

33 Sunday in Ordinary Time - Year B 2006 Dan 12:1-3; Mk 13:24-32

Over the last several years, slowly but surely, a movement has been growing which threatens to overturn a law bitterly fought over for decades.

- a. This too promises to be a battle royal, with opponents on both sides ready to slug it out in the courts.
 - b. You would think the battle is over the right of a woman to end the life of her unborn child; that is, abortion.
 - c. But its not; it is over the right of the state to end the life on a convicted felon: that is, capital punishment.
2. This battle has been fought for years:
- a. In our courts, where lawyers have argued that justice demands a life for a life
 - b. In our governments, where legislators have argued that safety demands the execution of criminals
 - c. And even in our pulpits where almost every Christian body has taught
 - i. that what for individuals is the right to self-defense
 - ii. becomes for communities the right to capital punishment.
 - d. And as a result in state after state that right was granted and granted again.
3. But the tide has begun to turn
- a. as the battle against capital punishment
 - i. has increasingly been fought in new locations;
 - ii. locations which have more influence than courts, governments or pulpits do;
 - b. It is being fought out in laboratories,
 - i. where recent advances in DNA technology have resulted in the startling discovery that many people living on death row were not guilty of the crimes they were to be executed for, and thus have been released.
 - c. And it is being fought out in the arts
 - i. Where movies, TV shows and even plays have all focused on capital punishment.
 - ii. And almost all of them have focused on one aspect of the debate.
 - (1) An aspect brought out most poignantly
 - (2) in a former off Broadway play which is still being performed around the country called *The Exonerated*.
 - iii. The play deals with 12 real-life people who lived on death row,
 - (1) sometimes for years, watching others
 - (2) including in one case the husband of one of the people, executed,
 - (3) until one day, evidence turns up which sets them free;
 - (a) exonerates them.
 - iv. they were innocent;

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- (1) yet, eventually they too would have been executed.
 - v. The point is crystal clear:
 - (1) even if justice demands it;
 - (2) even if safety needs it
 - (3) even if self defense of a community requires it;
 - vi. how can anyone make such judgements?
- 4. However, whenever that question is asked, sooner or later a counter question is raised:
 - a. How can we keep from making such judgments?
 - i. For justice does **demand** it
 - ii. Safety does **need** it
 - iii. Self defense does **require** it,
 - iv. And far more importantly, the Bible **COMMANDS** it.
 - (1) For in the Hebrew Scriptures
 - (a) There is the Law which formed the basis of all judgements
 - (b) There are the Judges, who called the Hebrew people back to faithfulness to that law
 - (c) There are the Prophets who convicted the people of their sins against that law
 - (d) And there is the promise heard in today's first reading from the prophet Daniel
 - (i) that at the end of the world all of us would be judged according to that Law,
 - 1) some receiving eternal glory,
 - 2) others everlasting death;
 - (ii) talk about capital punishment!
 - (2) And in the New Testament we hear Jesus speaking of judgement;
 - (3) As in today's Gospel where he speaks of God's judgment at the end of the world and the gathering of all those God has found worthy
- 5. Thus we must judge, so the argument goes; for if we do not,
 - a. How can we be sure we are following the Law?
 - b. How can we be sure we are being faithful to it?
 - c. How can we be sure of our sins against it?
 - d. How can we be sure we are prepared for the final judgment,
 - i. if we do not judge ourselves and others again and again and again?
- 6. But then that is just the point.
 - a. We cannot be.
 - 2
 - b. We cannot be sure of our judgments

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- i. for the same reason the judges in the play *The Exonerated*
 - ii. and all the other judges in cases where capital punishment was meted out could never be sure.
 - c. Because they did not know everything,
 - d. could not know everything
 - e. would never know everything - because they are not God.
 - i. Which is precisely the New Testament's point about judgments;
 - (1) because whenever it speaks about judgment, it does not speak about our judgment but about God's.
 - (2) And it says that we will not be judged on the basis of our relationship to a law but to a person, namely, Jesus.
 - (3) And only God can know the nature of that relationship, and thus ONLY GOD can judge us.
 - (a) Which is why there is always forgiveness always mercy always the possibility for us to begin again with God.
- 7. Of course, one could argue that this is all well and good when it comes to God, but what about when it comes to everyone else? Are we not required to make judgments?
 - a. No we are required to be faithful.
 - i. To encourage others to be faithful
 - ii. To read the scriptures as the story of that faithfulness
 - iii. and to use the Law as the guide to that faithfulness.
- 8. We can indeed set up systems of law that are as fair as possible,
 - a. we can set up courts which are just as possible,
 - b. we can even have punishments which are as equitable as possible.
- 9. But when it comes to judgment, especially that judgment which results in capital punishment,
 - a. well, perhaps the best way to express it would be to go to the Catechism of the Catholic Church,
 - b. published in the early 1990's as the official expression of the content of our Catholic faith.
 - c. Shortly after it was published it went through a revision by the express order of John Paul II.
 - i. The revision takes place during the discussion of the fifth Commandment, Thou Shalt not Kill.
 - ii. While it acknowledges the right of a community to self defense it added, "Today, in fact, as a consequence of the possibilities which the state has for effectively preventing crime by rendering one who has committed an offense incapable of doing harm, without definitively taking away from

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him the possibility of redeeming himself - the cases in which the execution of the offender is an absolute necessity are very rare if not non practically non existent.”

- iii. What does that verbiage mean? It means imprison but do not execute
- iv. remove the freedom to act, but never take away the opportunity to repent;
- v. Punish the crime but do not judge the criminal
 - (1) for only God is judge, not only of the criminal but of us all,
 - (2) and when God judges there is always time for repentance, for forgiveness and the chance to begin again...
 - (3) Thus how can it be any different for any one else?