

23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time

One of the lessons my parents taught the six of us kids was, “Two wrongs don’t make a right.” As children, if someone started a fight with one of us, we had a very simple solution: fight right back. Our parents would say, “Don’t fight.” We would say, “He started it.” Our parents would say, “It doesn’t matter who started it. It’s wrong to fight. Two wrongs don’t make a right.” It was a hard lesson to learn, and it still applies even to adults. If someone offends us, we often think that this establishes a right to offend them back. If someone calls you a name, insults you, cheats you, argues with you, or hits you, you will have a natural instinct to do the same thing back - and more. It’s a childish impulse. However, someone’s sin against us does not give us any right to sin against them. Always, always we are called to exercise good behavior, noble actions, courtesy, humility, grace, and above all charity. We do not approve of the other person’s action, so we do not imitate it.

Today’s first reading is a prophecy from Isaiah that we normally hear during Advent. It foresees a day when God will come to save his people, to open the eyes of the blind and to clear the ears of the deaf. Isaiah says, “Then will the lame leap like a stag, then the tongue of the mute will sing. Streams will burst forth in the desert.” He envisions an amazing time when the oppressed will not simply have their rights restored, but they will experience beauty, health and abundance as well. Jesus fulfilled this prophecy through the miracles he worked, such as the one in today’s gospel: He opened the ears of a deaf man and loosened his tongue to help him speak clearly.

Isaiah delivered his original prophecy to a people who had experienced tremendous oppression. In the period of exile many of them lost their lives and their property, while undergoing the sorrows of deportation from home and separation from family. The Israelites had experienced these problems because they did not keep the covenant with God, but also because their enemies were taking advantage of them when they were down. Their enemies committed the same kinds of offenses that children and adults do today: insults, cheating and fighting. Israel’s natural instinct must have been to insult, cheat and fight back. That would supposedly achieve “vindication” and “recompense”.

But God offered vindication and recompense in a different way. He did not arm Israel with more powerful weapons. He did not give them stronger leaders. He did not allow them to cause more damage on their foes than they had received from them. No, God offered this kind of vindication: sight, hearing, health, music and water. God gave the people the tools they needed to live a civilized life, not to prolong a cycle of violence and terror.

Nations today seem unable to break the cycle of violence. They quickly respond to one offense with another offense, so we do not always have good models to build peace in our families. But the old adage still applies: Two wrongs do not make a right. If someone hurts us, we can either hurt them back or we can break the cycle and treat them with charity. Somehow we have to stop the anger and the fighting - especially within families. When we do, we will help Jesus Christ fulfill the prophecy of Isaiah, and bring peace, life and joy to the world.