

Commentary on the Gospel for Tue, Mar 18th 2014

One of the hardest things for Church-going Americans to grasp is that, often, the readings are talking about us – as well as to us. This is not because their inspired authors could see ahead thousands of years, but because human nature hasn't changed all that much. The attitudes Jesus confronted in first century Judaism are too often the very same ones we 21st century Christians hold today.

Isaiah begins his scroll by accusing his fellow Hebrews of being like the citizens of Sodom and Gomorrah. (Exaggeration, yes. But he did what he felt was necessary to get their attention.) A prophet is one who speaks for God, and in this reading God, through Isaiah, tells them: “Make justice your aim; redress the wrong; hear the plea of the orphans; defend the widow.” “That’s what I want.” And in case we still don’t get it, the Psalm addresses the other side of that coin, adding that God isn’t pleased by religious rituals in themselves. Finally Jesus in today’s gospel attacks both the piety and the legalism of the most upright group in Judaism – the Pharisees. We too easily slough off that encounter, assuming that it refers only to Jewish regulations. But there are many ways we use religion to lay heavy burdens on one another, and there are many ways to say “too bad!” to those who struggle under those burdens. So we can’t dodge the fact that this statement is about us as well as about the Pharisees.

Think for a moment of the burdens carried by single mothers in our parishes, struggling to make ends meet. Or the victims of spousal abuse. What about those who took what seemed the only recourse available to them – divorce? Do we help lift their burdens? Do we include them in our communal life? Do we feel responsible for them? Or do we stigmatize or look down on them? Pope Francis’ famous words should be on our lips as well: “Who am I to judge?”

We’re quite good, actually, at helping the victims of disasters, at least in the short term. As “victims”, they were innocent. Do we feel less compassion for those whose plight may have arisen in part from their own bad choices – who are, in our view, less “deserving”? We should ask ourselves how God looks on us and our own bad choices. Perhaps we need to ponder for a moment the prodigal father in Luke Ch. 15.

In the gospel Jesus is very clear about our responsibilities to one another: “You are all brothers”. This statement was shocking, even revolutionary. Kinship was the most important social force in the ancient Mid East. We are as responsible for the well-being of brothers and sisters in Christ as we are for our own blood relatives. As kin, their problems are automatically ours as well. So Jesus says.

The readings stress that following the rules, observing the religious rituals – though a good thing to do

– are not enough, not nearly enough. They’re certainly not a substitute for lifting the burdens of others; they’re not a substitute for supporting them in their woundedness, even when we can’t heal those wounds.

Lent is a God-sent time to look about and see what burdens our expectations and proprieties have imposed on others – burdens we could help lift – should help lift. Pope Francis has told us that, when we enter so deeply into the wounds of our brothers and sisters that we feel them ourselves, we are filled with compassion – and ultimately with gratitude as well.

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