Christ in this sacrament, you have to get up from where you are, and go to where he is. You can't stay seated where you are.

He wants you by his side. He wants you to come to him. He's in charge. What a great way to go through life: close to him, side by side.

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