

**Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year A
(Jan. 30, 2011)**

Thirsting for Justice

“Blessed are they who hunger and thirst for justice, they shall have their fill.” That word justice keeps coming up all over the place in our sacred scriptures. But what exactly does it mean? What do we think of when we hear the word justice read either from the Old Testament or from our Gospels?

Our inclination is to think first of the law courts which are supposed to guarantee justice for all, but there we are concerned with guilt and innocence, punishment or freedom. Or we think of quid pro quo or an eye for an eye. But in point of fact if you look closely at the way justice is used in our scriptures it doesn't mean any of those. In other words Biblical justice means something different. So let's look more closely at it and see what we can learn for ourselves and how we act today.

We really have to go all the way back to Moses on Mount Sinai to begin our search for the meaning of Biblical justice. On Mt. Sinai God renewed the covenant with the people. God said, “I will be your God and you shall be my people. And I will be faithful to you. I will never leave you no matter what. And I want you to be faithful to me. And you will show your fidelity to me by being faithful to one another.” Then God gave them the commandments which are all about how they relate to God and to one another. Remember, God said, “You will be my people.” God's people. That means they are a community. And the commandments that God gave them are all about preserving the community. Think about it. We hear, “Thou shalt not,” and think the commandments are all negative. But think again. What God is forbidding is all those things that destroy community: killing, stealing, lying, adultery, whatever causes division and makes it difficult to be God's people, living in love and caring for one another which is what God asked us to do. It helps to think of the commandments not so much thou shalt not do this or that but rather there shalt *BE* community. In other words do nothing that weakens, much less destroys community.

Now think of this: as people living in community we live in

relationship to one another, all of us no matter who we are or where we are. There are mysterious bonds, interdependencies that link us all together. You may have heard me talk about the spider web a couple of weeks ago. It's an image of the whole human race. Touch the web at any point and it sets the whole thing trembling. The life that I touch for good or for ill will touch another life, and that in turn another, until who knows where the trembling will stop or in what far place and time my touch will be felt. Our lives are linked. No man is an island. Remember that? Believe it or not God is telling us the same thing in the covenant. "I will be your God and you will be my people. Be faithful to one another as I will be faithful to you."

Here is another expression of much the same thing. Some years ago there was a play on Broadway called "Six Degrees of Separation." It was later made into a film. At one point the main character in the play has this to say:

"I read somewhere that everybody on this planet is separated by only six degrees of separation. Between us and everybody else on this planet – the president of the United States, a gondolier in Venice. Fill in the names. I find it enormously comforting that we're so close. Because you have to find the right six people to make the connection. It's not just big names. It's anyone. A native in a rain forest. A Tierra del Fuegan. An Eskimo. I am bound on this planet by a trail of six people. . . . Now every person is a new door, opening up into other worlds. Six degrees of separation between me and everyone else."

I don't know how scientifically true that is, but it certainly is poetically true and it is spiritually true. For us as Christians we might say it is an expression of the Body of Christ.

Now when we consider how we are all linked together that means that we are in relationship to one another. And those relationships entail responsibilities. I am responsible for people whom I have never seen and whom I never will see. I am responsible for the homeless person living on the streets of Washington. I am responsible for every person in this congregation and you are responsible for me. I am responsible for the people of Haiti, still suffering from a devastating earthquake. I am responsible for Moslems in Iraq and Afghanistan who are still being killed

in endless wars. I am responsible for Christians in those same countries who are persecuted and deprived of religious freedom. And I could go on and on.

Now all of my ranting is not meant to lay a guilt trip on anybody. It's just my way of explaining what the Bible means by justice. John Donohue, a scripture scholar known to many of you – he has spoken a number of times here at Holy Trinity – John defines biblical justice as “fidelity to the demands of relationships that are rooted in the covenant.” That's why I went back to Moses to begin my explanation. Fidelity to the demands of relationships. Once we realize that we are all in relationship, then we cannot help but realize that there are responsibilities involved in those relationships. Biblical justice means recognizing those responsibilities and doing something about them. That's what Jesus is talking about in the Sermon on the Mount. That's what he means in the parable of the last Judgment when he tells us to take care of the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the homeless, the imprisoned.

How do we do that? Well, certainly our parish offers us many opportunities. We can't all do everything. Maybe we can do very little given family commitments and responsibilities. But they are part of biblical justice as well. Perhaps I can sum up everything I have been trying to say this way: to hunger and thirst for justice simply means doing everything within our power to make life pleasant for as many people as possible. If we just try to do that, then with the help of God we will all have our fill – and we will be blessed. That means we will all be happy.