



Monday 16th August 2021
20th Week in Ordinary Time Year 1
(Saint Stephen of Hungary)

First Reading

Jgs 2:11-19

A reading from the book of Judges

The Lord God appointed judges for them, but they would not listen to them.

The sons of Israel did what displeases the Lord and served the Baals. They deserted the Lord, the God of their ancestors, who had brought them out of the land of Egypt, and followed other gods from the gods of the peoples round them. They bowed down to these; they provoked the Lord; they deserted the Lord to serve Baal and Astarte. Then the Lord's anger flamed out against Israel. He handed them over to pillagers who plundered them; he delivered them to the enemies surrounding them, and they were not able to resist them. In every warlike venture, the hand of the Lord was there to foil them, as the Lord had warned, as the Lord had sworn to them. Thus he reduced them to dire distress.

Then the Lord appointed judges for them, and rescued the men of Israel from the hands of their plunderers. But they would not listen to their judges. They prostituted themselves to other gods, and bowed down before these. Very quickly they left the path their ancestors had trodden in obedience to the orders of the Lord; they did not follow their example. When the Lord appointed judges for them, the Lord was with the judge and rescued them from the hands of their enemies as long as the judge lived, for the Lord felt pity for them as they groaned under the iron grip of their oppressors. But once the judge was dead, they relapsed and behaved even worse than their ancestors. They followed other gods; they served them and bowed before them, and would not give up the practices and stubborn ways of their ancestors at all.

Responsorial Psalm

Ps 105:34-37. 39-40. 43-44. R. v.4

(R.) Lord, remember us,

for the love you bear your people.

1. They failed to destroy the peoples
as the Lord had given command,
but instead they mingled with the nations
and learned to act like them. **(R.)**
2. They worshipped the idols of the nations
and these became a snare to entrap them.
They even offered their own sons
and their daughters in sacrifice to demons. **(R.)**
3. So they defiled themselves by their deeds
and broke their marriage bond with the Lord
till his anger blazed against his people:
he was filled with horror at his chosen ones. **(R.)**
4. Time after time he rescued them,
but in their malice they dared to defy him.
In spite of this he paid heed to their distress,
so often as he heard their cry. **(R.)**

Gospel

Mt 19:16-22

A reading from the holy Gospel according to Matthew

If you wish to be perfect, sell what you own, and your treasure will be in heaven.

There was a man who came to Jesus and asked, 'Master, what good deed must I do to possess eternal life?' Jesus said to him, 'Why do you ask me about what is good. There is one alone who is good. But if you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments.' He said, 'Which?' 'These,' Jesus replied, 'You must not kill. You must not commit adultery. You must not bring false witness. Honour your father and mother, and: You must love your neighbour as yourself.' The young man said to him 'I have kept all these. What more do I need to do?' Jesus said, 'If you wish to be perfect, go and sell what you own and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.' But when the young man heard these words he went away sad, for he was a man of great wealth.



Reflection - Fr John Lovell

In the Second Century AD, there was an early Christian theologian named Marcion. He was a dualist and a gnostic, who embraced only select parts of the Gospels and the New Testament, while rejecting all of the Old Testament, which he believed depicted a malevolent God who was at odds with the mercy Jesus and His Good News. Marcion and his belief system, Marcionism, were firmly rejected by the early Christian Church as heresy. St Polycarp was so outraged by his teachings that he called him, “the first-born of Satan”.

Based on our First Reading today from the book of Judges, and various other sections of the Old Testament, it's probably not surprising that some people came to see the Old Testament God of the Jews as a God of vindictiveness, cruelty and wrath, rather than a tender and loving Father of all humanity. And still today, there are people who see God the Father as a harsh and punishing deity. Accordingly, when they suffer hardship and disaster, they wonder what they are being punished for and may believe only a relatively few devout people are going to be saved.

So, what do you think: were you raised to see God the Father of Jesus as a harsh and punishing God, waiting to catch us out for any transgression of the moral law? And if not, why do you think He was portrayed in such a harsh way in many parts of the Old Testament? If we look to the life and teachings of Jesus the answer to the first part of this question I think would have to be ‘no’, God is definitely not like that. And in answer to the second part of the question, as to *why* God was often portrayed in such harsh ways in the Old Testament, I think it's because the ancient Hebrews were a primitive people with far less understanding of the true nature of God than us. They didn't have the Gospels, or great theologians like St Augustine or St Thomas Aquinas, and many of them lived among neighbouring frightened, warring nations who interpreted virtually all misfortune, natural disasters and defeats at the hands of invading armies as punishments from their various pagan gods, who were temperamental and wanted human blood sacrifices. So why should they see the true God as being any different!

What we do know for certain about the one true God, from Jesus and the lives of the saints, is His great benevolence. The covenants and the Law were given as signs of God's care and protection for His people. These things unite us as a people, encourage us to overlook our differences, forgive wrongs, embrace principles of justice and peace, and encourage us to look after the stranger, the widow and the orphan. Peoples and nations that work together rather than against each other, can ultimately overcome any misfortune or natural disaster, which I'm sure in time will include the current COVID-19 pandemic which is afflicting our world.

Let us pray together for doctors, hospital staff and volunteers who are giving their own lives to save others. And for civil leaders, for those who have to make decisions at this time. All these people are the pillars defending us in this crisis ... The God of tenderness will heal us of all life's wounds and of all the bad things we have done. Returning to God means returning to an embrace, the embrace of the Creator.

(Pope Francis, homily, 20 March 2020)