

8th Sunday per Annum - A
Isaiah 49:14-15;
I Corinthians 4:1-5;
Matthew 6: 24-34
Little Flower - 2/16/17

My Brothers and Sisters,

Today's readings challenge our images of God and of ourselves.

The heart of Old Testament revelation is that God is one and personal. The heart of New Testament revelation is that God is three persons in one God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In the Gospels, Jesus refers to the God of the Old Testament as his Father. Both the Old and New Testaments contain many masculine images of God. Consequently, when we think of God, most of us have a masculine image of God. However, in today's first reading, Isaiah compares God's love for Israel with a mother's love for her child. This feminine image of God suggests two reflections.

In much the same way that persons are mysteries to each other, God is mystery to us. We might ask ourselves how balanced or how complete our images of God are. For example, if we focus only on God's justice and overlook his tenderness, our image of God is not only incomplete but untrue. The truth is that Scripture contains many feminine images of God. This week Pope Francis made the point that "In God, justice is mercy, and mercy is justice."

Second, our first reading challenges us to look at our understanding of ourselves and others. In reality, all of us have both masculine and feminine qualities. If we deny either set of qualities, we are less human, less whole, and, therefore, less holy. In the past, men and boys, for example, often were taught to deny, or at least not to express, tenderness. Likewise, women and girls were taught to deny, or at least not to express, negative emotions. Perhaps today's first reading reminds us that to be whole persons we must embrace both our masculine and our feminine qualities and work to develop both and to allow ourselves to express both.

Most of us, if we think of God's judgment at all, think of God's judgment as a negative. Today's second reading offers a much more positive interpretation of God's judgment. First, St. Paul reminds us not to allow ourselves to be judged by others. The negative judgments of others can cripple or destroy our self-image and our self-esteem. Also, he suggests that we not even judge ourselves. We are often our own harshest critics.

More importantly, Paul tells us that God judges us not only by our actions, which are often inconsistent with our most basic values, but also by the intentions of our hearts. One of my college professors always said he hoped that when he died, he would be judged not just for his actions but also for his ideals. In fact, Paul suggests that God's judgment is primarily a positive judgment. Paul wrote, "...*then everyone will receive his praise from God.*" God sees more good in us than we or others see in ourselves!

At the same time, today's readings suggest three important qualities for Christians. Paul suggests that the most important quality of servants of Christ is that we be trustworthy. In today's Gospel, Jesus reminds us that as his disciples we must not have divided hearts: we are to seek first God's kingdom and his righteousness. Finally, he encourages us not to worry and not to be anxious but to trust God.

In other words, pointing to the birds in the sky and the wild flowers, Jesus invites us to hope. Hope means that we are confident, we trust, that God will fulfill his promises because we believe that God is faithful. In our theology, there were always two sins against hope: despair and presumption. Despair is hopelessness. Despair affirms that we are worthless. In the Gospel of John, Jesus proclaimed that God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world but to save the world. In hope, we trust that Jesus never comes to judge but only to save.

My brothers and sisters, today's Liturgy challenges us to look at our understanding of God, our understanding of ourselves, and our understanding of God's judgment and to live lives of hope.