

## **Twenty Third Sunday of the Year September 10, 2017**

Ezekiel 33:7-9 Romans 13:8-10 Matthew 18:15-20

As Christians we are responsible and are made accountable for the welfare of those under our care, be it children, parents, elders, or even friends. People holding any office of responsibility have the need to be accountable for the work they do, be it a doctor, a lawyer, an officer or a Pastor. In each occupation, there is a responsibility and full accountability is required of the individuals. As Christians we are not individuals but members of the Body of Christ that is the Church. The readings of today tell us of God's command of spiritual responsibility and accountability that each one of us have towards our neighbours. It speaks of our responsibility of correcting our brothers and sisters in Christ who live in error. This obligation always existed in the Catholic Church, from the early days of the Christian community right up to the present time. They challenge us to care for our brothers and sisters and protect them in their physical and spiritual needs. The Gospel of today presents to us matters pertaining to the relationship between the members of the Church. Jesus stipulates a process for dealing with a community member who sins against another person. He lays down the guidelines for fraternal correction in the Christian community. At the same time he tells us of his own presence when the community meets in prayer in his name. In the first reading we hear God appointing a prophet as watchman over his people. He has the duty to warn them about the approaching danger and care for them. God says if he fails to do so he will be responsible for that person's death. Paul in the second reading reminds us of what we owe to others: "you shall love your neighbor as yourself." He tells them to avoid getting into debt, except the debt of mutual love.

Several images for a prophet appear in the Bible. A prophet is one who is chosen by God as his spokesperson and his mouthpiece so as to communicate his message to all. His role is to speak for God and to speak in the name of God on his behalf. Amos likens a prophet to a plumb line placed among the people to demonstrate how little they match up to God's commands. The King of Israel regarded Prophet Elisha as a vanguard protecting the people against the enemy. In today's first reading God describes Prophet Ezekiel as a watchman over the people of Israel. He is called by God as his servant and agent and must therefore obey God, his master. The image is of a sentry placed on hill top or some elevated place, at the time of a threatened invasion. The sentry's duty is to

give warning to his fellow citizens the moment he sees the signs of invasion. God tells his prophet to warn the sinner of the certain damnation that will follow if he does not mend his ways. If the prophet does not do so the sinner will die in his sins, but the prophet will have to share in his damnation. On the other hand if the prophet gives the warning to the sinner and the latter still dies in his sins, the prophet will not bear any responsibility for that man's damnation. The reading reminds us that we as God's people have the great responsibility placed on us by God. Everyone has the duty and obligation to rectify errors that are seen while encouraging the divine gifts received by the person.

Love of neighbor was the hallmark of Christianity which expressed the love of God and the working of man on behalf of God. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus stresses the importance of the need of loving our brothers and he considers it as of greater importance than sacrifice. The love of neighbor presupposes the love of God, for if God is not known and loved, there can be no basis, no motive for true love of neighbor, which is charity. Human love is based on natural affection as among the members of a family. The love of brother is not restricted to fellow Christians but is extended to all. In the second reading of today, twice in three verses Paul speaks of fulfilling the law. The way to do so is by loving one another. This would imply caring for and helping others. It is a debt we always owe. Paul mentions here four commandments, not to commit adultery, not to kill, not to steal, not to covet, and refers to whatever other commandments there may be. They are all summed up in the command love your neighbor as yourself. Thus there is no substitute for the Christian law of fraternal charity, just as there is no substitute for Christian religion. We love our neighbor because God through Christ's coming on earth has made us all his children and want us to be happy with him forever. Because we love God we must do all in our power to see that his wish is fulfilled.

The Gospel passage of today deals with such situations within the Christian community. The whole of Matthew chapter 18 is a discourse on mutual relations within the Christian community and, especially, what to do when divisions arise, as must inevitably happen. We are communities of sinners trying to be saints and there are many pitfalls on the way. In today's passage we see a three-stage procedure for dealing with a community member who has done "something wrong". Presumably, it is some form of external behaviour which is harmful to the quality of the community's witnessing to the Gospel. The whole thrust of the

passage is that we should all work towards reconciliation rather than punishment. There will also be a desire to keep the issue at as low a profile as possible without any unnecessary publicity. At the same time we are obligated to privately approach the sinner so we will not publicly humiliate him or her. So, the first stage is for the two people concerned to solve the issue among themselves. If it works out at that level, that is the ideal situation. Jesus says: "You have won back your brother." To win back here is a Jewish technical term for conversion. For it is not enough that he merely stop his offensive behaviour, there also needs to be a genuine change of attitude and a genuine reconciliation with the offending person. It indicates in the Christian spirit a change of heart.

Then we have the second step in the mode of reconciliation. If the offender refuses to listen to his "brother", then others should be brought in as confirming witnesses. This involves confronting the community member with one or two additional persons. This step comes from the teaching of Deuteronomy Chapter 19, verse 15. This is a more serious step and again it is hoped that the matter will be resolved by it. If neither of the first two steps works and if he refuses to listen to these, then he has the duty to report to the Church. The 'Church' here is understood as the local community because during the time of Jesus the term Church was not in use. However, in the thinking of the Christian Testament, each self-contained community is a 'church' as written in the Book of Revelation where letters are written to seven 'churches' or local communities. Paul also uses this term in his letters to different churches meaning communities. The approach to the church is to go beyond all legalism. The personal relationship can be rectified in an atmosphere of Christian prayer, Christian love and Christian fellowship. It is understood that while meeting in the community it is not the judgment but fraternal love that brings the transformation.

If these steps fail to produce any result, the final step is taken as the last resort. If the offender still refuses to listen or to change, he is to be treated as a gentile or a tax collector. That was generally interpreted and the first impression was that the person is to be shunned totally by the community as a hopeless and incorrigible person. This however sounds very strange coming from the teaching of Jesus who never set limits to human forgiveness. He was always known as a kind, gentle and forgiving person and accepted good and bad. He was always merciful and did not permit the stoning of woman caught in adultery. The Prodigal Son was received with open arms after he had decided he no longer

wanted to live his life of debauchery and, by his own decision, came back to his father. He accepted Matthew and Zaccheus and went to dine with them. He reached out to sinners and forgave them and he said it is the sick persons who need the doctor and not the healthy. The sinners and tax collectors always approached him easily and that led to serious opposition from Scribes and Pharisees. Therefore when Jesus says that they must be treated like gentiles and sinners, it really means to treat them as Jesus did, namely, with love and affection, and at the same time showing special concern towards them. To Jesus it means continuing friendship. He indicates that they too have a heart which can be touched. This special concern and forgiveness will lead to a change in heart and the person will surely be reconciled to God. In other words such persons must be treated with love and kindness. They can still be won over as Jesus has done with regard to sinners and gentiles.

Immediately after this Jesus speaks about power to bind and loose. "Whatever you bind on earth shall be considered bound in heaven..." These words indicate that the community has the power, given it by God, to make a judgment on who is fit to belong to the Body of Christ. It is a necessary power to preserve the integrity of the community as a witness to the Gospel. It is also a dangerous power which can be abused. This power was originally given to Peter is now extended to the disciples. Here it seems to be within the context of imposing or lifting the excommunication of a community member. It requires very sensitive discernment because it is easy to exclude someone who may in fact be telling the community some wholesome truths it needs to hear. We ought to remember that as a community we have a responsibility for each other's wellbeing. The only wellbeing that can justify such 'ex-communication' is behaviour that is totally at variance with the community's mission to be the Body of Christ and to be the witness of the Gospel message.

Jesus further tells the disciples: "If two of you on earth agree to ask anything at all, it will be granted to you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three meet in my name, I shall be there with them." Jesus indicates that when all things fail, there is the common prayer. United prayer is powerful, sensible and effective than any sort of resentment and he will be there. Wherever Christians meet together in truth and love, whether it is for prayer, study, or decision-making, Jesus is present and Jesus speaks and acts. This is both a tremendous gift and also a great responsibility. This efficacy does not require large numbers of people. A

mere gathering of two or three persons in Lord's name is all it takes. This was also the popular rabbinic teaching at the time of Jesus. This passage tells us that our prayer must never be selfish and that selfish prayer cannot find an answer. We are not meant to pray for our own needs but to pray as members of a fellowship, remaining in agreement and being concerned of the needs of the community. We pray in the community for peace and harmony, good health, brotherhood and togetherness. When our prayer is unselfish it is always answered and God will answer them in his own way with divine wisdom and foresight. It is of utmost importance to notice that Jesus is present in the church, in his community and among his people. He is present in the community of church, in a family, in a group in prayer and in place where he is searched.

To love of others requires a capacity to experience another person as a person. This is not easy; we normally see others as we see objects and things, as facts, not as persons. We can also speak of categories of persons, groups, classes, and even want to speak in their name, and perhaps never experience anyone of those abstract groups as a personal. Love is the only adequate response of our capacity to relate to persons, yet how difficult we find it just to experience even one person as a person. There is a clear duty to make oneself responsible for others' actions. Ezekiel warns us that if we do not warn others of their evil ways we will be held responsible for their spiritual death. The Gospel advice runs in the same vein. It is not difficult to see the connection between this fraternal correction and the Gospel precept of love for neighbor. A true love for neighbor and a true knowledge of the nature and the harm of sin leave no other option. To love God with all one's mind and heart requires searching for God with all one's mind and heart. This means the time and a readiness to search for and know God's presence and will. It means a whole-hearted willingness to search for God wherever he may be found.

Today in the church Jesus places on us the painful obligation of fraternal love in the watchful love we show towards others. To approach this painful duty of fraternal correction, it entails many qualities: courage, compassion, patience, gentleness, humility, sincerity, reverence, a desire to preserve the other's good name, prudence, delicacy, tact, mutual dialogue, true listening and mercy. The readings tell us that we will be held responsible for the silence and our unwillingness to speak. We are scandalized and even annoyed when our leaders in the church or community do not speak. But Jesus tells us today that we have to

speak for him and rectify the wrong in the society and the community. We are there not merely to criticize but to help positively to build bridges and rectify the wrong. This week, let us take some time to reflect on our responsibility towards God. Let us reflect on how we will account to God for the actions of those around us, be it our parents, our brothers or sisters, our children, our relatives, our neighbours, our co-workers, our peers, all of those whose life we touch. Let us do what we must do so that when we appear before God on Judgment Day, we will be able to repeat the words of Jesus, "Not one of them was lost except the one destined to be lost."

One summer evening after a festal hour of singing and dancing the whole tribe sat around the chieftain. He began to speak to them: "If you have quarreled with a brother and you have decided to kill him," as he spoke he looked directly at the one of the group, "first sit down, fill your pipe and smoke it. When you have finished smoking you will realize that death is too severe a punishment for your enemy for the fault he has committed, and you decide to give a good whipping instead. Then you fill your pipe a second time and smoke it to the bottom. By then you feel that the lashes will be too much and instead some simple words of reproof would be sufficient. Then when the third time you have filled your pipe and smoked it to the finish, you will be better convinced that the better thing to do is going to that brother and embraces him.

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