

Commentary on the Gospel for Sun, Sep 17th 2017

Today's readings are infused with truths about mercy and forgiveness. God's generous initiatives toward us provide great comfort and assurance: condescending to us, pardoning us, healing us, redeeming our lives, and removing our sins from us "as far as the east is from the west" (Ps. 103). But today's readings also caution us about hazards that threaten our state of blessedness, which are found in our disposition toward others.

Sirach speaks candidly about the destructive power of wrath, anger, and vengeance. Few get through this world unscathed by mistreatment or injustice. Caution is advised, as our assessments are not infallible; sometimes we also blame others wrongly. Yet even in the midst of real injustice, we must guard against having the wrong disposition, even as we discern the right response.

This is a tall order, particularly when we are still stinging from our wounds. At such a time, it seems like loving your neighbor is asking a bit much! But if having the wrong disposition toward our neighbor creates a barrier to blessedness, it behooves us to figure out how to navigate away from these hazards. So, how do we do that? The readings contain a few suggestions to ponder.

Sirach reminds us to "remember your last days" and "death and decay." This advice is not found in modern positive thinking for prosperity! But sober thoughts about death, which is never really far from us, help us contextualize. The importance we attach to all the things we accumulate (or lose) may fade in light of the more enduring reality of the kind of people we are becoming. Justice is better than injustice, to be sure. But isn't suffering from injustice preferable to being the one doing injustice?

The Roman philosopher Seneca once said, "Don't stumble on things that are behind you." That is good imagery. Moving on may be hard, but continuing to stumble is hard, too. If we cannot avoid hardship, let's make it work for us!

Sirach also reminds us to "think of the commandment" and to "remember the Most High's covenant, and overlook faults." As we do this, we recognize that we fall short. Alexander Solzhenitsyn once said that the dividing line between good and evil runs inside our own heart. Neither sin nor goodness is ever really that far from us. Caution and respect, coupled with a rule of charity, should govern when we are required to make assessments. Otherwise, this advice to overlook faults is a good idea.

Today's gospel reinforces this message of remembering our own need for mercy, while offering another insight to help us. The forgiven debtor somehow could not get his mind around the mercy shown to him. Perhaps he continued to think that he had to earn his way out. He could not comprehend the generous love shown to him, so he continued to live in the false, stingy reality he had known before, oppressing others as he was being oppressed. He needed a transformation in his mind, which did not happen in time to prevent a bad outcome. This cautionary warning draws us to seek a better path while we can.

Can we find our way toward forgiveness and mercy, while moving away from anger, bitterness, and vengeance? Do we have faith for such a miracle, which seems contrary to our nature? Then let us ask for this gift. And let us also do our part by taking the steps suggested in today's readings, while praying for one another and seeking mercy even for this fault of ours.

