In this homily I want to comment on today’s first reading, present a general principle of human nature and church history, and apply that general principle to our time and place.

Today's first reading comes from Isaiah. Scripture scholars inform us that this book was composed in three major moments: in the late 700's BC at the time of the Assyrian conquest of Israel’s Northern Kingdom, then in the late 500's BC after the Babylonian conquest of the Southern Kingdom; and in the late 400's BC, when the remnant of the Jewish people were trying to recover and restore their faith and their country. Today's reading comes from chapter 66, the last chapter of Isaiah. For context of today’s reading, remember that for hundreds of years, on again and off again, the people had promised to be faithful to God, but tired of their fidelity, killed the prophets, and returned to trusting in themselves and not in God and God’s ways; and their country suffered for it. At the conclusion of Isaiah’s book, the prophet tries to inspire and encourage the remnant people who had suffered so terribly over the centuries, mostly due to their rejection of God and God’s ways. The prophet writes with great encouragement:

“Rejoice with Jerusalem and be glad because of her, all you who love her; exult, exult with her, all you who had been mourning over her. ... Thus says the Lord, I will spread prosperity over her like a river, and the wealth of the nations like an overflowing torrent.”

God never quits on us. The people, however, had fluctuated or oscillated between vibrant faith, then to a weakened faith, to a loss of faith in God and subsequent loss of vitality in their country. Weakened in faith, the people had become weakened spiritually, and they fell easy prey to external enemies, in the context of today’s first reading, the Assyrians and Babylonians. But with the help of God, the people again were going to try again to recover and restore their faith.

The general principle, which this first reading exemplifies, is this: human nature is changeless and human history is forever changing. What is changeless in human nature? ... that each person is created in the image and likeness of God, therefore, each person possesses inherent dignity; and that while each person is created good in one’s being, each person possesses also an inclination to do evil. We are always good in our being no matter what we do, but we are sometimes good and sometimes bad in our behaviors.

What is ever-changing? We human beings change in the ways we live our lives. In simple ways, we change our styles of dress and fashion. We change in our language: we don't speak old English, or Medieval English, or even English; we speak American English! We change in our
technologies: just consider from a generation ago, how our systems of transportation and
communication have improved. Prosperity changes; prosperity shifts from certain countries
and certain cities to other places. More importantly, our philosophies, our values, and our
morality change. Sooner or later, many societies comes to a point where they call “evil” what is
good; and call “good” what is evil. And governments change; governments generally last about
200 hundred years. They fall initially more from internal weakness than from external attack.
And this complex phenomenon of the interplay of ideas and actions results in our experience at
the same time of what is changeless and what is ever-changing.

On this Fourth of July weekend, we happily celebrate our independence, that God has blessed
our country so much, and that we stand as “one nation under God.” Our nation, however, is
changing. Surveys show that two-thirds of our countrymen think that the country is going in
the wrong direction. Privately, each of us has one’s own perspectives and opinions of politics,
economics, society, and culture. I suggest that we might apply the principle of what is
changeless and changing to our faith and religion. Compared to when you were a young
person, do you privately think that our country and citizenry actively believes in and worships
God ... more or less? Compared to when you were a young person, do you think that our
country follows God’s commandments and the Church’s laws .. more or less? Compared to
when you were a young person, do you think that our citizenry values God ... more or less?

Like the people of ancient Israel and most every other country in human history, when we are
suffering, we beg God to help us. When we enjoy prosperity, we seem to need God less and
less, we become comfortable, and we lose vitality in our religion and subsequently in our
country. How might we recover and restore vitality? ... It is complex, but an essential part is
by recovering and restoring our belief and worship, by recovering and restoring our following
and practicing of God’s commandments, by recovering and restoring family life. We need to be
active participants; recovery will not happen without our involvement. And be assured, “God
never quits on us.”