

Commentary to the 23th Sunday in Ordinary Time



In the first reading for today, the prophet Ezekiel is told that he has been appointed by God to be a sentinel, a watchman for Israel. Like the sentinel crow, he is to warn the people of an impending danger, an attack by an enemy. Only the enemy he is to alert them to is not just their enemy, but the enemy of God. Ezekiel is commissioned by the Lord to warn the people if they are in danger of attack by the forces of evil. If he does not warn them when he sees evil, then he is participating in the evil. But he is not at fault if he warns them but they refuse to listen.

The Gospel reading develops the same thought. It is taken from a section of the Gospel of Mathew often referred to as the Discourse on the Church. Members of the Church are told to warn people in the community when they are falling victim to the forces of evil. If they warn people and those people refuse to listen but continue in the grasp of evil, then the people will not longer be part of the Church. This might seem harsh until we recognize that the Church is the Community of the Saved. Those who do not wish to be part of this community, but who want to continue in evil, are in effect separating themselves from the community.

We have an obligation to warn people about the dangers of consorting with evil. We have an obligation to warn our country about the dangers of promoting immorality. But we have an even deeper obligation to base our warnings on love.

Please notice that the Church sandwiches these readings around Romans 13:8-10. In the second reading the heart of Law of God is presented. The Ten Commandments, and all the laws of God presume charity. If someone loves his neighbor, then that person will be fulfilling the law of God.

We are living in times of extreme radical behavior. There are many people who see nothing wrong with violating every law of God, even those laws of nature which common sense dictates. At the same time, one of the most popular sermons in Churches takes place when the priest or minister notes the immorality of society, citing specific facts. Everyone is ready to applaud Father for telling it like it is, unless, of course, some of his references refer to them. Then they would rather he keep his opinions to himself.

Some people treat the law of God as a hammer and are delighted to smash others with their understanding of the law. We saw the extreme of this behavior thirteen years ago. Next Thursday we will remember the horrible events of 9-11. At the time of the tragedies, there were people, and there

still are people now, who think that the coward murderers had a right to attack the United States as a punishment for its neglect of God, its subtle and not so subtle promotion of immorality, and its exaltation of materialism. There are still people, whether they are Moslem terrorists, Hindu terrorists, Christian terrorists, or terrorists of any faith you can name, who think they have a right to assault and even kill people whom they perceive as lacking in their commitment to God. There are people in our country who claim to be Christian and who sing "Onward Christian Soldiers," as they torture and kill other people. How dare anyone invoke Jesus Christ as they practice bigotry? Many people forget that the heart of the law is love. Many people hide behind what they perceive as the law of God so they can practice hatred not love.

I have often heard about teenagers who were thrown out of their homes in what their parents' called tough love. I remember one girl who spent her entire senior year of high school going from house to house of friends because she refused to be part of a drug program which was later shown to be both psychologically and physically abusive. Her parents were practicing tough love. Often there was little or no love in the toughness. Tough love can become an excuse to be mean and hateful.

We are called to be strong, loving and wise. Not just strong. Christ did not come so we can use him to attack others. He came so we can gently lead the world to him. Look again at that Gospel reading. The instructions to the community is to lead the offending Christian back into the heart of the community with love. Nowhere is there an instruction to assault him, imprison him, or kill him. There was nothing Christian about the Inquisition. There is nothing Christian about those who use Christ to attack others.

We are returning to the fallacies of the last century that resulted in the most brutal dictatorships the world has ever seen. At the beginning of the last century there were those ready to assault anyone who did not believe as they did. They were called fascists. Those of the Nazi variety gave us the worst war the world has ever suffered through. Then there were those who refused all recognition of God, and all recognition of the rights of the individual for what they called the common good of society. They were called communists. Twenty million "White Russians" were killed establishing the Soviet Union. The communists imprisoned much of the world for three quarters of the century.

My fear is that people of the twenty-first century are giving credence to using force to destroy the rights of individuals or to promote their concept of God's will. They may disdain being referred to as communists or fascists, but their methods of achieving their goals are often the same as those who gave us the terrors of the last century.

When the love of God ceases to be the foundation of our actions, we are doing the work of the devil. That is what happened on 9-11. That was the devil's work, not God's work. This is what happens when skin heads attack gays. That is the devil's work, not God's work. This is what happens when anti-abortion extremists attack doctors and even girls outside of an abortion clinic. That is the devil's work, not God's work. That is what happens when the so-called intellectual elite destroy the rights of those who do not see the world as they see it. These people know they are not doing God's work because they are too arrogant to have a need for God. What they don't know is that the devil is using their intelligence into a tool for attacking the People of God. Any time and any place that people use their own self-righteousness to destroy others, they are doing the work of the devil. This includes the workplace, the neighborhood, and the school.

Why do we allow ourselves to be caught up in the complications of modern society? Life is not that difficult. All we need to do is seek the Lord where He may be found, act with love, and allow God to work through us for others.

We are called to be sentinels, watchmen for the Lord. We need to point out where God is found and where He is not found, whether that be to those who have no need for God in their lives, or those who use their perception of the law of God as an excuse for their justifying hatred.

The devil is wily. He knows how to twist good intentions into evil actions. We are often not aware of our participating in evil. Like the crows in the field, sometimes we are too close to a situation to realize where evil is hiding. Often people who are removed from the immediate action can see evil from the distance. That is why we need wise people to guide us. That is why we need to be sentinels for each other. We need each other to be sure that our actions reveal Christ's love.

Fr. Joseph Pellegrino, SJ