

Juneteenth Mass

Homily

The LORD works righteousness and justice for all who are oppressed. – Psalm 103:6

“Freedom” and “justice” two fundamental and inalienable rights that many of us may overlook because of the significant progress we have achieved in recent times. However, for the millions of enslaved people in the Southern United States who toiled under inhuman conditions, President Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation, read on the shores of Galveston, Texas, by **Union Major General Gordon Granger** on **January 1, 1863**, was a game changer. Unfortunately, it would take over two more years for over 200,000 enslaved people in Texas to learn about their liberation, which did not occur until **June 19, 1865**. The resistance demonstrates the extent to which profitable enterprises have been constructed upon the misfortunes and forced labor of innocent families.

Today, we pay tribute to the emancipation achieved after 250 years, marked by the chattel slavery system in America. Ever since, **June 19** has become a memorable holiday tradition for the obvious reasons we all know. Today, we pay homage to all those behind the groundbreaking event that occurred in Texas, where the last enslaved African Americans were granted emancipation. The occasion is solemn, particularly in light of the fact that on **June 17, 2021**, President Biden signed into law the **Juneteenth National Independence Day Act** (Senate Bill S.475), thereby designating June 19 as a federal holiday. This important step acknowledges America’s beginnings as a slave-holding country and the crucial moment when slavery was abolished.

We gather today as Christians because we believe that God deeply cares for the oppressed and marginalized. We also know that the principles of justice and liberation hold a significant place in God’s heart, as evidenced by Israel’s deliverance from Egyptian bondage after many centuries. To illustrate this point, the first reading from **Exodus 3** recounts how God appeared to Moses in the form of a burning bush and commissioned him to go to Pharaoh and emancipate the people of Israel.

I have seen the miserable state of my people in Egypt. I have heard their appeal to be free of their slave drivers. Yes, I am well aware of their sufferings. the cry of the sons of Israel has come to me, and I have witnessed the way in which the Egyptians oppress them, so come, I send you to Pharaoh to bring the sons of Israel, my people, out of Egypt.”

When we look at the history of our nation, we see shadows of racial subjugation, disparity, and prejudice. However, from a different vantage point, we can also discern the divine power overcoming the darkness. Here, God takes the initiative, as would any parent, to safeguard his household. And the Passover story in

the Hebrew bible illustrates God's stance vis-à-vis the demeaning and exploitation of part of his creation. That is why when the time is right, he makes everything new.

With the coming of his Son Jesus, Humanity received the ultimate deliverance. Today's gospel taken from **Luke 4**, the programmatic discourse of Jesus bears this out. In the synagogue of Nazareth on a sabbath day, Jesus reads from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah, where it is written:

The spirit of the Lord has been given to me, for he has anointed me. He has sent me to bring the good news to the poor, to proclaim liberty to the captives and to the blind new sight, to set the downtrodden free, to proclaim the Lord's year of favor!

This is a powerful passage that grounds Jesus' ministry of justice and liberation. This teaching provides a pathway to redemption human wholeness, which is central to Christian ethics. In another way, the pursuit of Freedom and dignity is deeply ingrained in our Christian identity, as the very mission of Christ is an act of liberation, deliverance from sin and the degraded state of humanity. This inherently Christian message cannot be dissociated from the ethical fight against exploitation and the demeaning of the human person. Consequently, salvation becomes an invitation to elevate ourselves to a higher plane.

After the reading, Jesus sat down and told the audience: *"This text is being fulfilled today even as you listen."* And he won the approval of all.

As followers of Christ, can we confidently affirm that this mission statement of Christ is a tangible reality for all in our nation and worldwide as we listen? How can we fulfill our Christian obligation to bring about a world of justice and peace?

The progress we have made in the fight against modern slavery is significant, but there is still much work to be done. Juneteenth provides an opportunity for us to reflect on the brutal reality of exploitation and the profound harm it inflicts upon entire communities. This exploitation is driven by greed and misguided beliefs about the human person. To be christian today is to be good news to the poor, to free the captives and downtrodden.

Like Moses in Exodus and Jesus in the gospel, let us work for a world where every person is treasured and cared for because we are all created in God's image. Together, we can triumph over the slavery of sin and exploitation. For indeed, Christ came so that we may have life and have it in fullness.