

## **Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time - The Christian and Hatred**

February 23, 2025

A big fight broke out in a school yard between two third grade nine years old boys. Teachers quickly broke up the fight. "Who started this?" one teacher asked. "He did," said one of the boys, sobbing. "It all started when he hit me back." It is always the other guy's fault. There has not been a war started in the last one hundred years that has not been the other guy's fault.

God does not judge our actions in relationship to whether it is someone else's fault. He is more concerned that we do what is correct regardless of whatever grudge we could have. A good example of this is in the first reading for today. This is part of the history of David and Saul. The First Book of Samuel tells the story. The prophet Samuel had anointed the young boy David claiming him for God. After this, David slew Goliath and became famous. Soon after David was made a commander in King Saul's army. David was so successful that Saul eventually became jealous of him. On one triumphant return to Jerusalem, the women cried out, "Saul has slain his thousands and David has slain his tens of thousands." Saul decided that David had to go. He was quite shrewd. He saw how his daughter Michal was looking at young David. He knew David could not afford to offer the traditional gifts to a king for marriage to a princess. So he figured he could get rid of David by giving him a task that would result in his death. Saul offered his daughter Michal to David in marriage, but first David had to kill a hundred Philistines. David showed up with proof that he had killed two hundred Philistines, and was allowed to marry Michal. King Saul was even angrier. This upstart was now his son-in-law. One day after dinner Saul and his court were relaxing. David was present playing music and it pushed Saul over the edge. He grabbed a spear and chucked it at David. David ducked just in time and headed for the hills. Saul declared that David was a rebel and went out with his army to catch him. This is when we come upon today's first reading. David and Abishai learned where Saul's army was camped for the night. They snuck into the camp and into the King's tent. Instead of killing Saul and getting rid of his problem, David took proof that he had been there, Saul's spear and water jug. He then called out to Saul and his army from a nearby hill. He basically said, "I have plenty of reason to kill you, and it would have been simple for me to do so, but it would have been the wrong thing for me to do since you have been chosen by God to be king." One message of the reading is that an action we take cannot be justified by saying, "It's the other guy's fault." We have to consider the total impact of the action and whether it is really the right thing to do. First, we have to be honest. Just like the kid in the fight, we can always find ways to deflect the blame on others. Every wife abuser claims that his spouse drove him to it. Every child beater claims that the child would not behave properly. Every person holding a grudge is convinced that they had no part in the actions that led to the hostility. We are adept at justifying our behaviour, no matter how absurd that behaviour might be.

This Sunday's Gospel speaks about the impact of our actions of love or hate. The Lord asks us to do that which seems intolerable. He wants us to love our enemies, "Do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. To the person who strikes you on one cheek, offer the other one as well, and from the person who takes your cloak, do not withhold even your tunic. Give to everyone who asks of you, and from the one who takes what is yours do not demand it back." What can possibly justify such radical charity, radical love, that refuses to respond to injury? Jesus gives the justification: "Then your reward will be great and you will be children of the Most High, for he himself is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked." The motive for the Lord's decree is stated clearly: We are to be merciful, just as our Father is merciful.

One of the key tasks facing any christian community is to put into action the gospel of forgiveness, by refusing to harbour thoughts of hatred and revenge for our enemies. The Christian is called to bring an experience of God to the world, to proclaim salvation, to proclaim Jesus Christ. But how can we proclaim God if we behave in a manner that is a total antithesis to God? God's way is the way of friendship and love. God is Love. The real test of love is the regard we have for those we find little reason to like; those people who are bent on insulting us and causing us harm. How can we proclaim God if we hate? The mission the Lord has sent us on is far more important than the question of who started the fight. By refusing to respond to injury, we alert the world to a new attitude in life. Forgiveness removes the barriers which block the flow of love and, as a result, damage friendly personal relationships. It is costly and the gospel is the story of the price God had to pay so that our sins could be

forgiven. From the cross, Jesus forgave all who participated in his torture and death and so we could all be reconciled with God. From his cell, St. Thomas More, forgave King Henry VIII for destroying his reputation and his life. From our hearts, we have to forgive anyone who has hurt us. The vicious cycle of hatred can only be stopped by people who are determined to love. And that is why we have to make a determination to put the teaching of Jesus into practice. Each of us can start forgiving right now by curbing a sharp tongue of criticism, suppressing the revenge instinct and accepting the irritational behaviour of a neighbour.

In *Les Misérables*, a French epic historical novel by Victor Hugo, the scene where Bishop Myriel helps Jean Valjean is a pivotal moment of grace and redemption. Jean Valjean, recently released from 19 years of imprisonment for stealing a loaf of bread, is shunned by society. Desperate and weary, he finds refuge at the home of the very Christ-like Bishop Myriel, who welcomes him with open arms, offering food and shelter without judgment. Despite the bishop's kindness, Valjean, embittered by long hard years of imprisonment, and jaded by the current rejection of society, steals the bishop's silverware during the night and makes his escape. He is soon caught by the police and brought back to the bishop's residence. The police present the stolen silverware to Bishop Myriel, expecting him to confirm the theft. However, in a stunning act of compassion, the bishop tells the police that the silverware was a gift and even reproaches Valjean for "forgetting" to take the silver candlesticks as well. The police, convinced by the bishop's words, release Valjean. Once they leave, Valjean breaks down, and Bishop Myriel tells him that he has bought his soul for God. He urges Valjean to use the silver to become an honest man and to live a life of virtue. This act of mercy and forgiveness deeply moves Valjean, who is overwhelmed by the bishop's kindness. Jean Valjean becomes a new man and heeds the bishop's words. The scene is a powerful example of how mercy and compassion can transform a life. This powerful mercy is the mercy that Jesus has shown us, and it is the mercy that we are to show others.

All of us have our battle stories. All of us have been done dirty by others. Perhaps, some of us have let bad situations become worse by taking a shot back against those unjust aggressors in our lives. Of course, nothing was resolved. More than that, the world suffered because we did not take advantage of the opportunity to bring God's love and mercy to the world. Some of us are at the end of the road of life. How many of us really expect to be alive in twenty years, thirty years, forty years? How important is that grudge we hold? The only thing we can take with us when we die is our capacity to love. Do we really want to diminish or destroy our capacity to love to get back at that other person? It is a great gift the Lord gives us when he points out that the way to happiness is by rejecting hatred. The only one ever destroyed by hatred is the person who does the hating. Vengeance is a poison we pour for someone else, then drink ourselves. Those who find peace in their lives are those who are tied to God, that's what the word religion means-- being tied to God. The only ones who find peace in their lives are those who are so tied to God that others experience God's presence through them. Be merciful just as your Father is merciful is our guide to living the life of Christ in this world and being fully united to Him in the next life. As we gather around the table of the Lord, we pray that our hearts may not be insensitive to the sufferings of others but a source of hope and encouragement to those in distress and in need of our help.