

Social Justice Sunday Liturgy Notes

September 25, 2011

26th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Social Justice Sunday Social Justice Statement 2011–2012 *Building Bridges, Not Walls: Prisons and the justice system*

Overview:

In the Social Justice Statement for 2011–2012, the Catholic bishops of Australia urge all Australians to think about the conditions in our prisons, and to ask who are most likely to find themselves there and why.

The Statement, titled *Building Bridges, Not Walls: Prisons and the justice system*, points out that between 1984 and 2008, while rates of crime either stayed steady or fell, Australia's rate of imprisonment almost doubled. The majority of Australian prisoners come from the most disadvantaged sections of the community: the underprivileged, those suffering from mental illness, and especially Indigenous people. The disproportionate growth in imprisonment has come about in part because of repeated law-and-order election campaigns and sensationalist reporting, which encourage the idea that crime is out of control.

Certainly there will always be a need for prisons, but it is time for Australians to ask what they expect from their prison systems. Is jail simply somewhere to warehouse wrongdoers until they have served their sentences, or can it be a place where inmates learn to become useful members of the wider society? Should it be a dumping ground for those who are mentally ill? How do we welcome prisoners back into society and into our faith community?

The Statement celebrates the work of chaplains and all who work to bring hope and support to prisoners.

Liturgy Notes

The following notes may be of use to link the 26th Sunday in Ordinary Time with Social Justice Sunday 2011.

Welcome

Today is Social Justice Sunday. The Australian Catholic Bishops have published a Social Justice Statement, titled *Building Bridges, Not Walls: Prisons and the justice system*. The Statement challenges us to look more critically at the prisons and the criminal justice system in Australia. As we celebrate Social Justice Sunday, we are asked whether so many people should be in Australian prisons, whether there are constructive alternatives to imprisonment, and what is being done to help prisoners lead productive lives once they have served their time. Let us consider how we can make a difference for those in prison and seeking bridges to a new life.

The readings of today remind us that God forgives sinners – and we are challenged to do the same.

Readings

The Readings for the 26th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year A) relate strongly to the message of this year's Social Justice Statement. They speak of forgiving those who turn away from sin, being of the same mind as Christ and of respecting people for what they do, not just what they – or others – say.

Ezekiel 18:25-28

When the sinner renounces sin to become law-abiding and honest, he deserves to live. How apt is this message for today!

Psalm 24

Response: Remember your mercy, O Lord.

Philippians 2:1-11

St Paul reminds us that in our minds we must be the same as Christ Jesus. That includes forgiving sinners as he forgave them.

Gospel: Matthew 21:28-32

How often do we hear someone say, ironically, 'Do as I say – not as I do!' Here Jesus' message is the opposite: look at what the first son *does* – not at what the second son *says* he will do! Jesus allows room for us to "think better of it" – to change. We are challenged to allow others to change, including those who have committed criminal offences, paid their dues to society and want to lead decent lives. Lest we think ourselves better than those who have broken the law, Jesus reminds his listeners that "tax collectors and prostitutes are making their way into the kingdom of God before you."

Homily Notes

(Homily notes prepared by NSW Prison Chaplain)

The contemporary political model informs us that it's so easy to tell who is "guilty" and "not guilty". Whereas Jesus tells us that perceptions can be deceptive.

In the Gospel, on hearing the "I will not," of the first son, I would have judged him guilty. Then, on hearing the "Yes, sir" of the second son I could just as easily have said, "good and obedient son." But, as the parable unfolds, I would have been wrong and I am left wondering how many times I have drawn similar conclusions about people based on appearances or my first impressions.

In our society, there are people who count, and people who don't. There are people whose rights, dignity and comfort are headlines, and then there are people whose lives are cheap: they are dead news and this makes them invisible.

Is it a truism to say that most prisoners are in prison because "they deserved it", and consequently they should face the consequences? It is true that too many prisoners bear the burden of a poor self-image, are mentally ill, are intellectually disadvantaged, are from impoverished socio-economic backgrounds and in general are vulnerable – most are people who feel rank outsiders and generally have missed out on a positive start in life.

In the parable everyone, the guilty and the not guilty, are offered a moment of grace. Both sons have time after their responses to do the right thing. The second son could have followed through on his "yes"; while the first could have changed his mind. That moment was for both a space to "do the father's will" but only one took it to heart. The first son, upon rejecting his father's request, "changed his mind". The religious leaders too, like the sons, had before them a moment of grace, time to change. Here I am assured that in God's mind nothing is fixed and locked in for me. I don't have to continue in some of the ways I have followed; I can change, a new start is possible. Moreover, I hear everyone offered what the first son took up, a chance to "change my mind".

God is present where there is mercy. God is present where there is a second chance. God is present where there is hope for a life reformed. The measure of our fidelity to the Gospel is:

The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ. Indeed, nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts. For theirs is a community composed of men. United in Christ, they are led by the Holy Spirit in their journey to the Kingdom of their Father and they have welcomed the news of salvation which is meant for every man. That is why this community realizes that it is truly linked with mankind and its history by the deepest of bonds. (*Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World Gaudium Et Spes, Promulgated by His Holiness Pope Paul VI on December 7, 1965*)

This Eucharist is our moment charged with grace and opportunity to change our perception. The Church is not only for the privileged few. We ask, "Have we missed opportunities to be faithful to God?" Matthew's judgment parable later in his gospel (25:31ff) opens up possibilities for us:

feeding the hungry; giving drink to the thirsty, welcoming the stranger; clothing the naked; comforting the ill and visiting the imprisoned. The parable encourages us to recognise the graced moment and to take the opportunity to change our minds and start doing what children of the Kingdom should be doing.

As followers of Christ we are called to see the face of Christ through the eyes of the poor. We pray to appreciate the Kingdom of God as a real proposal with real consequences in our world, in our parish, and that we will be strengthened in our weakness to bring sight to the blind, and freedom to prisoners.

The Church of Christ must be an inviting Church, a Church with open doors, a warming, motherly Church of all generations, a Church of the dead, the living and the unborn, a Church of those before us, those with us, and those after us, a Church of understanding and sympathy, thinking with us, sharing our joy and sorrow, a Church that laughs with the people and cries with the people, a Church that is not foreign and does not act that way, a human Church, a Church for us, a Church that, like a mother, can wait for her children, a Church who looks for her children and follows them, a Church that visits the people where they are, at work or at play, at the factory gate and at the football stadium, and within the four walls of the home, a Church of those in the shadow, of those who weep, of those who grieve, a Church of the worthy, but also of the unworthy, of the saints and the sinners, a Church not of pious pronouncements, but of silent helping action.

(**Cardinal Franz König**, former Archbishop of Vienna. Cardinal König spoke these words at the age of 96, two years before his death in 2004. From the Advent calendar of *Wir sind Kirche-Jugend*, 8 December 2002.

Prayers of the Faithful

Introduction: We pray to the God of Forgiveness who in Jesus calls us to acknowledge our own brokenness and stand in mercy and solidarity with all our brothers and sisters.

That we be open to recognise all people as made in the image and likeness of God.
Lord hear us: *Lord hear our prayer.*

That the leaders of our nation – politicians, scientists, economists, teachers, artists and poets – use their gifts to shape us as a community steeped in justice and respect for all people.
Lord hear us: *Lord hear our prayer.*

We pray for all the imprisoned: those on the inside, whose confinement is obvious and those on the outside whose imprisonment is subtler.
Lord hear us: *Lord hear our prayer.*

That those who suffer unfair imprisonment may receive justice and recover their dignity.
Lord hear us: *Lord hear our prayer.*

That those who are in prison may reflect on their lives and the effect of their action on others and have the courage and support to change their lives.
Lord hear us: *Lord hear our prayer.*

That those who administer all aspects of the justice system do so with honesty, diligence and fairness.
Lord hear us: *Lord hear our prayer.*

That prison chaplains and all workers in prisons be given the grace to carry out their work with compassion and fairness.
Lord hear us: *Lord hear our prayer.*

That the Church may be an instrument of reconciliation and peace within its own structures and communities and a sign of forgiveness to all people.
Lord hear us: *Lord hear our prayer.*

For the Parish Bulletin

We celebrate Social Justice Sunday on 25th September. The 2011–12 Social Justice Statement is titled *Building Bridges, Not Walls: Prisons and the justice system*. The Statement asks Catholics to think about conditions in our prisons, who is sentenced to prison and why. It notes that rates of imprisonment in Australia have risen sharply but levels of crime have remained steady. The most disadvantaged in Australia are the most likely to be imprisoned. It invites to reflect on our understanding of prisons and the justice system and to review our attitude to those who leave prison seeking to make a change in their lives.

For further details about the Social Justice Statement, visit the Australian Catholic Social Justice Council website www.socialjustice.catholic.org.au or call (02) 8306 3499.

The ACSJC website has resources available for download free of charge. They include a PowerPoint presentation and a Community Education resource suitable for parish groups and senior students.

Suggested Music

City of God (St Louis Jesuits)
 The Lord Hears the Cry of the Poor (St Louis Jesuits)
 No Right to Crush God's People (Peter Kearney)
 The Beatitudes (Peter Kearney)
 Bread of life, Hope for the World (B. Farrell)
 Christ Be Our Light (B. Farrell)
 Harvest of Justice (D. Haas)
 Voices That Challenge (D. Haas)
 Christ Be Our Light (D. Haas)
 We Are Called (D. Haas)
 The God of Second Chances (D. Haas)
 Abide O Spirit of Life (D. Haas)
 Come to the Feast (M. Haugen)
 Bring Forth the Kingdom (M. Haugen)

***Suggestion:* The following prayer, issued with the Statement as a prayer card, could be given to parishioners or printed on the bulletin and said together.**

God, Our Creator,

We acknowledge the ancestors and original owners of this land,
a land of wealth and freedom, far horizons, mountains, forest and shining sand.
Maker and spirit of earth and all creation, let your love possess our land
and may we share in faith and friendship, the gifts unmeasured from your hand.

We pray for all the imprisoned, those on the inside, whose confinement is obvious
and those on the outside, whose imprisonment is subtler.

We reach out in grace, knowing that human divisions are false,
that we are not the innocent praying for the guilty or the right praying for the wrong,
but people praying for people, the hurt remembering the hurt,
the failure reaching out in love to the failure in a single community.

We remember those who seek to change difficult life stories,
midwives of hope and agents of grace.

We remember and pray for the victims of crime on the outside,
knowing that we do not have the luxury of black and white,
the simple answer or the easy question.

We remember and pray for the countless victims on the inside
casualties of uneven playing fields and difficult starts,
dreamless futures and nightmare pasts.

We remember the whole criminal justice system and its process,
those caught up in it, those on every side and in every moment of it.

We pray a blessing on all those who enter prison.

We pray a blessing on all those who wait on the outside.

We pray a blessing on the world community.

Teach us to deal with each other with compassion.

Keep all of us ever mindful of your law of love
so that we may temper justice with mercy, exercise control with compassion.

May our motives and our actions conform to your will
and fulfil your purposes all the days of this life
so that we may share in the life to come.

Amen.

7th July, 2011
Area 2 Long Bay,
New South Wales, Australia

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