

24th Sunday Ordinary Time

September 12-13, 2020

Readings: Sirach 27:30-28:7; Romans 14:7-9; Matt 18:21-35

The readings for today's Mass are read in every Catholic Church of the western Rite in the world, yet they seem almost eerily appropriate here in these United States, having very recently commemorated 9/11 and in seeing the unrest from within happening all summer long. The readings both comfort and challenge us. Our first reading from Sirach teaches: "Wrath and anger are hateful things, yet the sinner hugs them tight."

Our nation is not unique in our historic struggles to love one's neighbor, the clarion call of today's Gospel. Catholics were the victims of anti-Catholic bias in the 1850's that is well-documented. It led in large part to the formation of the Catholic School system, because it was increasingly difficult for Catholic children to attend public schools.

In the span of 50 years, the Catholic population in the United States transformed into a diverse mass of urban and rural immigrants who came from many countries, spoke different languages, held varying degrees of social status, and emphasized different aspects of their Catholic heritage. Catholic culture remained strong, vibrant and clear.

Despite significant differences between Catholics and Protestants over matters of doctrine, there remained a dominant culture in our nation that was both God-fearing and one that stressed traditional values regarding marriage and family. Clearly, this is no longer the case, and the resulting serious issues of social cohesion present new problems.

While our nation has been safe from outside attacks, the challenges today are largely from within, and our social landscape is significantly more complicated today. Our nation has undergone such dramatic changes and there are clearly struggles with how to understand our core values as a nation. Many Catholics are confused about how to respond, and deal with the anger and tensions, in light of the unrest in our country.

But one thing I can say with certitude amidst all the uncertainty in our society. “Wrath and anger are hateful things.” If we allow these emotions to overtake us, they certainly will. Our fallen human nature is no match for them. Recall what the Lord God said to Adam in the garden after the fall- “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers.”¹ This is what we call Original Sin; its effects are real.

Original sin has resulted in our fallen human nature. But, though wounded, our human nature remains capable to tremendous good. We are able to love others authentically and without distinction, according to race, class or status. God’s grace allows us to bear with one another patiently, and to engage those with whom we disagree civilly and respectfully. It even allows us to love our enemy. We can overcome anger, and we ought to strive to do so.

The Book of Psalms teaches, “Refrain from anger; abandon wrath; do not be provoked; it brings only harm.”² St. Paul says, “Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun set on your anger.”³ So anger is not the sin, but the expression of it may be. Some anger is righteous anger. One 5th century homilist noted, “He who is **not** angry when he has cause to be, sins. For unreasonable patience is a hotbed of many vices.”⁴

Aquinas picked up on that quotation, wrongly attributing it to St. John Chrysostom. But the sentiment remains valuable, even if not attributable to a saint. I’ll be honest- in 31 years of ministry, I have never been accused of having “unreasonable patience.” We get angry all too quickly. Today’s readings remind us of the danger of allowing our anger to boil and fester within us. We will never be at peace. The vice of anger has its own “children”-quarrelling, contempt, indignation, to name a few.

¹ Genesis 3:15

² Psalm 37:8

³ Ephesians 4:26

⁴ Summa Theologica, II-IIQ. 158, Art. 8 quoting Hom. xi in Matth. in the Opus Imperfectum, falsely ascribed to St. John Chrysostom.

These are all corollaries and lead to bitterness and derisiveness, that attitude that gives way to ridicule and scorn. Even righteous anger has limits, if that anger is preventing us from being at peace. If we willfully allow anger to take root in our hearts, we are at fault. We are to blame.

May the Lord protect us from allowing our anger, however real and even justified, to cloud our better judgment. As we remain ever vigilant in the face of evil and hatred, may we truly pray for the grace of forgiveness towards all who have hurt us, just as our Lord has taught us. May God bless our families and our nation.