

The battle cry we are hearing the most this week is a call for justice. President Bush, in his eloquent address the other night, said, "Whether our enemies come to justice or justice comes to our enemies, justice will be done." The entire military plan is officially being called Operation Infinite Justice. The desire for justice is good, but doing justice is tricky.

When somebody hurts us, we respond in different ways – some through conflict, some through avoidance, through the courts, or retaliation. Not all of these ways will achieve justice. For example, if one kid hits another, the second kid may hit back, saying things like, "He asked for it." Or, "She had it coming." To the second kid, the first kid is responsible for hitting and for getting hit back. The second kid pleads not guilty. That is not justice. That's retaliation. Some people use the word justice in order to cause harm. But justice promotes harmony. It restores the common good. When people commit unjust acts, justice comes into play, but justice is not getting even. Justice is when the offender makes amends. It's when the first kid says, "I'm sorry." That would be justice.

So, what happens if the perpetrators have no desire to make amends? Well, we may punish appropriately and we may protect ourselves. When we build harmony, we are acting with justice.

So far, this is precisely what our country is doing. The demands that Mr. Bush made this week are just. He asked for the nations granting shelter to terrorists to give them up. They are refusing, but this is the best possible solution to our national tragedy. It brings forward those accused of these crimes for trial in international courts of law. That will allow for the greatest measure of justice, and it will protect the innocent citizens of all nations.

Today's scriptures also show how tricky justice can be. In the parable from Luke's gospel, Jesus praises a steward who is dishonest; Jesus praises him because the steward is clever. If nothing else, this parable warns us from thinking we know the mind of God in every circumstance. In today's first reading, we hear a prophet complaining that merchants are taking advantage of the poor. Amos is a Middle Easterner attacking business, saying it symbolizes the evil that lies in peoples' hearts. This argument lies uncomfortably close to what we hear from terrorists. The difference is Amos doesn't blow up buildings, and his words are enshrined in our sacred scripture. Amos seeks justice in commerce. Do not take advantage of the poor while doing business, he begs.

In the midst of this tragedy, God still calls us to justice. How do we do business? Are we taking advantage of people? How are we treating others? Are we prejudiced against the Muslims in our community? What have we said to our political leaders? Are we asking them to secure justice through peace? How do we define justice? Do we seek harmony or do we seek revenge? These are difficult questions for anyone to face, but especially by victims of a national tragedy. Still, even when we get hurt, we will find peace through justice.