

Sixteenth Sunday of Ordinary Time: Justice and Integrity

When I read through the Sacred Scripture for this Sunday, I was struck by one concept in the first reading from the prophet Jeremiah. First of all, a little background. Jeremiah wrote immediately before the horrible exile of 588 BC. Jeremiah, you might remember, told the leaders to trust in God and not to make treaties with the pagan nations. These treaties would demand the practice of pagan rituals, and could lead to the adoption of pagan immorality. In fact, the Jews joined in with abominable sacrifices. More than this, these treaties would be a rejection of something that was at the heart of the Hebrew People. God had chosen them. God had delivered them from the Egyptians, fought their battles for them and protected them in the past. A treaty with another nation would imply that God would not care for his people. At very best, the Jewish leaders would be hedging their bets.

Now while these leaders, these faithless shepherds, were rejecting God, they were also putting on the pious front. Externally they appeared to be religious. In reality they were hypocrites. Jeremiah was sick of their act. He continued his attack against them. He piled the prophetic gloom and doom on thick. But, then he did a 180 and spoke positively. That's the section that caught my eye. Jeremiah prophesied a day when the leaders would be wise and just, a day when people would look at their king and proclaim, "The Lord is our justice."

*Behold, the days are coming, says the LORD,
when I will raise up a righteous shoot to David;
as king he shall reign and govern wisely,
he shall do what is just and right in the land.
In his days Judah shall be saved,
Israel shall dwell in security.
This is the name they give him:
"The LORD our justice."*

Usually when we hear the term "justice" we think of court cases. We refer to justice as a decision that safeguards the rights of all people. Biblical justice is much deeper than that. Biblical justice describes a way of life that reflects the presence of God. Biblical justice is based on faith in God resulting in a particular way of acting. Biblical justice refers to integrity.

Now there's a word that we do not hear a lot, at least not in the public forum. Integrity. The word integrity means to be whole, complete. A person with integrity is a person of sincerity, a person's whose actions are a natural reflection of his or her interior. A person with integrity has a firm hold on the truth. He does not create truth. He respects truth.

What qualities, then, should we look for in a leader? Today's readings answer this question: 1) a leader must be capable of uniting the people in truth, as St. Paul tells the Corinthians, and 2) a leader must be both strong and compassionate, as the

Lord Jesus was.

When we think of leaders, we naturally tend to think about those in the highest echelons of authority: the Holy Father, the leaders of the Church, the president, the leaders of governments throughout the world. But leadership does not stop here. Through the sacrament of marriage, husbands and wives assume the responsibility of leading their spouses and their children to God. Through the sacrament of Holy Orders, deacons, priests and bishops assume the responsibility of leading in word and sacrament. By the grace of the sacrament of confirmation we are all given the responsibility of being leaders in the Church.

The leadership of a husband and wife in family and in marriage must combine strength and compassion. Husbands and wives, mothers and fathers, cannot make demands without recognizing the impact of their decisions upon each other or upon their children. The goal of marriage is to approach God through giving of oneself to one's spouse and children. The husband and wife, mother and father must be aware of the needs, physical emotional and spiritual, of their spouse and their children. As a community we all share in the responsibility to pray for our married couples. We also need to pray for our families with a single parent. These women or men have had to assume the role of both parents without the support of a spouse. They need our prayers as well as our support.

We often ask you to pray for your priests. All priests have individual gifts which they must develop in order to serve Christ. The prayers and support of the people are effective in helping the priest develop these gifts. As in all leadership, the priest must reflect Christ in being strong yet compassionate. A priest must stick to the truth even when it is unpopular and inconvenient; yet, he must care for the needs of the people. When in doubt, the priest must simply ask the question, "What would Jesus do in this situation?" The prayers of the people help the priest to ask this question and to find the proper answers to it.

The leadership we all share in as confirmed Catholics is directly related to the leadership entrusted to the Apostles on Pentecost Sunday. When the Apostles received the Holy Spirit, the Spirit spoke through them and they proclaimed Jesus Christ. This is an area where we all need help. We are all tempted to compromise with a society that has rejected Christ. Or, at least, we are tempted to keep quiet when others are attacking the faith. We need to pray for each other that we be compassionate while never deserting the Truth that is Christ.

So, today we pray for all leaders: in the Church, in the world, in our families, among our ordained clergy, and among all the confirmed. We pray that we and all leaders may combine the Christ-like characteristics of being strong and compassionate.

We have to be people of integrity. We have to have the courage to demand the truth in our own lives as well as in the lives of all we love. People need leaders to

show them the love and the compassion of Christ. They need leaders who have a firm hold on integrity. They need us to be those leaders. We can do this. We must do this.

The prophet Jeremiah said, "A day is coming when people will say, 'The Lord is our justice, our integrity.'" That day is upon us. Jesus is with us. Jesus is yearning to be reflected in our lives. He is calling us to be the people we can be.