

HOMILY SUNDAY 29 – C (Homily 02)

“Contemplation and Action”

(Exodus 17:8-13; Psalm 121; 2 Timothy 3:14-4:2; Lk 18:1-8)

Three strong, interrelated themes emerge from the readings today: faith, prayer and justice,

The message is clear: we must express our faith not just through prayer, but also by working for justice.

Perhaps we have seen the bumper sticker: *If you want peace, work for justice*. In the light of these readings, that bumper sticker would better read: *If you want peace, pray for peace and work for justice*.

According to John Shea, the popular interpretation of this Gospel story (that God will eventually hear persistent petitions), does not do justice to the story. *The main point is that personal spirituality and social justice are two sides of the same coin. Praying to God is for the purpose of effecting social justice.*

One could use the Cross as a symbol of this assertion. The vertical branch represents faith in God and prayer. That branch does not become a cross, however, until the horizontal arm is added, representing action for justice. It is easy to pray for something; not so easy to enter into committed action to realize the object of that prayer.

Shea goes on to say that to pray always and not to lose heart means more than merely persevering in the face of difficulties. It is more than not giving up. It is coming forward with love and being faithful to the ways of peace.

We can resist the temptation to resort to actions more unjust than the oppressive structures when we integrate our hearts into the heart of Jesus. He is the one who prayed always in the garden of Gethsemane, who stayed awake, and who was able to resist the temptation to resort to violence or run away, as did the disciples who fell asleep. He is the relentless widow who prays always until his heart becomes the heart of God.

While the first reading speaks eloquently of the power of prayer in times of crisis, and the second reading adds the importance of praying with scripture, the Gospel

drives home the importance of trying to be the answer to our own prayer. Our faith must take us beyond simply prayer, into action.

To each of us, therefore, the parable of the unjust judge and the persistent widow calls for a re-examination of our faith. Have we turned a deaf ear to those who cry out in need or have we given up hope that God will hear our calls for help? Faith requires different responses from the widow and the judge. What does faith require of us? Have we the faith of a mustard seed? The faith of the widow?

Today we are a nation brimming with non-judicial persons who cry for help and need our protection. It doesn't matter what the judges decide or courts allow. The Catholic Church has never asked the Supreme Court what the rights of an unborn child should be; how a disabled friend or a terminally ill relative ought to be treated, if capital punishment is permissible, or if same-sex marriage should be allowed. We don't turn to Parliament to determine if war is just. So why should we wait for our lawmakers to decide if undocumented thousands should have our protection, medical treatment, education for their children, decent living facilities or the basic right of due process? This parable has very practical modern applications. We are in the middle of this parable and God is listening to the cry of the oppressed once more.

Recently the television news carried the story of an amazing act of faith. A woman whose son was murdered in a random act of violence finally found the courage, through prayerful grieving, to go to the jail and visit the man who had murdered her son. Somehow in the course of that visit, forgiveness happened in her heart. She realized that this man who killed her son had projected onto her son all the pain, frustration and self-hatred that was in him which he had not faced. She understood him and the negative influences and lack of love had shaped and formed him into a killer. She stopped judging him and forgave him, and took him as her own son. Now that he is out of jail, they are working together on a project called *From Death To Life* to help improve the lives of at-risk men so that similar tragedies will not happen again. She is a marvelous example of someone who prayed for forgiveness and became the answer to her own prayer, forgiveness, which is the purest justice of all.

To pray to God who is justice is to commit ourselves to work for justice. Someone else who exemplifies the readings today is Richard Rohr, a Franciscan priest and popular speaker and writer. He began his career as founder of a prayerful charismatic community called *New Jerusalem*. Over the years he became an expert on the great themes of scripture, the Enneagram personality type method, male and

female spirituality, as well as political analysis. He left the community he founded when he realized that the members of that community had become too focused on themselves and their insular life of prayer, worship and fellowship. They were missing, and resisting, the call of the Gospel today, to balance working for justice with their life of prayer. The answer for him was to found the *Center for Contemplation and Action* in New Mexico that trains people both in prayer and in working for justice. He himself takes stretches of desert time for prayer and contemplation, for reflecting and writing, before going on the road to give talks and workshops. He is a living example of balancing prayer and work; contemplation and action.

The Eucharist we are about to celebrate is all about faith. We believe that through the prayer of this community and the celebrant, the Body and Blood of Jesus is made present on the altar. We believe that as we receive in communion who we are, the Body of Christ, we are transformed into that Body of Christ. We believe that empowered in this way, we are commissioned to go out, sustained by prayer, to work for both peace and justice.

So, have faith, and express that faith through sustained prayer and undaunted work for justice and fairness in our world.