33rd Sunday in Ordinary Time

The judicial system in the United States used to be one of the most respected entities in the country. Recently, though, trust in the Supreme Court and federal courts has dropped. Good government relies on good courts—not only to interpret the law but to hear from those who feel they've been treated unfairly. Humans want fairness. Siblings expect it from their parents, employees from their employers, students from their teachers, penitents from their confessors. Everyone wants to be treated fairly.

As we near the end of the liturgical year, the lectionary touches this topic. We hear a passage from Luke's gospel, in which Jesus cautions, the end of the world is coming, and even those who faithfully follow him can expect some suffering. The good news comes surprisingly from today's responsorial psalm, which offers consolation in its closing verses: "[The Lord] comes to judge the earth. He will judge the world with justice, and the peoples with fairness." In a world where you may not get a favorable reply to your demands for justice at home, at school, at work, or in a court, Psalm 98 foresees that the Lord will come again as judge, to set things right.

Fairness is one reason the church teaches purgatory. Bad things can happen to good people, and good things can happen to bad people. This doesn't seem fair, but we believe that there's more to life than life. Somehow God sorts all this out even after we die, demanding more purification of those who do ill.

As we desire to be the recipients of justice and fairness, we may remember that other people feel the same way, and they often want justice and fairness from us. We generally want to satisfy them, yet we may not always be very good at it. Some people spot that we treat person A differently from person B. Or, without comparing two cases, we may not even treat person A with justice. We let other priorities exclude fair judgment: The fear of wasting time prompts us to make a snap decision. To avoid people with problems, we choose to ignore them. We think pridefully of our own self-importance and don't consider the needs of others who rely on us. We judge quickly and unfairly because we feel bothered by things that in reality aren't all that annoying.

When Psalm 98 promises that the Lord will judge the world with justice, we take comfort in what that means for us. We'll finally get our due. But we may also feel challenged to judge others more fairly. Our responsorial today praises the just Judge and invites the entire world to join us—even inanimate objects like water and grass: Our cantor sang, "Let the rivers clap their hands, and the hills ring out their joy." Incidentally this is the psalm that inspired the popular Christmas carol, "Joy to the World—the Lord is come." The end of the first verse echoes this call to inanimate praise: "Let… heaven and nature sing."

Being fair to other people brings them a sense of balance, and it brings peacefulness to our own hearts. When we judge others with justice, we make the earth a better place. We join the chorus of heaven and nature, water and grass, courts of law, and peoples of every nation singing praise to God. No matter when the end of the world comes, no matter when our last day on earth dawns, we can take pleasure today that our practice of fairness has brought joy to the world.