

This week our country remembers the most uncivil action ever committed against our nation. An awful hatred motivated criminal attacks of terrorism and mass murder last September 11.

We still smart from the wounds. As a nation, we feel attacked, hunted and vulnerable. We stand united, patriotic and loyal. We have traded some of our freedoms for stronger safety. We have taken up the arms of war to fight an enemy who is multi-national, evil and still lethal.

In the first year after the attacks, perhaps this is all we could have done and should have done. But we have not dealt deeply with some questions that haunted us right away: Why do they hate us? What have we done? At the time, we thought there was no reason for anyone to hate us. We have done no ill as a country. If someone attacked us, they were wrong.

But other nations, including allies from Europe and parts of the Arab world think differently. Many of them think America had it coming. We are too rich, too powerful, too used to having things go our way, too wasteful of our resources, too isolationist in world affairs. We think the American way is the only way, no matter who it hurts. On topics ranging from economics to arms to food to the environment, we have broken treaties, put up with poverty, ignored the needs of other nations, and sought to make life better for ourselves – so goes the accusation against the United States from many of our neighbors.

In the Old Testament, whenever ancient Israel suffered invasion, deportation, poverty or degradation, prophets told people there was a reason for their agony: they had sinned. If they repent, God would relent and their lives would be better. Ancient Israel did not always blame others. They searched for ways to repent and improve. But America still looks for ways to punish and persevere. Perhaps we are too close to the events of September 11, 2001, but at some point, if we seek world peace, we need to hear out the complaints that other nations have against us.

Jesus maps out a very simple approach in today's gospel. When someone offends you, try first to work it out between the two of you. If that doesn't work, get a few witnesses in on it. If that doesn't work, take it to the whole community. If you still cannot change the offender, then treat them like an outcast. He never says, "Kill your offender." In fact, to end a conflict, both parties usually have to change.

Over the next few days our patriotism will be strong. The world will be watching how America commemorates this anniversary. A great nation rises up from its injury. A greater nation advances the cause of peace.