

TWENTY-SIXTH
SUNDAY IN
ORDINARY TIME

YEAR A



FIRST READING

Ezekiel 18:25–28

PSALM

Psalms 25:4–9

SECOND READING

Philippians 2:1–11

GOSPEL

Matthew 21:28–32

Prayer

Psalms 25:4–9

Make me to know your ways, O LORD; teach me your paths.

Lead me in your truth, and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation; for you I wait all day long.

Be mindful of your mercy, O LORD, and of your steadfast love, for they have been from of old.

Do not remember the sins of my youth or my transgressions; according to your steadfast love remember me, for your goodness' sake, O LORD!

Good and upright is the LORD; therefore he instructs sinners in the way. He leads the humble in what is right, and teaches the humble his way.

Reading the Word

Ezekiel 18:25–28

God said "Yet you say, 'The way of the Lord is unfair'."

Hear now, O house of Israel: Is my way unfair? Is it not your ways that are unfair? When the righteous turn away from their righteousness and commit iniquity, they shall

die for it; for the iniquity that they have committed they shall die. Again, when the wicked turn away from the wickedness they have committed and do what is lawful and right, they shall save their life. Because they considered and turned away from all the transgressions that they had committed, they shall surely live; they shall not die.

Philippians 2:1–11

If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who,

Though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness.

And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.

Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Matthew 21:28–32

Jesus said, "What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work in the vineyard today.' He answered, 'I will not'; but later he changed his mind and went. The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, 'I go, sir'; but he did not go. Which of the two did the will of his father?" They said, "The first."

Jesus said to them, "Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead

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of you. For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him.

Hearing the Word

“Excuses”

This Sunday’s liturgy of the word calls attention to the use of excuses in order to justify one’s actions, attitudes and beliefs which go contrary to God’s will and contradict his purposes.

The prophet Ezekiel, like his contemporary, Jeremiah, lived through a time of tremendous turmoil that led to the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple. Ezekiel found himself in exile in a faraway country, Babylonia, together with many other Israelites. Understandably, the exiles tried to understand the reasons for such utter destruction of the once-glorious city and for their own tragic fate. They were asking how the faithful God of Israel could allow such a disaster to happen to his city and his people.

One of the ways to deal with this question was to lay blame for the disaster on the past generations and their wrongdoing. According to this view, God unjustly punished an innocent generation for the sins of its predecessors. Such reasoning absolved the exiles from any responsibility for what had happened, laying instead full blame on others, and indirectly implying that God’s verdict was unjust. The

prophet reacted to these accusations against God and the exiles’ forefathers pointing to God’s unquestionable justice, manifested in the personal responsibility laid upon each person for his or her righteousness or wrongdoings. The prophet insisted that every person bears the consequences of their actions and is not punished for the offenses committed by others, especially those of former generations. Thus, Ezekiel made it clear that the exiles themselves bore responsibility for their fate.

Moreover, Ezekiel emphasized that turning away from wickedness was necessary in order to experience God’s salvific action in the future. The Israelites, denying responsibility for the exile, also denied themselves the possibility for restoration. Only if they accepted their culpability for the exile, and, more importantly, turned their life around in acts of repentance, would they survive the exile and see God’s salvation. The excuses they invented were preventing them from recognizing and accepting the truth of their own guilt. In the long run, the same excuses would prevent them from experiencing God’s salvation.

In the second reading St Paul addresses the Philippian community which he himself founded. There were relatively few problems among its members, and the apostle enjoyed a trouble-free relationship with them. Still, the Christians in Philippi struggled with selfish ambitions and

pride, which led to quarrels, divisions and disunity. Paul reacted to these problems in two ways. First, he made a personal appeal that they should consider others with humility, and show concern in seeking the best interest of one another. Second, he eliminated any possibility of finding excuses for acting selfishly and in self-interest, by appealing to the highest authority – Christ himself.

In one of the most beautiful hymns in the NT, Paul describes how Christ, while existing as God in the heavenly realm, left his unimaginable status, humbly accepting humanity, and eventually dying a cruel and shameful death on the cross, in order to redeem the people. In the first lines of the hymn, Paul writes that Christ “did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited”. In these words, Paul emphasizes that Christ neither held on to his superior position, nor took it for granted for granted, nor looked for excuses to retain it. On the contrary, he willingly accepted the difficult and painful mission on earth, having in mind the good of humanity. His sacrifice brought salvation and led to his subsequent exaltation by the Father. Had Jesus looked for excuses to avoid this mission he would not have suffered, but he would not have become the savior either.

In the passage preceding the parable of two sons contained in today’s Gospel, the Jewish leaders challenged Jesus about the source of his

authority. Their intentions were insincere because, envious of his wisdom, power and influence, the leaders were looking for an opportunity to accuse Jesus of wrongdoing and discredit him. Jesus responded by revealing their true intentions using a story of two sons who were asked by their father to work in a vineyard. The first son initially refused his father's request, but, upon reflection, he realizes his error and did what the father asked. The second son was insincere from the beginning to the end. While pretending to obey the father's wishes, he had no intention of fulfilling them and hid his insincerity by a lie. There could be no doubt that only the first son did his father's will, as Jesus' opponents themselves confirmed.

Next, Jesus used the parable against his opponents revealing their insincerity, similar to that of the disobedient son. First, the leaders refused to believe John the Baptist and respond to his message. Similarly, when Jesus came behaving differently from John and with a different message, they also refused to accept him, even though they saw the good fruits his ministry bore. Their refusal resulted from jealousy, which led them to find excuses for not accepting either of God's heralds.

The excuses the leaders used to reject both John the Baptist and Jesus are plainly revealed in Matthew 11:16-19. The leaders made up their minds and found reasons to act in a way that suited their views and

serve their purposes. Their attitude differed drastically from that of the sinners, who recognized and acknowledged the errors of their ways, and did not look for excuses to continue in their sins. As a result, they were able to repent, while the leaders continued in their stubborn rejection of the Messiah.

Today's readings emphasize the importance of not allowing one's own views and purposes to obscure God's intentions. Ezekiel's fellow exiles were so self-defensive that they refused to accept any responsibility for the disasters that had befallen them, blaming instead their ancestors, and God's injustice for their fate. St Paul carefully reminded the Philippians that they have no excuses for perpetuating the self-interested and selfish attitudes which divided their community. Their teacher and Lord, Jesus, could have remained in the divine state, safe from any pain or danger. Yet, without looking for any excuse, he sacrificed himself for their salvation. In the Gospel, Jesus accused his opponents, the Jewish leaders, of dishonesty. They looked for excuses for rejecting both him and his precursor, John the Baptist, without any valid reasons. Excuses and reasons to justify any action can easily be found. Christian responsibility, however, lies in honestly seeking God's truth and light, so that the decisions and actions taken may not be self-serving, but be aimed at the good of others. This requires honesty and humility because, as the

Psalms correctly recognized, God "leads the humble in what is right, and teaches the humble his way."

Listening to the Word of God

This Sunday's liturgy of the Word admonishes us to reflect on our tendency to find excuses, and blame others for our own mistakes, failures and sins. This tendency comes very naturally to us and was first seen in the story of Adam and Eve. In many traditional cultures, the elders, leaders and statesmen are held as upright and morally outstanding members in the community. When an elder makes a mistake, he or she will not admit it, but rather lays blame on a younger person, or on someone else. The same is true of modern societies where politicians create an image of inerrancy and would never admit their own faults or mistakes.

Yet, the first reading and the Gospel teach us to admit our limitedness and accept responsibility for our actions. To be able to do so, we must first change our minds and hearts. We often give excuses because of fear of embarrassment and criticism. When made aware of our limitedness, failures, lack of responsibility and mistakes, we feel shame and loss of self-confidence, which leads us to blame the circumstances or others, in order to save face. For instance, in the family, when things go wrong, the husband blames the wife, the wife blames the children, the children blame the cat,

and so on. As Christians, we must be courageous enough to accept our mistakes and failures, and have the courage to admit and apologize for them. In fact, such honest and open acknowledgment of mistakes and failures leads others to see us as mature and responsible people, while making excuses leads to a loss of credibility in the eyes of others. When people discover that we are not brave enough to be held accountable, they will stop trusting us, knowing that we are neither dependable nor reliable. Ironically, by trying to save face we lose it. Excuses also make life fruitless and prevent personal growth and development. As Christians, we must not let the habit of finding excuses take root in us because then we will never be able to progress in life. Excuses appear particularly at times and in situations which are difficult or require effort. Today, many search for effortless and easy success. This leads to stealing, corruption, cheating and moral compromises. Yet, true success is achieved through serious and consistent efforts which require discipline and sacrifice. Faced with such demands we often find excuses for not doing what is required. Our laziness and desire for comfort produce countless excuses for not doing what is demanding and challenging. Yet, experience shows, again and again, that the easy path and dishonest shortcuts never lead to the success that will last. Similarly, we often blame others, such as teachers,

employees, parents or leaders, for what goes wrong in our lives. It is always somebody else's fault and never my own. Yet, by blaming others we stubbornly refuse to examine ourselves and, as a result, we fail to improve ourselves. If it is always someone else's fault, it means that I am faultless and do not need to change anything about me and my behaviors. Such attitudes will, inevitably, result in repeating the same mistakes over and over again, because we will identify and change only what causes us to fail.

Acknowledging one's mistakes and not blaming others for our failures is, therefore, essential and necessary for us to grow and develop as human beings. It is also necessary in order to discern and follow the will of God for our lives, because often God speaks to us in the midst of our faults and failures. If we do not freely admit them, then we will also miss the lesson from God.

Proverb

“He who falls always tries to justify the cause”

Action

Self-examination

Do I habitually blame others for my mistakes and failures? Give examples.

What kind of excuses do I give for not reading the Word of God and finding time for my personal prayer?

Response to God

I make a personal commitment to God that, in the course of this week, I will not be looking for excuses for my shortcomings and mistakes.

Response to your World

I will identify one mistake I often make, and honestly reflect on what in me brings about that mistake.

As a group, we reflect on what we could do to raise awareness of the damaging tendency to blame others for everything that goes wrong.

Prayer

Our gracious God, your ways are fair and just. Instruct us to walk your path and teach us to accept and admit our sins and failures.

Help us to be mindful of our actions and recognize you Lord as a merciful Lord.

Lead us into what is right and teach us to be humble like your Son Jesus Christ.

We ask this through Christ our Lord who live and reigns with you, one God forever and ever. Amen.