HOMILY FOR THE 27TH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME – C

This Sunday is often referred to as Respect Life Sunday. It kicks off a month that is devoted to renewing and strengthening our commitment to promote respect for all life -- from the moment of conception on. We do this each year because we know that to follow Jesus means doing what we can to protect and nurture all life as precious gifts of God. It means following him in promoting the just and compassionate treatment of all people – especially those who have been pushed to the margins and have been deprived of what they need to live full and productive lives.

Of course, the reason we need to do this every year is that there is still so much to do. Cries for justice can be heard all around us. Prejudice, intolerance, inadequate wages, inaccessible healthcare, the killing or mistreatment of the most vulnerable – especially the pre-born, children, and the elderly are things that we continue to hear about each day. And it can be terribly discouraging to think that after so many years of promoting respect for all life and the just treatment of all, in many quarters there continues to be a blatant disregard for the preciousness of all life. And often it is the very ones who could do the most to make things better for the poor and the marginalized that are working the hardest to make things better for themselves, at the expense of those who are most in need.

Knowing this, like the prophet Habakkuk, we may wonder at times why God allows such things to continue. I mean, if God is all-powerful and if God is really on the side of those who are fighting to promote a respect for all life, why does it seem so often like we are fighting a losing battle? Like the prophet Habakkuk, we might feel like saying, “God, what gives? You are the one who called us to take up this fight for the just and compassionate treatment of all people. And we know that with your help all things are possible. So why hasn’t this battle been won?” In fact, Habakkuk was so tormented by this question that he took his stand on a watchtower and said that he wasn’t going to budge until God gave him an answer.

And since God has better things for his prophets to do than to stand around doing nothing, God gave him an answer – not the answer that Habakkuk was hoping for, but the only answer God could give. In other words, there was no “because” given to the prophet’s question “why.” When it comes to the big questions God hardly ever responds with a “because,” because God’s reason for doing things often goes beyond the bounds of our human reasoning. So rather than baffling us even more with some incomprehensible explanation, God does what he can to reassure and encourage us. This is what he did for Habakkuk, and through Habakkuk for us. Basically, he said that he has the situation under control, that good things are coming, that the self-serving will end up with nothing more than themselves, and that justice will prevail. And while our initial response might be, “Yeah, right, I’ve heard that line before,” upon reflection we might realize that those others who have said such things aren’t God.

I mean, when God says, “trust me,” it carries a lot more weight than it does coming from someone who is less than all-powerful, all-loving, and all-knowing. If the One for whom all things is possible says that there will come a time when justice will prevail once and for all, when all people will be treated with the greatest love and respect, then we can count on it. I mean, if anyone can make good on his word, surely it’s God!

But God doesn’t want us to just count on the triumph of justice. He wants us to share in it, that is, he wants us to be involved in bringing it about. And we should want to be involved because if we are really his people, then it is our battle too. And this was part of God’s response to his prophet. Remember the last line of our reading from Habakkuk -- “the just one, because of his faith, will live.” Now I realize that these particular words don’t convey much of a sense of active participation, and that hearing them, we might get the idea that as long as we are just ourselves we will come to share in the triumph of justice simply by putting our faith in God. But there is really more to it than that. You see, a more accurate translation of the original text is “the just one, because of his faithfulness, will live.” In other words, it is not just believing in the triumph of justice but by actually continuing to be faithful in carrying out the fight for justice that we will come to share in it.
I find it fascinating and instructive that the word that I am saying is best translated “faithfulness” appears in the reading we will hear in a couple weeks from the Book of Exodus. The reading has to do with what happened during a battle the Israelites were fighting against the Amalekites. As the story goes, Moses stood on a hill over the battle grounds with the staff of God in his hand. And as long as Moses held his hands up over the battle the Israelites were winning the fight. But the battle went on for a long time and Moses grew too weary to keep his hands raised. And when he lowered them, the Israelites began to take a beating. So his brother Aaron and his good friend Hur came and stood by Moses and helped him hold up his hands. With their help, his hands remained steady – or better translated, “remained steadfast” till sunset and the battle was won. Now where I am going with all this is that the word translated “remained steadfast” is the same word that is in our text from Habakkuk – and is translated “faithfulness.”

What this story helps us to see is that faithfulness, remaining steadfast, is not just a matter of believing. It is also a matter of doing, and doing steadfastly over the long haul. The just one of whom Habakkuk speaks, is not one who simply believes in justice. Rather the just one is one who does justice, who promotes justice, steadfastly – one who keeps holding his or her hands up over the battle for justice, and supports others in doing the same, until the battle is finally won.

No one has ever seen this vision more clearly and lived according it more steadfastly than the woman who was just made a saint - St. Mother Teresa of Calcutta. For well over fifty years she worked tirelessly to bring about the just and compassionate treatment of those most in need. For well over over fifty years she worked tirelessly to help people learn to live together in peace and love. And she engaged others in this work, so that by the end of her life, she had founded communities to carry out this work in 123 countries. And while she is known most of all for her direct service, for the compassionate caring that she and her sisters gave to the poorest of the poor, Mother Teresa also worked to right many of the world’s injustices – speaking out again and again in venues all over the world for religious freedom for peoples of all faiths, for the protection of the unborn, for peace, and for the restoring of the family as a community of love.

Why did she do it? For the reason Jesus spoke of in the Gospel today. Remember his words, “When you have done all you have been commanded, say, “We are unprofitable servants; we have done what we were obliged to do.” Mother Teresa put it this way, “I’m a little pencil in the hand of a writing God, who is sending a love letter to the world.” In other words, we do everything we can to promote justice and the compassionate treatment of all people because that’s what God wants, and it is our job to serve God. And Mother Teresa reminds us that this is a joyful service because we are involved in carrying out a plan that is born and ends in love.

Mother Teresa reminds us further that this is something we must do together. As Moses couldn’t keep his hands raised up over the battle without the support of his brother and his good friend, so the battle for the just and compassionate treatment of peoples is too much for any of us to do alone. We have to support one another. If you’re not sure of how you can get involved, read the parish bulletin, the Catholic Times, or listen to Catholic radio. We take up this cause together because, as Mother Teresa said, “I can do things you cannot, you can do things I cannot, together we can do great things.”

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