

Friday (Martin Luther King)

I should like to talk with you about a good man, whose exemplary life will always be like a flashing light to plague the dozing conscience of mankind. His goodness was not found in a passive commitment to a particular creed, but in his active participation in life; not in a moral pilgrimage that reached its destination point, but in the love ethic by which he journeyed life's highway.

Scripture (Isaiah 42:6-7)

I, the Lord, have called you in saving justice, I have grasped you by the hand and shaped you; I have made you a covenant of the people and light to the nations, to open the eyes of the blind, to free captives from prison, and those who live in darkness from the dungeon.

23rd Week of Ordinary Time

Your sins are my business

When God commissions Ezekiel to pass on warnings to the House of Israel, (Ez. 33:7-9), especially to the 'wicked', it is fairly clear that the message will not be well received.

Earlier in the chapter the responsibility of a sentry in time of war is spelled out – if the sentry doesn't sound the alarm and citizens die as a result, it is his fault. If, however, the sentry warns them and they choose to ignore him, they are responsible for their fate. In giving Ezekiel the role of sentry to the House of Israel, God makes clear the responsibility of him and the citizens when it comes to sin.

My reaction to this is 'rather you than me.' I don't suppose there has ever been a good time to tell people they have to change, (parents and teachers will certainly know this!) but in our society, I can imagine people being quick to say, 'stop being judgemental', or 'Who are you to say what's right and wrong?', and of course, 'How I live my life has nothing to do with you',

I have to ask, therefore, if what applies to Ezekiel applies to me: do I have a responsibility to 'warn' people to change their ways? My defence that he was a prophet, called when there was a particular crisis doesn't stand up when I read Matthew 18:15-20 where Jesus is instructing his disciples how to deal with members of the community who are out of line. The different levels of response make two things clear: when someone is in the wrong, I can't just ignore it and, secondly, the aim is always to 'gain' the person, i.e. to get them to change. This is not only practical advice for any community because it avoids gossip and scapegoating and it doesn't allow injuries to fester and divide people. It also means there may come a point when the person is excluded. Wrongdoing is taken seriously, (which ultimately means that free will is taken seriously).

Apart from being practical, Jesus also makes this a theological matter by giving the community the authority he initially gave to Peter – that of 'binding' and 'loosing'. Jesus makes it clear that when the community meets for prayer, study, or, in this case, decision making, Jesus is amongst them as a part of the community. With him present, the decisions will always be along God's way of thinking. In the previous verses, (18-24), Jesus makes it clear that God always seeks out the stray, so the community, with Jesus present, will always seek to help the 'sinner' rather than condemn or reject.

This is the guiding light for any parish, and for the Church as a whole, if it is to avoid the dangers of becoming an exclusive clique of people who 'keep the rules' as though keeping to them is the criterion for being a part of the community, or of individuals abusing any authority they have by virtue of their position or because they have a better knowledge of God's ways because they have had a different formation or happen to be of a stronger nature. The reading from Ezekiel and Jesus' instructions make clear that God takes sin seriously, but God's intention is always to seek out the lost, to heal the wounded, to nurture the weak and to offer repentance to sinners. Whether someone has wronged me personally, or they are generally 'going off the rails', I should not talk about a person to others unless I have spoken to them first, (you can't be a gossip and a Christian!), neither can I claim it is none of my business. I think a good definition of sin is an obstacle between a person and the love of God. If I (or the church) don't follow the steps to try and get the wrongdoer to be aware of their sin and that they can change, I have effectively taken away that person's best way of hearing of God's love. Martin Bennett

Monday (Thomas Merton)

The closer we are to God, the closer we are to those who are close to Him. We can come to understand others only by loving Him who understands them from within the depths of their own being. If we wait for some people to become agreeable or attractive before we begin to love them, we will never begin. Some people never reveal any of the good that is hidden in them until we give them some of the good that is in ourselves. We are so much the children of God that by loving others we can make them good and loveable, in spite of themselves.

Scripture (Galatians 6:1-2)

Brothers and sisters, even if one of you is caught doing something wrong, those of you who are spiritual should set that person right in a spirit of gentleness; and watch yourselves that you are not put to the test in the same way. Carry each other's burdens; that is how to keep the Law of Christ.

Tuesday (Albert Camus)

What the world expects of Christians is that they should speak out, loud and clear; that they should voice their condemnation in such a way that never a doubt, never the slightest doubt, could arise in the heart of the simplest person; that they should get away from abstraction and confront the evil in the world today.

Scripture (Matthew 18:15-17)

Jesus said, 'If someone does something wrong, go and have it out with them alone, between your two selves. If they listen to you, you have won them back. If they don't listen, take one or two others along with you: whatever the misdemeanour, the evidence of two or three is required to sustain the charge. But if they refuse to listen to these, report it to the community; and if they refuse to listen to the community, treat them like a pagan or a tax-collector.'

Wednesday (Dietrich Bonhoeffer)

When we judge other people, we confront them in a spirit of detachment, observing as it were from the outside. If we love, we can never observe the other with detachment, for they are always and at every moment a living claim to our love and service. I am not forbidden to have my own thoughts about the other person, to realise their shortcomings, but only to the extent that it offers me an occasion for forgiveness and unconditional love, as Jesus proves to me.

Scripture (Wisdom 11:23-24,12:1-2)

You are merciful to all because you are almighty, you overlook people's sins so they can repent. Yes, you love everything that exists and nothing you have made disgusts you, since if you had hated something, you would not have made it. For your imperishable spirit is in everything! And thus, gradually, you correct those who offend; you admonish them and remind them of how they have sinned, so that they may abstain from evil and trust in you, Lord.

Thursday (Oscar Romero)

To be a Christian means to have the courage to preach the true teaching of Christ and not be afraid of it, not to be silent out of fear and preach something easy that won't cause problems. To be a Christian means to have the courage that the Holy Spirit gives in the sacrament of Confirmation, to make his teaching prevail, to reach hearts and proclaim to them the courage that one must have to defend God's law. May today be for us a renewal of the Holy Spirit, of the courage that we must have as Christians.

Scripture (Philippians 1:27-29)

You must always behave in a way worthy of the Gospel of Christ, so that I shall find you firm and united in Spirit, battling as a team with a single aim, for the faith of the Gospel, undismayed by any of your opponents. This will be a clear sign for them that they are to be lost and for you that you are to be saved. This comes from God, for you have been granted the privilege for Christ's sake, not only of believing in him but of suffering for him as well.