

25th Sunday of the Year, Year C

A key question to ask in relation to public policy is what policies are more conducive to the welfare of all citizens, especially those who are most disadvantaged. I am reminded of the words of Pope Paul VI in his encyclical on the Progression of Peoples, 1967, n.14: 'Development is not to be reduced simply to economic growth. For development to be authentic it must be integral, that is to say, it must have regard to the promotion of each and every person, and of the whole person.'

Today's readings provide food for thought and prayer as we examine our collective conscience. Let us begin with the Response to the psalm: 'Praise YHWH who lifts up the poor'. The name YHWH we associate with Moses and the liberation of the slaves from Egypt (see Exodus 3:13-16). If God is pouring grace into this world to inspire us to lift the poor out of their poverty, we who desire to be true disciples of Jesus must ask ourselves what are we doing to be part of this liberating action of God. Are we listening, or are we content to reap the benefits of a system that looks after us while failing to care for others? Do we believe what we have just prayed in the Responsorial Psalm that God does indeed 'look down on the earth in order to lift up the lowly from the dust and raise the poor'? The terrible poverty experienced in a world where there is so much wealth indicates that many people and many governments are listening to rich stakeholders but not to God.

Do we really believe the words of today's Entrance Antiphon in which God says: 'I am the Saviour of all people. Whatever their troubles, I will answer their cry, and I will always be theirs'? In the Opening Prayer we prayed to God who loves all peoples: 'Father/Mother in heaven (Source of life for all creatures), the perfection of justice is found in your love and all mankind is in need of your law. Help us to find this love in each other that justice may be attained through obedience to your law'.

Social life is very complex. We cannot be single-issue voters, but we are asked as Christians to examine which of the various sets of policies is more conducive to the task of government which is to work for the common good, and especially to care for the most disadvantaged. This is also why Paul, in today's Second Reading, asks us to pray for our political leaders. The policies they espouse and the honesty with which they organise public life to carry out these policies has a critical effect on the level of justice in society and people's wellbeing. Paul asserts that 'God wants everyone to be saved and to reach full knowledge of the truth'. We are not expecting our political parties to espouse the beatitudes of Jesus (though it would be good if they did), but we are asking them to be committed to the truth and to fulfil their primary responsibility, which is to help create a social environment in which everyone can have the opportunity to reach his or her full potential as a creative human being graced by a loving God. Jesus said that his mission was to enable everyone to 'live to the full'(John 10:10). That is our mission, too.

The First Reading comes from Amos, the first of the prophets of ancient Israel whose words have come down to us in a scroll named after him. He was a man of God who was shocked at the injustices and exploitation that prevailed at his time in a nation that claimed to worship the God who hears the cry of the poor. He speaks out against those 'who trample on the needy and try to suppress the poor'. He rails against the hypocrisy of those who buy sandals to go on pilgrimage to the temple with money that they have in effect stolen from the poor

whose land they have possessed in order to extend their own properties. They pass laws to control the behaviour of the poor, but put in place systems that put them above the law.

Many aspects of our system of government protect us against the worst forms of injustice, and we have the courage of many good people, both outside and inside government, to thank for this. However, justice is a fragile thing and the many blatant injustices that we see when we look at our world alert us to the need to be vigilant and to put in place means of controlling greed and protecting the most disadvantaged. Saint Basil (died 379AD) wrote: 'When someone steals another person's clothes we call him a thief. Should we not give the same name to one who could clothe the naked and does not? The bread in your cupboard belongs to the person who is hungry. The coat hanging unused in your wardrobe belongs to the person who needs it. The shoes rotting in your closet belong to the person who has no shoes. The money which you are hoarding belongs to the poor.' What would Saint Basil write today? His words cause us all to pause, especially when placed alongside Jesus' description of the Last Judgment in which those will be condemned who failed to feed the hungry or visit the sick or raise a hand to help those locked in the many kinds of prisons that keep people from freedom.

Jesus' parable recorded in today's Gospel speaks of a manager who was astute enough to use his master's reputation for generosity to his own advantage by writing down people's debts. Jesus does not want us to follow him in his selfish behaviour, but he does want us to remember that God, like the master, is generous and that we would do well to write off people's debts through forgiveness. He also wants us to place our trust in God's loving forgiveness rather than in material possessions.

I would like to conclude with a hopeful statement by Pope Paul VI in an encyclical he wrote in 1971 to celebrate 80 years since the publication of a major Church document on justice.

'Let each of us examine ourselves to see what we had done up to now, and what we ought to do. It is not enough to recall principles, state intentions, point to crying injustices and utter prophetic denunciations; these words will lack real weight unless they are accompanied for each individual by a livelier awareness of personal responsibility and by effective action. It is too easy to throw back on others responsibility for injustices, if at the same time one does not realise how each one shares in it personally, and how personal conversion is needed first. This basic humility will rid action of all inflexibility and sectarianism; it will also avoid discouragement in the face of a task that seems limitless in size. The Christian's hope comes primarily from the fact that we know that the Lord is working with us in the world, continuing in his Body, which is the Church – and, through the Church in the whole of mankind – the Redemption which was accomplished on the cross and which burst forth in victory on the morning of the Resurrection. This hope springs also from the fact that the Christian knows that others are at work to undertake actions of justice and peace, working for the same ends. For beneath an outward appearance of indifference, in everyone's heart there is a will to live in brotherhood and a thirst for justice and peace, which is to be expanded.' [Paul VI Octogesima Adveniens, n.48].