

4th Sunday of Easter
May 15, 2011
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Justice

Acts of the Apostles 2:14a, 36-41
Psalm 23
1 Peter 2:20b-25
John 10:1-10

For two weeks now, the news has been saturated with information about the killing of Osama Bin Laden.¹ At the first news of his death, thousands of people in New York City flooded the streets in an impromptu rally and they celebrated. There was singing and reveling. Thousands more people logged onto Facebook and Twitter and posted comments of joy about Bin Laden's death. Others e-mailed family members, friends and co-workers.

I'll be honest—I had a lot of different emotions going on in my heart. Mostly, I felt sad; sad that people were celebrating someone being killed; yet, I felt that my unwillingness to participate in the celebration was somehow unpatriotic. Without directly saying it, the news programs made me feel that, if I didn't celebrate Bin Laden's death, I somehow wasn't supporting our troops, being a good American, or honoring those who have given their lives for the sake of our freedom. In other words, the news linked *patriotism* with *joy at another person's death* and then called it, "*justice*." As Christians, I believe this should cause us to pause, reflect, and question.

What sort of justice does our faith require? In the book of Genesis, we read about God's first command regarding justice. The command consisted of a 1:7 ratio. The Lord spoke to Cain and said, "If anyone kills Cain, Cain shall be avenged sevenfold" (Genesis 4:15). One of Cain's descendants, Lamech, later explained his understanding of justice in these words, "If Cain is avenged sevenfold, then Lamech seventy-sevenfold" (Genesis 4:24). God obviously wanted to lead His people to a greater understanding of justice, so in the book of Exodus He gave a new command.

Moving from a ratio of 1:7, God instructed His people, saying, "If injury ensues, you shall give life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe" (Exodus 21:23-25). This became a new law—a law of *equivalency*, where the punishment corresponded to the crime. Whereas the original instruction fueled revenge, the new law helped to limit punishment and cruelty. This was not the end of God's lesson on law and justice, however.

Jesus, as the *fulfillment* of the Old Testament law and prophets,² made it very clear through His words and His life that faith required a new form of justice. Challenging people beyond a 1:1 ratio, Christ made a new law, "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, offer no resistance to one who is evil. When someone strikes you on your right cheek, turn the other one to him as well" (Matthew 5:38-39). In case His listeners didn't quite understand this new 1:0 ratio, Christ continued, saying, "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you" (Matthew 5:43-44).

¹ Also spelled "Usama Bin Laden"

² Matthew 5:17—"Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets. I have come not to abolish but to fulfill."

This new understanding of justice is meant to turn us toward God, trusting in Him as the perfect source of eternal justice, rather than taking justice into our own hands. This is precisely the type of justice we heard about in our second reading today, which said, “When [Christ] was insulted, he returned no insult; when he suffered, he did not threaten; instead, he handed himself over to the one who judges justly” (1 Peter 2:23). Such reliance and trust in God’s justice is not easy and often leads us to ask, “How do we balance the evil that people are capable of—evil that we have all experienced in various ways personally, as well as a nation—with Christ’s call for us to *love those people*?” I’m not going to pretend to have a profound answer to that question and I refuse to simply preach to you some ridiculous sounding platitude. Instead, I want us to look briefly at Pope Benedict’s explanation of eternal justice from his encyclical, Saved in Hope.

At the end of his encyclical on hope, the Pope writes—


A world which has to create its own justice is a world without hope. No one and nothing can answer for centuries of suffering.... God is justice and creates justice. This is our consolation and hope.... Evil doers, in the end, do not sit at table at the eternal banquet beside their victims without distinction, as though nothing had happened...³

By viewing justice with an eternal perspective, we let God be the judge. When we no longer feel the need to be the judges, we have the freedom to remember our own sinfulness and be aware of our own contributions to the brokenness and hurt of our world. This, in turn, gives us an opportunity to remember that God’s justice is tempered with *mercy*. In the letter of James, we are reminded that “mercy triumphs over judgment” (James 2:13b). Pope Benedict expressed something very similar in his encyclical, referring to the final judgment as a time of both *justice* and *grace*.

The judgment of God is hope, both because it is justice and because it is grace. If it were merely grace, making all earthly things cease to matter, God would still owe us an answer to the question about justice—the crucial question that we ask of history and of God. If it were merely justice, in the end it could bring only fear to us all. The incarnation of God in Christ has so closely linked the two together—judgment and grace—that justice is... established.⁴

When we understand that justice belongs to God, then we become free to pray that God will judge all people with mercy and grace, including ourselves and Osama Bin Laden. In the words of Saint Paul, “All have sinned and are deprived of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). Yet, “God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8). Rather than celebrating a person being killed in the name of justice, our faith invites us to celebrate God’s eternal justice, which is the perfect balance of judgment and mercy.

SUGGESTED PRAYER EXERCISE:

 Read 1 Peter 2:19-25. What does this description of justice mean to you personally? How does it affect your thoughts/feelings about the violence and suffering of our world?

³ Saved in Hope, Pope Benedict XVI. Ignatius Press, San Francisco, 2007, pgs. 88, 90, 92.

⁴ Ibid. pg. 99