

30th Sunday of the Year, Year C

Today's First Reading and the Responsorial Psalm which is a reflection upon it reminds us of the fact that the best of what we have in our judicial system has its roots in the Jewish culture which recognises God as a God of justice who hears the cry of the poor. We also have the example and teaching of Jesus who frequently castigated injustice and who demanded of his followers that we love one another. But we must remain ever vigilant, for those with power can and do distort the system to ensure that it serves their interests. Government, instead of fulfilling its primary role, which is to organise society in a way that protects justice, is in danger of defaulting on this obligation and using its considerable power to protect the rich against the poor.

Today's readings have a lot to say to those of us in positions of power in society, but it has a lot to say to all of us. Just public institutions are among the most important fruits of a just community. We all have to learn to be just in all our dealings, and today's readings offer us some key reflections.

God's judgment is always true, that is, it is always in accordance with the way things really are. Since God is love, God's judgment is always faithful to love; it is always merciful. This is the key theme of the readings of today's Mass. We might be able to deceive ourselves, and we might be able to deceive others. We cannot deceive God. Because God is love he sees with the eyes of love. But love neither distorts nor lies. God sees us exactly as we really are. He sees us from the inside. He knows our hearts.

Our faith tells us that, even if we manage to avoid the consequences of our sinful behaviour here on earth, we have to stand before God who sees who we really are and what we have really done. God does not punish. He simply acknowledges the truth. What we call 'punishment' is the necessarily negative effects of our negative behaviour. The ultimately disastrous effect of our sinful behaviour is what we call hell. Let us not pretend that there is no hell. It is clearly taught by Jesus and by the whole tradition of the Church. At the same time let us not think of it as some kind of punishment arbitrarily inflicted on a sinner by a vengeful God. A lot of people have an image like this and they wonder how a merciful God could possibly send anyone to hell. God does not send to hell. Hell is where we decide to be when we refuse God's love and persist in behaviour that is destructive of others and is self-destructive. The catholic catechism is clear: 'To die in mortal sin without repenting and accepting God's merciful love means remaining separated from God for ever by our own free choice. This state of definitive self-exclusion from communion with God and the blessed is called "hell"'(n.1033).

Most imagine hell as a fire. It is important to realise that this is only an image. The reality is that we choose not to be in communion with God, and a God of love cannot force us to change. Love respects freedom, however stupidly and destructively we exercise it. God's judgment is simply the recognition by God of the truth of our determined and obstinate will. Hell is something we choose. We can choose it here, where we can hide behind distractions or blame others. After death there will be nothing to hide behind. The experience of hell is the experience of absolute frustration of being for ever separate from the source of life and love and from the life of the blessed. We can think of nothing worse. No image of pain could capture the awfulness of such a condition.

But God is not cruel. God will remain loving for all eternity. We think of the father of the prodigal son, unable to drag the boy home, and waiting in love for any sign of his return. Here on earth there is always hope of repentance. Death sets a seal upon our choices, so let us not put off our response to grace till it is too late.

Today's Responsorial Psalm (Psalm 34 in our Bibles) reminds us that God is ready to hear the cry of the poor. God is close to the broken-hearted. When we are desperate, God in his mercy reaches down to rescue us and to protect us. God's judgment is always merciful, because God knows our weakness and God knows the longing that is in our hearts. God can distinguish between the false prayer of the person who is self-reliant, and the humble cry of the broken sinner who wants to be in communion with God but who feels lost and abandoned and unable to raise his head.

The setting of Jesus' story in today's gospel is the atonement ritual in the temple. The first character presented to us is the Pharisee. He typifies the wrong attitude. He is self-focused and self-reliant. He is standing by himself. He sees himself as pure and is determined not to allow his purity to be in any way tainted by mixing with the community since, in his judgment, they are sinners.

He is not actually praying, for his attention is not on God but on himself. He thinks he is speaking to God, but he is speaking to himself. He thinks he is looking upon the face of God, but he is seeing only himself in the mirror of his own self-satisfied projection. This is made abundantly clear by the way he looks down on the tax collector – a certain sign that he knows neither God nor himself. He is using prayer in order to draw attention to himself, and to instruct others to live as he lives. Note that Jesus does not condemn him. He simply states that the Pharisee's prayer does him no good, leaving him in the same state after as before.

The second character is a tax collector. He is also standing apart, but it is because he feels unworthy of being part of the assembly. He does not even dare to raise his eyes to heaven. However, he is there, pleading with God to forgive him his sins. Unlike the Pharisee, he is in touch with reality, and his humble plea opens him to God's forgiving love.

Luke concludes by repeating an exhortation to humility. We cannot raise ourselves up to God. Only God can raise us to himself. And God can do this only when we recognise our lowliness and look to God to raise us up. If we want our hearts to remain open to God's mercy, we must keep them open in mercy to others. We have to face the truth of our own behaviour and the behaviour of others. We have to protect the community against crime. But this protection will never work unless we remain humbly open to God's grace, and unless we treat others, even those who commit crimes against us, with the respect that flows from grace.

The Second Reading of today's Mass gives us the last words written by Paul from prison in Rome just before his cruel death. He places his hope in God's mercy. As we think of Paul languishing in prison, or of the humble tax collector kneeling at the back of the temple, we might recall the words of one of the early martyrs thrown to the lions in the Colosseum of Rome. Ignatius, bishop of Antioch, reminds us that the key to justice is to remain in touch with our own longing for God and never to forget that this same longing is implanted in everyone, even if they do not know it. He wrote to the Christian community in Rome: 'Here am I, yearning for death with all

the passion of a lover. Earthly longings have been crucified; in me there is left no spark of desire for mundane things, but only a murmur of living water that whispers within me, 'Come to the Father'. There is no pleasure for me in anything that perishes, or in the delights of this life. My heart longs for the bread of God – the flesh of Jesus Christ; and for my drink I crave that blood of his which is undying love' (6,1-2).

Today's readings remind us of three things which we can do if we wish to contribute to the building of a just society.

1. We can check our judgments of others, correct any harshness and pray to experience something of the compassion of the heart of Jesus.
2. We can humbly acknowledge our own faults and check ourselves if ever we find ourselves looking down on others.
3. We can get in touch with the deep yearning in our hearts and remember that everyone has this same yearning, whether we know it or not. God wants everyone to know his love and to turn to him in repentance. All our exercise of justice, however difficult, must be geared to the offender coming to know and embrace this truth and to our institutions constantly being reformed to create an environment in which the most vulnerable members of our society are protected and given the opportunity to contribute their God-given gifts for the betterment of us all.

We might remember one of the sayings of our own Australian saint, Mary of the Cross (MacKillop): : 'Never see a need without doing something about it'.