

23A 2020 SML
MT 18:15-20

This evening's/morning's gospel is taken from Matthew 18, an entire chapter devoted to Our Blessed Lord's teaching on forgiveness and mercy. To that end, a question that sums up all human questions is "For what may we hope?" That is the question whose answer decides the meaning, or the meaningless of life.

The Christian answer to the question, "For what may we hope?" is everlasting life, embedded in the minds of students of the Baltimore Catechism. "Why did God make you?" "God made me to know Him, to love Him, and to serve Him in this world, and to be happy with Him forever in the next." Yet not included in this answer is the "expectation" of an inevitably happy ending, in the sense of saying, "It will all work out in the end."

It is precisely in His mercy that God takes us seriously. He will not ambush us. He will not bypass our freedom. Our eternal destiny depends on our decision and our response to God's plan: either to know Him, love Him and serve Him in this life, or to ignore or reject Him in this life. This proves the

seriousness of life and the seriousness of our free will. Our life decision is a decision for life or for death.

Although St. Caesarius simply wrote that “all men hope for mercy,” there is no simple answer, “For what may we hope?” The answers we find from scripture and the teaching of the Church are not unanimous. There are two different sets of scripture verses that, at first glance, appear to be irreconcilable.

The first set of verses read like this:

- ✓ 1 TIM 2:3: God wants all people to be saved.
- ✓ JOHN 12:32: When I am lifted up, I will draw all people to myself.
- ✓ JOHN 12:47: Jesus came not to judge but to save.
- ✓ COL 1:20: God wanted to reconcile everything in heaven and on earth.

While these verses clearly state what God wants, they will only be fulfilled if we want what God wants, if our will coincides with His will.

The second set of statements concerning judgment begin in the Garden of Eden, where punishment is promised in paradise: “But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil

you shall not eat, for at the moment you eat of it you shall die.”

Judgment threads its way through the Old Testament:

- ✓ expulsion from paradise,
- ✓ the flood,
- ✓ Sodom and Gomorrah.
- ✓ It's in the Psalms (“He judges the world with righteousness; he judges the peoples with equity.” 9:8)
- ✓ Wisdom Literature is full of thoughts about judgment.
- ✓ The prophets Amos, Isaiah and Ezekiel all speak of the day of the Lord as a day of judgment.

Jesus and the New Testament continue the prophet's tradition beginning with John the Baptist. The clearest example is Jesus' speech about the Last Judgment, according to which those who show mercy to the poor, the needy and the persecuted are promised the Kingdom of God and those who do not are subject to eternal punishment.

Jesus is God and God is love. Love can be stern, forceful and even fierce as was Our Blessed Lord's:

- ✓ His love made a scourge or ropes and drove buyers and sellers out of the temple;
- ✓ His love refused to give the courtesy of speech to moral blowhards like Herod;

- ✓ It turned on a Roman procurator boasting of totalitarian law and reminded Pilate he would have no power had it not been given him by God;
- ✓ When a gentle hint to the woman at the well was not taken, He reminded her she divorced five husbands and she didn't even bother to marry the guy she's shacking up with now;
- ✓ When He heard of the shedding of the blood of Galileans, He said, "You will all perish as they did if you do not repent."
- ✓ He told them to pluck out their eyes and cut off their hands and feet before He would let these body parts lead them to sin.
- ✓ When His apostles slept, He chided them for their lack of prayer.

This list goes on.

Yet we are pretty good drawing the line between ourselves and the really big chief sinners. For them, the big chief sinners, the cross may be necessary. For us, however, an understanding wink from a forgiving God will be enough. But the "big chief" of sinning is in every human heart. We make our selves small when we make small our sins. Fearing the judgment of great evil, we shrink from the call to great good. Like Adam, we slink away to hide in a corner of Eden. Like the prodigal son, we hunker down behind the swine trough of our

shrunk lives. But eventually Adam came out from hiding and the prodigal came to his senses. He remembered who he was in his former life, in his real life. There is no way to have dignity restored except by confessing dignity betrayed.

And still we hold back from confession. The longer Adam hid from his shame, the more he proclaimed his shame. It only increases our complicity the more we deny. We act as if there is not forgiveness enough, when in fact there is more than forgiveness enough.

Were you there when they crucified my Lord? Yes, we were there. Recognizing the line that runs through every human heart, we were there. About the big chief sinners I do not know, but what I do know about sinners I know chiefly about me. The things we have done wrong seemed, or mostly seemed, small at the time:

- ✓ the encouragement withheld
- ✓ the kindness not given
- ✓ the visit not made
- ✓ the trust betrayed
- ✓ the cutting remark so clever and so cruel
- ✓ the angry answer
- ✓ the surge of resentment

- ✓ it is such a long and tedious list
- ✓ and some items on the list not so tedious.

But now it has come to this. It has come to the cross. And all the trespasses of all the people of all time have gravitated here, to the killing grounds of Calvary. And be grateful that forgiveness is not just limited to the sins we know. “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do.”

Things must be set right, and if we cannot even set ourselves right, then who is to do it? It must be done by someone who is in no way responsible for what has gone wrong. It must be done by an act that is perfectly gratuitous, that is not driven by necessity, but by an act that is perfectly free. The act must be by One who embodies everything, whose life is not one life among many, but is life itself, a life that is our life and the life of all who have ever lived and will live. Who is this One?

- ✓ “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.”
- ✓ We knew not what we did when we reached for the right to name good and evil.
- ✓ We knew not what we did when we grabbed what we could and went off to a distant country.

Who is that One? We know that One is Jesus Christ, and while we know we cannot be the one to make things right, we know the One Who can, and we know we must acknowledge Him by our way of life. This much we do know.

This Sunday, let's come out of hiding as did Adam, and let's come to our senses as did the prodigal son. Today, here at the Cross, our eyes are fixed on the One Who is the One who set things right. We look at the One who is everything that we are and everything we are not, the One who is true God and true man. In Him, God and man, we are perfectly one. Here, at the foot of the cross, we have come home, home to the truth about ourselves, home to the truth about what God has done about what we have done. And now we know, or begin to know, why that awful, awe filled Friday is called Good.