

Justice & 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 great and horrible exile. 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 the adoption of pagan immorality. 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 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 is sick of their act. He continues his attack against them. He piles the prophetic gloom and doom on thick. But, then he does a 180 and speaks 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 proclaim with their lives, "The Lord is 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 don't 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.

The age of integrity began with Jesus Christ. It continues with us.

I want to share a story with you about a person of integrity. The story is Fr. John Fullenbach's story and it is about Blessed Mother Theresa. Fr. Fullenbach tells how he had heard about Mother Theresa of Calcutta in the late 60's, before the whole world was speaking about her. He decided to sacrifice a few months of his life and go to Calcutta to help Mother and her sisters care for the poorest of the poor. They welcomed him and immediately put him to work accompanying one of the sisters to an extremely poor area of the city. There was a garbage dump there with people combing it for food and clothes. Next to the dump a poor elderly man lay dying. Fr. Fullenbach went over to him to pick him up and take him to the sisters home where he could die with dignity and care. When he bent over the man, the man spit in his face. Fr. Fullenbach was furious. He had come all the way from Germany to India to help this man and those like him, and this was how he was treated!! But then he realized that

he was not being compassionate. He was being more condescending than anything else. Anyway, he picked up the man, took him to the shelter and spent hours cleaning him and caring for him. The entire time, though, he was furious.

After the man went to sleep, Fr. Fullenbach went into a large room and began wrapping cloth into bandages. Suddenly from the corner of the room he heard a child screaming. One of the sisters was trying to bathe an eleven year old who, poor thing, was covered with sores. The little girl was standing in a basin and wouldn't let the sister anywhere near her. She scratched the sister, threw water at her, went to bite her and screamed and screamed. Fr. Fullenbach was watching this when at the corner of his eye, he saw Mother Theresa at the door. "This will be good," he figured. "Now we'll see how saintly she really is." And he did. Mother Theresa walked over to the screaming girl and dismissed the other nun. She went to clean the child, but the child clawed her and splashed water all over Mother's sari. Perhaps, for some of us, a slap might be in order. At least a little tap to get the child to co-operate. That was not how Mother Theresa reacted. Instead, she backed up, fixed her clothes, then looked at the little girl's face for a few moments. She held out her arms and kept the little girl at arms length just looking into her eyes. After a few minutes of this, she just hugged the little girl and hummed to her as the little girl cried. This went on for about five minutes. Then the little girl let Mother Theresa wash her.

That is integrity. That is the leadership Christ calls us to. That is the leadership we all exhibit when we are not concerned with our needs, or our feelings, but with caring for the needs and feelings and the Divine Presence in another.

A day is coming when people will say, "The Lord is our justice, our integrity." That day is upon us. We have in the past, and we can in the present and future be people who make the love of Christ a living reality in the world. Jesus is with us. Jesus is yearning to come out of us. He is calling us to be the people we can be.

Many people in the world have tremendous needs. They need true leaders to show them the love, the compassion of Christ. They need us to be those leaders. We can and we will. We don't have the right to shirk our Christian responsibility with the claim that we are not good enough.