

+ J. M. J.

Last week in the reading from the Gospel we heard that the father upon catching sign of his son, who was still a long way off, was filled with compassion and ran to embrace his son (Luke 15:20). We heard something similar in the Letter to the Philippians. St. Paul says he has **“been taken possession of by Christ Jesus.”** What he means by this is Jesus pursues us and even when we flee from him he runs towards us even faster. Jesus in his very person, true God and true man, brings us out of our sinful ways back to God. His very name means “God saves” (CCC 430).

That’s very important to remember. Last week the father didn’t want to dwell on the son’s former deeds; instead he was more concerned with reconciliation and the party. Today we hear about this sinful woman brought in the presence of Jesus; that is precisely what Jesus does brings sinners to himself where they are safe.

There are two concepts that we have an awfully hard time reconciling, justice and mercy. Strictly speaking we would not want to live in a universe where those who committed crimes went free. Truly God is just, but as we have been exploring we have a God who is at the same time infinitely merciful. What is hard to grasp is that for God justice and mercy are the same quality. That’s because in God justice and mercy meet in love, perfect love that is infinitely just and infinitely merciful. An example is in order.

In the first reading we heard of God opening the waters of the sea. That sea came crashing over the chariots and horsemen of the Egyptians. For the Egyptians water meant death. But water is what gives life. God gives water for the refreshment of the wild beasts, jackals and ostriches, and most importantly for his people as he gave the Israelites water in the desert at Meribah. In one case water kills. In another it gives life.

In the Gospel Jesus came to reconcile everybody to God, the woman, the scribes, and the Pharisees.

Notice Jesus begins to write in the sand as they question him. He then gives part of a teaching. **“Let the**

one among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone.” There was great love in that teaching of Jesus. What happens? The scribes and the Pharisees cannot accept Jesus’ great love, so in the hardness of their heart **“they went away one by one.”** When Jesus finishes writing he is prepared to give the rest of his teaching **“Neither do I condemn you. Go, and from now on do not sin any more.”** Two responses to Jesus’ love. The scribes and the Pharisees flee. The woman remains.

When we approach Jesus asking for forgiveness whether it be for serious sin in the sacrament of penance or for other sins through the various acts that bring about conversion and reconciliation, Jesus is quick to say to us I do not condemn you. **“Go, and... do not sin any more.”** St. Augustine warned that once experiencing God’s great love through forgiveness we can fall into one of two errors. I dare say the first is more common. We can presume God’s mercy. We can diminish our sins, forgetting that all sin separates us from God. We can presume that God will forgive our serious sins without need of sacramental confession. Worse, we can in a way take advantage of God’s generous forgiveness saying we can do what we know is wrong for we know we will always be forgiven.

The second error is to be too hard on ourselves when we fall. That is to forget that it is by God’s grace that we do the good that we do in life. It is the error of pride to think that somehow one of our sins might be bigger than what Christ can reconcile by his death and resurrection, and finally we can be tricked into despairing that God cannot forgive me, so it does not matter what I do anyways.

This woman caught in adultery is to be praised because after her sin she finds herself standing next to Christ, and it is whenever we stand in the presence of Christ that we are safe. With two weeks left in Lent, let us receive that great love of God which is justice and mercy. Let us remember to examine our consciences frequently perhaps before we go to bed so as receive God’s great love. We receive the Eucharist often to free us from daily faults and preserve us from mortal sin,¹ and if our conscience

¹ RP 27.

reveals to us that we may have committed a serious sin we avail ourselves of the sacrament of reconciliation as soon as possible.