

TWENTY-NINTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

October 21/07

Introduction

Over the past twenty years or so we have had some high profile examples of people in our country who spent years in prison and then, perhaps through something like DNA testing, were proven to be innocent. It shows us that even in Canada the justice system can fail. It is far worse in many other countries. Years ago there was a priest who worked with a family trying to get their son out of a foreign jail. It was only when they paid a large bribe that they were able to get anywhere. So it was with the widow in today's Gospel. Some influential person had done her an injustice. The judge was afraid to offend that important person. At the same time the widow couldn't afford to bribe the judge into hearing her case. Eventually it was only her persistence that paid off. Justice can be hard to get. No wonder people sometimes say: "There's no justice!" The Gospel has two important things to say to us today about justice.

There Will be Justice for All but Not Necessarily in This World

At the end of today's Gospel reading Jesus refers to the Last Judgment. If we are Christians then we believe in eternal life, and we recognize that the only judgment that truly counts is God's final judgment on each one of us. This is not to say that we should not seek justice in this life, but it is to say that we are foolish if we expect to get it in every case. After all, Jesus himself was unjustly put to death. So were thousands of martyrs, and so were millions of other innocent victims throughout history. If we have faith, then, the only vindication we really count on is what God will accomplish at our death and at the end of the world. Our call in the meantime is simply to be faithful, caring, honest, just and chaste, no matter what the situation.

God is on the Side of Those Unjustly Treated

Listen again to the words of Jesus: "Will not God see justice done to his chosen . . . I promise he will see justice done to them and done speedily." There is a great biblical tradition behind these words of the Lord. Early in the Old Testament it became apparent that the people most often unjustly treated were the poor and those who lacked power. So we find the prophets saying such things as the following: "Maybe people in positions of power may ignore or mistreat the poor, maybe earthly leaders may fail them, but God, who cares about justice, will be the vindicator of the poor and the powerless." It is in this sense that Pope John Paul II once said to a huge crowd of poor Mexican peasants, "You are God's favourites!"

This is why we as a Church, and as individual Catholics, are called on by our faith to be on the side of the poor and the powerless of our world. In the first of the great social encyclicals of the Catholic Church, published in 1891, Pope Leo XIII said, "The rich have many ways of shielding themselves." We have to be on the side of those who don't have that sort of advantage. There are many abuses of power around us in today's world. Many women and children are abused. Many working people are unfairly treated. The poorer countries of our world have often received shabby treatment from the richer ones. In these situations there can be no doubt about what side God expects us to be on. That is why our faith calls us to work for justice, especially for the poor. There are many ways in which each of us can do this, for example, through political action, through our labour union, or through community action groups. We need to stand up and be counted!

Conclusion

There is a wonderful balance in today's Gospel that we should not miss. Some people have made the observation that years ago Catholics were all intent on getting to heaven, but today they seem more intent on changing this world. That is a false contrast. As the Gospel shows, the true goal of any Christian is to get to heaven. If we expect full justice short of that we are very foolish. At the same time, if we want to qualify for heaven, then we had better pay attention to those unjustly treated. That means working for needed change in this world.