

Homily March 11, 2018

When we hear on the news of some awful crime, we instinctively want to see justice done. People should not get away with inflicting grave harm on other people. People shouldn't get away with enriching themselves at the expense of another. We universally believe that, in justice, people should be punished for their crimes. And so we have an elaborate system of justice to identify the guilty and assure appropriate punishment, even though, in most cases, punishment never restores what was lost in the crime.

And our efforts at justice make sense. Without them we would only be encouraging even greater transgressions against people, their person or their property.

Fortunately, or perhaps in some ways unfortunately, God does not execute a criminal justice system in the same way. However, as blessed as we are with God's generous mercy, sometimes we may fail to appreciate the debt in justice we owe for the misuse of God's gift of life and grace. He made us in His image.

He made us to reflect His goodness and love in our use of human freedom and intellect. He made us that we might live faithfully in His image loving Him and loving all those whom He has likewise created in His image. Unfortunately, sin has clouded our vision. From the original sin on down our sin has cut us off from the fullest effect of God's love, with our intellect dimmed and our will weakened. We recognize this effect, somewhat readily, in the misdeeds of others. We are not always so quick to see it in ourselves.

The first reading reminded us of our pre-Christian heritage that acknowledges our human weakness, but also recognized the patience and mercy of God. The passage from Chronicles is an historical summary of the blindness to God that eventually led to the destruction of the homeland of God's people and a life in exile. But through the divinely guided benevolence of the Persian King Cyrus, God's people were given a fresh start in their homeland with the rebuilding of Jerusalem and the temple.

Today's Gospel speaks profoundly the good news of God's mercy and generosity as Jesus announced to Nicodemus that just as "Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert so would the Son of Man be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in Him may have eternal life." Jesus was, of course, talking about Himself. The incident with Moses occurred some 800 years earlier as God's people journeyed in the desert after their liberation of slavery in Egypt.

What happened was that the people's sins resulted in being bitten and made ill by snakes. But at God's instruction a golden representation of those very serpents was lifted up and became the instrument for the afflicted to be healed of the effect of their sin. Likewise, Jesus was to be lifted on the cross. His suffering and death would lead to His resurrection that would make the healing gifts of grace available to all. When we look at the cross and remember Jesus' suffering and death we can make that step of faith which first remembers the gravity of sin which deserved punishment. Then we can call upon Him for the forgiveness that opens us to further blessings of grace that enable us to do good in this life, eventually leading to eternal life.

In the Gospel John the evangelist went on to explain the gift. Jesus came not to exact just punishment from those who had rejected God's love and life. He came to save. His suffering and death were the great sign of His love. They were the great message: Yes, your sins deserve punishment, but I love you so much, I will endure this punishment. I will make things right. I will even the scale.

John also noted the necessity of believing in Jesus. To believe in Jesus is to see things by the light of Jesus, the Jesus who died on the cross. It is a light that says, yes - our sins are real. It is a light that reveals those sins to us. It is a light that shows the way we should act if we want to use well the gifts of life and love that God has given us. It is a light that shines through the Church, especially when we gather here, before the image of Christ lifted on the cross and His suffering, death and resurrection are made present for our benefit.

In our second reading St. Paul very beautifully described our being raised up by and with Jesus. So even as we look at the cross we see the outstretched arms beckoning us upward beyond sin, through mercy, to freedom and grace to continually be renewed and choose to act in ways that glorify God and assist our brothers and sisters.

In liturgical documents the Church calls for the cross with the image of Christ crucified to be placed near the altar. The custom is, as here, for a large crucifix placed above or behind the altar. We are called to look upon the image and be healed because we believe beyond death there is resurrection, beyond sin there is mercy and repentance. Beyond our weakness is His strength.