

Readings for Thursday of the 23rd Week of the Year

FIRST READING: 1 Corinthians 8:1b-7, 11-13

A reading from the first Letter of Saint Paul to the Corinthians:

Brothers and sisters: Knowledge inflates with pride, but love builds up. If anyone supposes he knows something, he does not yet know as he ought to know. But if one loves God, one is known by him. So about the eating of meat sacrificed to idols: we know that *there is no idol in the world*, and that *there is no God but one*. Indeed, even though there are so-called gods in heaven and on earth (there are, to be sure, many “gods” and many “lords”), yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom all things are and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things are and through whom we exist. But not all have this knowledge. There are some who have been so used to idolatry up until now that, when they eat meat sacrificed to idols, their conscience, which is weak, is defiled. Thus, through your knowledge, the weak person is brought to destruction, the brother for whom Christ died. When you sin in this way against your brothers and wound their consciences, weak as they are, you are sinning against Christ. Therefore, if food causes my brother to sin, I will never eat meat again, so that I may not cause my brother to sin.

The word of the Lord.

RESPONSORIAL: Psalm 139:1b-3, 13-14ab, 23-24

Guide me, Lord, along the everlasting way.

O LORD, you have probed me and you know me; you know when I sit and when I stand; you understand my thoughts from afar. My journeys and my rest you scrutinize, with all my ways you are familiar.

Guide me, Lord, along the everlasting way.

Truly you have formed my inmost being; you knit me in my mother’s womb. I give you thanks that I am fearfully, wonderfully made; wonderful are your works.

Guide me, Lord, along the everlasting way.

Probe me, O God, and know my heart; try me, and know my thoughts; See if my way is crooked, and lead me in the way of old.

Guide me, Lord, along the everlasting way.

Gospel: Luke 6:27-38

+ A reading from the holy Gospel according to Luke:

Jesus said to his disciples: “To you who hear I say, love your 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. Do to others as you would have them do to

you. For if you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners love those who love them. And if you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners do the same. If you lend money to those from whom you expect repayment, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, and get back the same amount. But rather, love your enemies and do good to them, and lend expecting nothing back; 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. Be merciful, just as also your Father is merciful. "Stop judging and you will not be judged. Stop condemning and you will not be condemned. Forgive and you will be forgiven. Give and gifts will be given to you; a good measure, packed together, shaken down, and overflowing, will be poured into your lap. For the measure with which you measure will in return be measured out to you."

The Gospel of the Lord.

Reflection for Thursday of the 23rd Week of the Year

I have always liked to learn new things. Some of the things I know, I like to keep to myself. A few years ago, my mother stayed over night in the rectory where I was assigned. After dinner, we priests cleaned up. The pastor rinsed the dishes and I arranged them in the dish washer. My mother, who was sitting at the kitchen table, was surprised to see how well I could do that. While still living at home, I had always professed my ineptness at that skill. Some things, as I get older, are more difficult to learn. Every rectory, since the early 1980s, have had computerized telephone systems. The learning curve is high on these things and every rectory has a different system. I have no idea how ours here works. I can dial out, receive a call and get messages. That's all. I miss the old multi-line push button phones.

Does Paul say in his letter to the Corinthians that knowledge is dangerous? The lectionary editors have once again edited the passage. It begins not with verse one. They have eliminated the first line of the verse that puts this in proper context. Here's the first sentence:

Now, concerning what you wrote about food offered to idols.

Granted, the subject comes up later in the letter, but the context is a "Q & A." Paul is answering a question and dealing with a disturbing issue. We have no real experience of food offered to idols. I do. One day off, a priest friend and I took a trip to one of the Hindu temples in Suburban Chicago. We went to the brown one that can be seen off Interstate 88. Since we were Catholic priests, we sought a tour of the temple by one of the Hindu priests. We learned a great deal from this man, but that is irrelevant. He was a priest of the god Vishnu. He took us into the chapel of the god Shiva. In front of the idol of the god was a bowl of apples one of the faithful had brought as an offering. He handed each of us an apple. Neither of us was willing to eat them for they were food offered to an idol, remembering this passage. I wound up with them. When I got home I related the story to our secretary. She took them. Her husband, who was neither a priest nor Catholic, always took an apple with lunch.

I mention this event because this is the heart of today's first reading. There is no reason not to eat the apple but my friend's and my reluctance. What happens to these offerings? The idol was a stone statue and the god not God. For us who are unfamiliar with this kind of practice,

this is how it works. Everybody knows that the idol will not and can not eat the offering. Even in Judaism, food was brought to the Temple in Jerusalem as offerings to God. Those practices were part of Jewish worship and prescribed in the bible. Most of the Jewish feasts required such offerings. There are some good articles on the sacrifices on Google if you want to learn more.

The faithful knew that God would not come and eat this food either. Animals would be butchered and roasted, not burnt up. Fruits and vegetables would be sautéed. What went to God was the aroma of the cooking. We use incense today in the same way. I use it sparingly for it can set me off on a sneezing jag. The Temple had priests, Levites, attendants and other staff. These people all had families. All this food was eaten by them. Everybody understood that the Temple work-force needed such support. The same system works in pagan temples today. Since the three of us were all clergy, the Hindu priest assumed, correctly, that we understood the custom. He offered the apples to us as a professional courtesy.

Corinth was a major Greek port city. It was a pretty cosmopolitan place. All the foreigners had their appropriate temples. These required lots of people to staff them. Undoubtedly, some of the Christians were employed in some capacity as support personnel. In his letter, Paul is attempting to bring those horrified with the thought of eating a god's food and those who accepted the food to eat as their salary together. Paul states that knowledge is used to serve people not drive them apart. These two sides had to recognize that they were one, not in their social practices, in Jesus.

As I write this, I see, and perhaps you do too, that this situation is very similar to the polarization of our society today. Paul's lesson is very contemporary and very appropriate for our times. Many issues can put a wedge between us, even if we discount social distancing and sheltering at home for us most at risk of COVID 19. In this election season, we all vote, that can unite us as Americans. However, the one for whom we vote can divide us apart. On what can we focus? Our civil responsibility may be our only common ground. Paul would advise us to recognize that truth.

As Catholics we all can come from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds. We are all over on the political spectrum. Some may root for the Cubs, others the Sox and some may even root for the Mets. Some of us can converse in more than one language. Some may speak only English. Some know English as a foreign language. Some see diversity as a blessing and others see it as an obstacle. There are so many different things that can prevent us to gather together. Food can be one reason to gather; we all need to eat. Jesus is another. Jesus is the reason and the means for us to gather. In Jesus' name we gather as one. We are all one in Christ. In Christ, we are all in this together. That is Paul's essential message to the Christians of Corinth and the Christians who gather at Divine Savior in Norridge. Paul's message has hit the mark.

At one of my recent, former parishes, I was assigned to be moderator or consultant to the parish men's group, Theology and Cigars. Not once did anyone smoke a cigar. When I joined them, the first time, they expressed their wishes for me to act just as a consultant and not participate. They gathered to support men who desired to live their Christian faith as good, Catholic men. I told them that wouldn't happen because I need support for that too. This gospel comes up on Thursday of the 23rd week of the year every year. Some of the guys would attend

daily mass and heard it. They discussed what Jesus had said about lending to those who ask and embarked on a campaign to tend to the homeless.

Near the parish, under the commuter, freight, and Amtrak viaducts, was a colony of homeless men. They would go and offer food, cigarettes and five dollar bills to them. On the surface this sounded good. However, five bucks was never enough, the cigs were the wrong brand and the food was never the kind they wanted. At the next men's group meeting they brought their disillusion back to the group. We all have faced pan-handlers. What does Jesus want us to do in those situations? What the men decided was more concrete and less catch-as-catch-can. There were local organizations, shelters, pantries and soup-kitchens. They decided to support the local food pantry and volunteer at the soup-kitchen. As individuals their help went unappreciated and was mostly unwanted. With a group plan those who needed help and wanted help got it. Jesus also said that the poor would always be with us.

Jesus' message has the context of a close and small Jewish community. People knew one another. Everybody knew people's situations. It is out of a communal response that folks cared for the poor. More resources could be shared. Jesus spoke to the disciples. His words speak to what would become, after Jesus' death, resurrection, ascension and the coming of the Holy Spirit, the Early Church. We, as the Church have accepted this mission. As Divine Savior Church, we support the food pantry at St. Eulalia in Maywood. Each week, as a parish, we bring the food collected here there.

It would be easy just to hear just Jesus' command to care for the poor and lend without expectation. However, Jesus also commands us not to judge. The measure with which we measure will be measured back to you. It sounds good on paper, but is at least a challenge to put into practice. Judging others can be insidious. How people look, how they sound and what they eat can be spring-boards for judgment which can be a knee-jerk reaction when we notice. I maintain that it is impossible for anyone to completely and always avoid this behavior. Each one of us, as a human being, is flawed. Sometimes the best we can do is to be aware of our tendency and notice when we do it. We can always turn to God, and for that matter, each other for forgiveness. It is only with and by the grace of God that we can change. Turning to God for God's help is also a grace. Sometimes the judgment most difficult to notice and change is when we judge ourselves. We can be our own worst judge. God forgives us out of God's eternal and unconditional wealth of love. God's love is boundless and given freely. God only asks us to share it with one another.

The gifts that God gives us, serve us well. We are alive, faithful, hopefully healthy, gifted and forgiven. Because of this, we can serve and care for one another. As our lives have come from God, we are on a path back to God. It is a path of a lifetime. On the way, God continues to perfect us.

I hope, as you read, you are well. May God bless us with the desire for continued service.

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September 10, 2020