March 11, 2018

Fourth Sunday of Lent (B)
2 Chron 36:14-16, 19-23
Eph 2:4-10; John 3:14-21

By Dianne Bergant, CSA

Usually, when we are concerned about matters of justice we focus on individuals or groups of people who are victims of injustice, those who are marginalized because of gender, race, ethnic origin, physical challenge, or any number of other reasons. However, there is another aspect of justice that today’s readings reflect, though they do not explicitly highlight. That aspect is the positive attitude that must undergird any exercise of justice.

In today’s reading from 2 Chronicles, the sins of the people are summarized and their resulting punishment is described. However, the reading does not end on a negative note. Instead, the people are directed to return to Jerusalem where a new temple will be built. This is a message of hope in future restoration. God is giving them another chance. A second message of hope is found in the passage from the Letter to the offences against us. Instead, God makes us alive again in Christ. This speaks of God’s graciousness and mercy. The reading from the Gospel of John contains two images of mercy. In the first, Moses’ act of lifting up the serpent in the wilderness brought healing to a people suffering the consequences of their infidelity. Here we have another story of forgiveness and a second chance. This image is then employed as a foreshadowing of Jesus’ being lifted up and our being given another chance because of God’s love for sinners.

In each of these passages, the people of God have been unfaithful and, consequently, deserving of just punishment. However, in each instance, the justice is grounded in mercy or love. In other words, justice is not simply calculated retribution. It originates in a desire for the well-being of the offender. Justice without such an attitude might actually be callous retaliation. This does not mean that no form of reparation is required. Mercy, as found in the Bible, is not the same as clemency. It does not render the wrongdoer unaccountable. Rather, it is a deep sentiment of concern for that wrongdoer, a sentiment that can be expressed in various ways - accountability (Isa 54:7), reprimand (Luke 15:31-32), forgiveness (Luke 23:34).

Genuine justice hopes for a change of heart. The reading from 2 Chronicles describes how the people had turned away from God; they were punished; in the end, God is with them again. Ephesians says that those who sinned are dead, but those who accept grace are raised to eternal life. The people in the wilderness suffered from serpents’ bites; they were called to turn back to God by looking upon the bronze serpent, and they were healed. Jesus is lifted up so that those who suffer from or are endangered by the consequences of their sinfulness may have eternal life. In each, there is a change of heart.
So what does all this mean for us who are committed to matters of social justice? These readings invite us to view the underlying sentiments we have toward those of whom justice should be exacted, those who marginalize the vulnerable, who prey on the defenseless, who burden the weak. Is the justice toward which we work grounded in genuine concern for those who perpetrate or tolerate injustice, or do we harbor sentiments of revenge? The prodigality of divine mercy can sometimes pierce the vindictiveness in our own hearts.

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