



26th Sunday A 2008 September 28, 2008

Fr. Joe Sobierajski, S.J.

Ezekiel 18:25-28 Philippians 2:1-11 Matthew 21:28-32

Have in you the same attitude
that is also in Christ Jesus.

— *Philippians 2:5*

There is an American novelist who lives and writes in Italy for whom I have a particular fondness. Donna Leon is her name and she writes mystery novels in which the main character is Commissario Guido Brunetti of the Venetian police. Like many mystery novels it is a misnomer to speak of her works as simply “mysteries” in the traditional sense because they seem to be much more philosophical in their scope. Commissario Brunetti is a thoughtful, introverted, intelligent and intuitive man whose mind goes beyond solving the case in point, and considers not only the character and circumstances of the persons involved, but also the way in which the government seems disinclined to encourage or model a way in which justice can truly be served. The book that I recently read entitled *Uniform Justice* focuses on a death of a young student in a Venetian military academy. His death is a result of the fact that his father, a good and scrupulously honest doctor, sought that same kind of honesty from the national government when he was a member of the National Assembly. In addition to being an exciting mystery, the novel raises questions about honesty, justice, trust, and whether men and women actually want such virtues in their government or their private lives. Or whether justice and trust are even possible.

It seems to me that just such questions are raised in our First Reading from the *Prophet Ezekiel* and our Gospel reading from *Matthew* today. In our First Reading, the people cry out, “The Lord’s way is not fair!” To understand the reason for their accusation we have to return to what has been said previously in this chapter of Ezekiel. The prophet speaks about the word of the Lord coming to him and making it clear that each man or woman is responsible for their own actions. This is first of all a new sort of justice since it was formerly believed that the sins of the father were visited on the sons. And, although in our day we might find some truth in that psychologically speaking, Ezekiel makes it clear that it is not so spiritually speaking. A man is not responsible for the actions of his father, nor the father responsible for the actions of the son. Each is to be judged on their own actions. Yet, God’s judgment does not descend on us immediately upon our commitment of an evil deed. God is always willing to accept our repentance and

our determination to live a good life. God's justice is always tempered with mercy, but it seems that humans at least when judging others would rather have justice without mercy. It's difficult to understand how God is unfair except perhaps in our human desire that His justice and mercy be applied only to us and not to our enemies. God then is "unjust" when He fails to think and do as we think and do.

Our Gospel from Matthew is a scene that is found in every generation through every age, a parent asking that his child do something for him. Here, the father asks his two sons to go out and work in his vineyard for the day. The first immediately says, "No!" and then for some reason changes his mind and goes to fulfill his father's request. The second says that he will, and then perhaps getting a better offer on how to spend the day changes his mind and does not go. "Which of the two did the father's will?" the Lord asks. The answer is of course the first. It doesn't matter whether we say "yes" or "no." What matters is what we do. People can and often do change their minds about what they should do even in their relationship to God. Jesus warns the chief priests and elders that while they may pay lip service to God, the tax collectors and the prostitutes listened to the Baptist's cry "to repent" and no matter what sin they found themselves in they came and repented because they believed John.

The chief priests and elders who should have been closely attuned to God ignore the need on their own part to repent, believing that their office, their position, their authority made them better than tax collectors and prostitutes, two of the most reviled sinners. The irony of course is not only did they not repent because of their own sins, but even the repentance of "hardened" sinners did not open their eyes to John's message. They did not believe John, and they did not believe the obvious effects of John's teaching. Is there anything or anyone they will trust? Is there any way they could see their own sinfulness and then in justice the need for their repentance? Could they even be honest with themselves about where they stand before God?

It is not difficult I believe to see how this all applies to us, each in our own situations. It all comes down to our relationship with God. *Do we trust God?* If we trust Him then we know that His love for us is not phony or some divine trick used to trap us in our sinfulness. If we trust in Him then we believe that what is said by Ezekiel is true: we are all responsible for our own actions. Yet, we also know that God is always willing to forgive. If we are willing to return God's paternal love by doing as He asks even when we might not feel like it, then we do our best to work in His vineyard as He asks. The vineyard is more

than just an image in Jesus' parable. The vineyard is this world in which we live where the harvest is constantly ready for gathering. Sinners though we may be; we are also God's hands. We are both the harvest and the harvesters. The Father desires that we be part of His vintage, but He also asks that we help gather others to Him.

Our reading today from Paul's *Letter to the Philippians* captures the mind, the motivation, the desire that needs to be in each of us if our faith means anything. Paul calls on the community of Philippi and on each of us to take responsibility not only for ourselves but also for others: "If there is any encouragement in Christ, any solace in love, any participation in the spirit, any compassion and mercy, complete My joy by being of the same mind, with the same love, united in love, thinking one thing. Do nothing out of selfishness...rather, humbly, regard others as more important than yourselves." All of this because Christ "emptied Himself" and became One like us, and gave Himself in obedience to death, even death on a cross. This was only possible because of the Son's love and trust of the Father and His conviction of the Holy Spirit's constant support.

So, again the question is "*Do we, do you trust God?*" In our ordinary lives we have many good reasons for not trusting our government, our justice system, and all kinds of "authority." Yet there is an innate need within each of us to trust someone or else we all become some kind of freewheeling bodies unconnected to anyone else, and therefore unloved and unloving. "*Do you trust God?*" It's not a rhetorical question. It's a question that we must each answer, and answer I believe everyday of our lives. For trust in God or its lack determines how we each live our lives. It determines what we think is actually of importance. It determines what guides us as we are confronted daily by all the forces around us that tell us that such trust is stupid. Trust in God leads us to act as Jesus Himself did when He placed Himself in the Father's hands. Trust in God frees us from the selfishness that blinds us to the pain and suffering of others. Trust in God means that we trust in His love. *Do you trust in God?*

Henri Nouwen, the spiritual writer saw trust in God as the only real, credible option in our human lives. "The root choice," he said, "is to trust at all times that God is with you and will give you what you need...God says to you, 'I love you, I am with you, I want to see you close to Me and experience the joy and peace of My presence. I want to give you a new heart and a new spirit. I want you to speak with My mouth, see with My eyes, hear with My ears, touch with my hands. All that is Mine is yours. Just trust Me and let Me be your God.'" (*Keep choosing god*) Trust in God, what do we have to lose?