

26th Sunday in Ordinary Time – A

“God’s ways are not fair!” This is not an uncommon sentiment to have, as we heard in our first reading from Ezekiel. It may not always be expressed in this way, however; sometimes it sounds more like, “I don’t understand why God would do this to me,” or, “I don’t understand why God would let this happen to me.” At its heart, it is a lack of understanding of God. Sometimes, His ways can indeed seem to us incomprehensible or even unfair.

The sense that some things are not fair reveals that God has created within each one of us a desire for justice. When something seems to be unfair, we feel that justice is not being done, and we sense the wrongness of this. And the desire for justice is a good thing; because God created us in His own image and likeness, this is a quality that we share with the Lord Himself. However, unlike God, our sense of justice can sometimes be distorted. Unlike God, we don’t always know the whole story; we may only perceive one side and believe that to be the whole story. And justice, for it to be true justice, must be based on right and wrong – what is truly right, and what is truly wrong. And again, because we are fallen human beings, affected by sin, our

understanding of right and wrong can sometimes be distorted, faulty, or incomplete.

God's sense of justice, however, is of course complete and perfect. God knows all things; He reads all hearts; He knows all sides of every story. God can never make a mistake. And God's ways are never unfair. So, if we have that feeling, that God's ways are not fair, or if we struggle to comprehend why this or that thing has happened to us, it is not God who is at fault, who made a mistake, or who is unfair. Rather, in those situations, we must recognize that we are mere creatures; that our intellects are limited, and that we simply do not know everything. We must humble ourselves before the Lord. We must renew our trust in God, in His providence, in His wisdom, and in His justice, and trust that one day all things will be made clear to us.

The complaint in our first reading, that "The Lord's ways are not fair!", is in response to this word the Lord spoke to the prophet Ezekiel: "If the wicked man turns away from all the sins he has committed, if he keeps all my statutes and does what is just and right, he shall surely live. He shall not die! None of the crimes he has committed shall be remembered against him.... Do I not

rejoice when [the wicked] turn from their evil way and live?” And the Lord also goes on to say, “And if the just turn from justice and do evil...can they do this evil and still live? None of the justice they did shall be remembered, because they acted treacherously and committed these sins....”

So the Lord is responding to those who feel that it is unfair that the wicked who repent of their evil should live, i.e., have eternal life, and / or that the just who later abandon the way of the Lord should suffer punishment. If we struggle with this, again, it is we who must acknowledge our littleness before the Lord and strive to understand better who God is and what He is trying to teach us here.

I think one of the things the Lord is trying to teach us is that He is both just and merciful. God does not seek to condemn anyone to hell; He created everyone for the purpose of one day being with Him in heaven. So if a sinful person repents of his sin, and asks forgiveness of the Lord, and seeks to amend his ways and live a better life, God will forgive him. But at the same time, those who follow the Lord must never become proud and assume they can do no wrong; they must not get comfortable with themselves and

complacent and take their relationship with God and their faith in Him for granted. Those who seek to follow the Lord will still have to contend with temptation. Those who seek to follow the Lord will have to persevere every day in following Him, putting one foot in front of the other to follow Him, even when it's not easy. We must ignore that inner voice that says, "Me and God are good – I don't need to go to a church to pray." (It's true that we don't need to go to a church to pray – we can pray anywhere – but God gave us the Mass as the greatest form of worship we can make to Him; He gave us the sacraments as gifts for our spiritual benefit. And because He has given us these things, He wants us to receive them. They are for our own good, and God knows what He is doing in giving them to us.)

We hear this teaching about God's justice and mercy in our Gospel reading, when Jesus tells the scribes and the Pharisees that tax collectors and prostitutes were entering the Kingdom of God before them. I am sure that this scandalized them, because they considered themselves to be good and just, and tax collectors and prostitutes were considered to be among the greatest of sinners. But the scribes and Pharisees were classic examples of people whose understanding of right and wrong had become distorted.

Essentially they believed that they were just simply by going through the motions, observing only the externals of the Jewish Law – while at the same time seeking complicated loopholes to do what they pleased – while their hearts remained far from God.

In contrast, Jesus through his preaching was attracting, among others, tax collectors and prostitutes. Of course, he called them to repentance – Jesus didn't say, "You can keep doing what you like and live however you like;" no, he told them they had to repent of their sins and change their way of life; they had to abandon their sinful ways in order to follow Him. But in doing so, they received God's mercy and forgiveness: God chose to forget their sins; He gave them a fresh start, a rebirth to a new and better life.

It is the same for each one of us. God offers to each one of us the same possibility of forgiveness: that is why His Son Jesus instituted the sacrament of reconciliation. God created us for eternal life, not eternal punishment; He desires that we turn away from sin and seek to follow Him. If we do this, we can be assured that He will forgive us. But we also must persevere in following Him every day in this journey through life here on earth.

God is both perfectly just and perfectly merciful, and the most perfect sign of this is Jesus' death on the Cross: the truly just one taking upon himself the punishment due to sinners for our sins. And the Eucharist is the living sign of God's perfect justice and mercy. We are not worthy to receive this gift, as we ourselves profess at every Mass, but at a mere word of God, our souls are healed. Let us go forward then to receive this gift from God of which we are not worthy, persevering in following the Lord.

- **October 1, 2023 at St. Mary's, Spring Lake**