

## Reflection

Liturgy of the Word – July 2, 2022

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Whenever I am invited to share some reflections on the Word with you, I often find the scripture of the day more than challenging. Today's celebration added another challenge, that I wasn't sure I was willing to take on.

The optional feast for today is a memorial in honor of St. Junipero Serra, Franciscan Missionary to the indigenous people of California in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Having ministered in Orange County, California I am very aware of the controversy that surrounds the role that the European missionaries played in the establishment of the California missions and the treatment of the native people there. As it is an 'optional' feast, it was very tempting not to talk about it. The Spirit reminded me that was not a good idea.

So, who was this man – and why is it important not to forget.

I am drawing heavily from an article by Tom Reese in the *National Catholic Reporter* (11/01/2021) for some of the following:

Catholic bishops portray him as a holy man who brought Christianity to California's indigenous people, while indigenous activists see him as an instrument of the Spanish Empire that brought destruction and death to indigenous peoples.

Statues of his likeness have been vandalized and removed – his name was removed from public spaces, replaced by monuments to Native Americans.

Judged by contemporary standards, Serra clearly does not reflect the ideal standards of missionary activity today – of honoring the cultures we encounter – of being listeners and learners rather than imposers of a way of life.

Although considered a good man in his time – whose motivations revealed in his writings appear loving – he is no model for us today. He, like other Europeans of his time, viewed indigenous people through a paternalistic lens. They saw the people they were to convert as living in a state of 'natural infancy,' and saw their mission as turning them into citizens of the empire as much as of the kingdom of God.

That meant learning European-style agriculture, becoming a Catholic, and living in a congregated pueblo-type arrangement, just like people in Spain. Serra believed living in a Christian community; they would readily embrace the faith. Because he saw them as children, he did not respect their autonomy. Once they joined, they could not leave. It became impossible for traditional Indigenous ways of life to be maintained.

He didn't understand, because of ignorance of germ theory at that time, they would be exposed to diseases for which they had no immunity, resulting in thousands of deaths.

There is evidence that some California Indigenous citizens were fond of Serra, whom they referred to as Padre Viejo, the old priest.

In 1775, there was a rebellion in San Diego that destroyed the mission and killed one of the priests. In response, Serra wrote to the viceroy and asked that, if he were to be killed by a Native American, that person should not be executed but forgiven.

In today's scripture we hear:

**Go and learn the meaning of the words,  
I desire mercy, not sacrifice.  
I did not come to call the righteous but sinners.**

Should Junipero Serra be canonized and a memorial day established in his honor? I will leave that to your own reflection.

What I do know is that the impact of the Doctrine of Discovery and the racist theories that supported it resulted in the genocide of our indigenous sisters and brothers as the European settlers claimed the land that is now the United States.

This is part of our story as citizens, one that we are coming to understand and, painfully, acknowledge as part of our history.

This weekend we celebrate the 4<sup>th</sup> of July and the ideals expressed in our founding documents.

As Christians we have another founding document – the Gospel and the life of Jesus.

And so, we celebrate – and we remember – and we accept the responsibility in our prayers – our advocacy – and our actions – to work for the coming of the kingdom – the beloved community – where all peoples are respected, and their rights restored.

So – perhaps, this is reason for a memorial of Junipero Serra – that we do not forget.