

## 2019 24<sup>TH</sup> SUNDAY

In today's Mass we celebrate Social Justice Week.

Our Bishops, in a Letter to accompany this year's theme of 'Fairness', speak of Social Justice as fairness in our dealings with other people and of fairness in the distribution of income, wealth and power in our society. But they also warn us that asking the question, "Is it fair?" is always challenging because what one person might see as right and fair may not be the case for another. We all need to be aware of the limitations of our own perspective.

This becomes abundantly clear in today's Gospel Story of the Prodigal Son.

The prodigal son has flagrantly defied his father, left home and totally squandered his substantial inheritance on partying and prostitution. But what happens when, woebegone and filthy, he returns home? He receives a rapturous welcome from his father and is restored to his former place in the family.

The elder son, who has never once disobeyed his father's requests and has slaved out in the paddocks earning an honest living, surprise, surprise, finds this most unfair. "I have slaved for you, yet you never once offered me so much as a baby goat to celebrate my birthday with my friends. But this son of yours, when he comes back after swallowing up your property on women- you kill a calf to celebrate."

The parable turns our human concept of fairness on its head. Many find the parable reprehensible. But the parable cannot be ignored. It is a sacred word to us from God and therefore has to be factored into our thinking on Fairness.

When the Church speaks on Social Justice the very first priority is the principal of human dignity. Every person is to be respected and loved in the same radical way as God loves them. The prodigal son had a dignity which no one could take from him. No matter his sins- he was God's beloved creation and could not be placed on the scrap heap as the elder son desired. The father in the parable personifies God magnanimous love reaching out to lift all people from degradation. We must reflect that love.

A second principle of Social teaching is The Common Good. Yes some people are a danger to society and society must be protected from them. We

accept that there have to be boundaries to human behaviour and these boundaries need to be enforced. But they must be enforced in a way which respects the human dignity of the offender. Within the prison system, for example, there must be genuine efforts made to help all prisoners be successfully re-integrated into society.

A third principle of Catholic Social Teaching is the preferential option for the poor and vulnerable. This tells us that we must not focus exclusively on our own needs and ignore the plight of those who are less fortunate than ourselves.

Let me tell you a story from Africa:

Once upon a time when animals still talked, the mice on a farm called a summit of all the other animals. They had seen the mistress buy a mousetrap and knew themselves to be in danger. But the other animals scoffed at their anxiety. The cow said, "I've got nothing to worry about. The tiny trap won't hurt me." The pig reacted in a similar way. The chickens clucked to the mice, "It's your concern; not ours." And so the Meeting concluded without anything being done to help the mice.

The mistress set the mousetrap and on thy very first night it snapped. Getting out of bed to look what it had caught she saw that it had trapped a snake by its tail. In trying to free the snake she was bitten and poisoned. The mistress went to the doctor for help to combat the poison. He advised her to eat chicken broth. So the chickens were slaughtered. But the woman continued to deteriorate. Concerned relatives came to visit. So the pig was killed to feed them. Sadly the mistress died and a huge funeral followed. A lot of food was needed so they slaughtered the cow.

The moral is clear- everyone is interconnected. We are inextricably tied to each other and to everyone in the world. We ignore our interconnectedness at our peril.

If we say "I'll take care of myself. You take care of yourself!" our selfishness will come back to us to snake-bite us.

Caritas Aotearoa have given us a little pamphlet to study. It tells us that as we look out into our world we must open our eyes to the realities around us. We must SEE what is actually happening in our country. We must JUDGE why unfair situations exist. Who gains? Who loses? And finally we must ACT. We

must address the root causes of injustices. We must try to empower those who are being disadvantaged.

We must consider our God-given gifts, our skills and our passions. What are practical things that we can do to make for a fairer world?

In the words of St Teresa of Calcutta: "Not all of us can do great things. But we can all do small things with great love."

We cannot simply sit back and do nothing in the face of injustice. As Disciples of Jesus, Who died on the Cross to save us all, our love must propel us into action.