

Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time, C – February 24, 2019 – Very Rev. Bryan W. Jerabek, J.C.L.
Cathedral of St. Paul, Birmingham, Ala. – 5pm Vigil, 8:30 & 11am Sunday Masses – 800 words

As he lay dying, King David would give his son, Solomon, several directives about how he was to deal with those who had wronged his father. About one, David told him, “Do not let his gray head go down to Sheol in peace”; about another, “Hold him not guiltless... you will know what you ought to do with him”.¹ Here we see the ancient “law of retaliation”² at work: its principle being, you give back what you get – “an eye for an eye; a tooth for a tooth”.³ And David, who himself admitted how much blood he had shed throughout his life,⁴ had followed that law rather closely. With one main exception.

In the first reading, David has the perfect opportunity to strike back at his enemy and great persecutor, Saul. But unlike on so many occasions with his other pursuers, he refuses to do so with Saul. He was motivated, of course, by the fact that Saul – for however wicked and unjust he was – was, nevertheless, the Lord’s anointed one. David thus distinguishes between an office and the man who holds it. Saul, the man, might have been evil; yet he was the king. The kingship in Israel had been instituted by God himself at the pleading of the Israelites.⁵ And David’s decision of restraint showed profound wisdom.

“Who can lay hands on the Lord’s anointed and remain unpunished?”, he said. The world then, as now, would see things differently: “Take him out; get him out of the way. He’s bad – remove the evil!” But reverence for God kept David from taking matters into his own hands. It’s as if he said, “Lord, you established his position; now you handle the problem”. And indeed, many times throughout the scriptures, God himself said, “vengeance is mine”.⁶ Our patron, St. Paul, spoke very clearly in these terms: “Beloved”, he said, “never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God; for it is written, ‘Vengeance is mine..., says the Lord’.”⁷

St. Paul’s teaching is a summary of what our Lord taught in this Sunday’s gospel. As Christ said: “love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you.” But what is the profound wisdom that David saw in this approach – at least with one man, the Lord’s anointed – and that Jesus extends more generally to all? It’s a paradoxical wisdom. For in our sadness, frustration, or anger over what an enemy has done, we might only be able to think about vengeance and wrath. But God’s “vengeance”, it turns out, is quite different: it is a relentless mercy.

The second reading reminded us that Christ is the second or last Adam and that he is a life-giving spirit; moreover, we are called to bear his image. Another place in the gospel, Jesus said, “I came that they might have life, and have it more abundantly”.⁸ He desires that all live, even those who are most wicked. After all, he died for their sins, also. And that desire of his is not at all the same as condoning sin and evil; not at all. What it does show us is that God is able to bring good out of evil. Our task is to open up that space for him to do his work, to exact his “revenge”, as it were – a revenge not of retaliation, but of goodness.

I am not saying that we must all be pacifists. No; we may defend ourselves and our interests, in a proportionate way. There is a scriptural argument for self-defense and national

¹ See 1 Kings 2:1-10.

² The *lex talionis*.

³ See Exodus 21:24, Leviticus 24:20, Deuteronomy 19:21, and Matthew 5:38.

⁴ See 1 Chronicles 28:1-10.

⁵ See 1 Samuel 8:5.

⁶ See Deuteronomy 32:35; see also Psalm 94:1, Isaiah 35:4, Jeremiah 46:10, and Hebrews 10:30.

⁷ Romans 12:19.

⁸ John 10:10.

defense, as well.⁹ But we are challenged by our Lord not to be too quick on the draw – to bear wrongs patiently; to be forbearing and mild with those who do wrong by us. So often, when we ask ourselves the question, “What would Jesus do?”, it becomes evident that in the very moment we might be tempted to respond in strict justice, exacting what is our right, our Lord, rather, might have turned the other cheek and left a space for mercy.

That space for mercy allows his grace to do its work. Some do reject it; some do reject his mercy! And those will ultimately face his vengeance, his wrath. God always wins. Hopefully we – everyone – win with him. Some may indeed lose. But let us not be among their number. Christ invites us to bless our enemies and pray for those who mistreat us. He hung upon the cross for them and their deeds, also. Let us accompany him, who is kind and merciful to all. So we will grow in his image and share in his life-giving mission. He teaches us in today’s gospel that the more generous we are, the more generously we will receive.

⁹ See also the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 2263-2267.