

Government Discrimination and Moral Injustice to Race, Religion and Life

It is always easier to speak about other people's character or status when they are not there, rather than in their presence. It is easier to lump all in a group rather than single out and face one person. And so it was with the disciples. It was easy to conjecture what others had said of Jesus and of course they could fall back on the fact that it wasn't their own idea, lest they be wrong. The first and last great prophets before Christ – Elijah and John the Baptist – were their responses. Jesus didn't deny that, but now brings the question home. That's all fine and good, but what about YOU? What is your conclusion? Who am I to you, asks the Lord.

Peter's response in Mark's Gospel acclaims Jesus as the *Christ*. Matthew records Peter spelling it out further: "You are Christ the Son of the Living God." The connection with divinity is unmistakable. In either case it is about the present awareness and honest appraisal of who Jesus is up to that time in his ministry. It was a challenge to step up and be counted. Remember - Judaism was monotheistic, allowing no other gods except Jahweh. And anyone claiming to be God was punished by death. Jesus was starting to get close to that and acknowledging such a thing could be construed as blasphemy. Jesus therefore began, only began to teach them, Mark states, about the Son of Man – a term designating a mysterious figure of supernatural powers recorded in the relatively recent Old Testament book of Daniel. But connected with that was the Way of the Cross, a bitter journey. Ending in ignominious death for Jesus.

And Peter did not like that! That was not the Messiah he just envisioned. It took some time for him and the others to reconstruct their model of the anticipated Messiah. For us we can reconstruct Jesus into a wonder worker that meets our needs, or says great and soothing, challenging and loving things. But the rejection, suffering, the ignominy of the Cross, Rome's worst torture - that's not exactly what Peter or we want. So Jesus just BEGAN to teach. It would take some time. The blind spot was understandable. But it did not represent God's plan, as strange as that must have seen after walking along with this miracle worker and crowd pleaser.

Now even after Easter there was still that unbelief. We are told this twice: when the women tell the story of Christ's appearance to them and in a condensed form of what was probably the Emmaus scene. In neither instance did the "other followers" - not yet called apostles - show a sign of belief. And then Jesus appears directly and reprimands them again, and to Thomas in the Gospel of John in his first unbelief.

They remained largely that way until the day of Pentecost, joined together and becoming the new Exodus community. Just as the Israelites had to forge together after the freedom from the bondage of Egypt, so the disciples were commanded to remain in prayer, becoming more community in the Lord after the break of the bondage of sin Calvary accomplished and Easter proved. But the pieces did not fall into place until Pentecost. The Body of Christ was that group, and in the presence of Mary, whom Luke makes clear in their midst.

We chose today's votive Mass of the Holy Spirit to celebrate the power God can and does give for those who persist in his plan. Pentecost is seen as a birthday of the Church, a beginning. But it is also the end of a gesta-

tion process which the disciples and Apostles needed to experience, even endure. Their faith was solidified even after Pentecost to be sure, what made the difference was the Gift of the Holy Spirit that fell upon these simple men, and a renewal of that Spirit already in Mary from her conception. In a real sense she was and remains the model for all to see as the culmination of a journey of faith. And before this took place it was necessary that the defection from the twelve be filled once again - Matthias replacing Judas who betrayed the Lord and despaired. In a few hours Peter who denied the Lord and repented would give his first homily of praise before a gathered crowd disposed to hearing the power of God working through a human instrument and acclaiming Christ. The Apostles were already on the streets proclaiming a word of justice, overcoming oppression and fulfilling Christ's command to teach in His Name - which the Holy Spirit will steer them with amazingly unexpected power.

The Holy Spirit gives us this power today in struggles to witness to the Lord Jesus Christ. In our Creed He is called the *Lord and Giver of Life*. These powerful words show Him as our Paraclete, one who goes to bat for you in the court of heaven and earth. That is, He is our Defense in a world where Satan and sin are the main Prosecutors. Against the Accuser, Satan. The Holy Spirit enters our being, body and soul, at Baptism with Sanctifying Grace. We are born again in Christ through the Spirit. He continues to drive us outward of self and comfort zone. For 2000 years and holding...

In James' letter today we are reminded and urged to look beyond that comfort zone as well, in our care for the poor and in not discriminating behavior. Certainly the Holy Spirit plays a role in urging us to defend and help those who are less fortunate, or without the choices we enjoy.

Saying “*Stand there*” or “*Sit at my feet*” have you not made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil designs?

If you show partiality you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors.

Let's look at those phrases in light of the gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. On one hand drawing distinctions among people and organizations does not necessarily imply discrimination, but when there is injustice we are called to right the wrong. In our times, back in the 1960s we marched with other Christians to protest racial discrimination which lingered on in parts of the country. This year marks the 50th anniversary of the passage of the Civil Rights Act which changed much of that ugly picture where Blacks were sent, to the back of the bus, like the discrimination James' letter alludes to, and in municipalities where water fountains were designated Colored / White. Where segregation as a matter of principle was routine in public places and certainly schools. And where Black churches were bombed during services.

To be sure we can find other examples in other northern cities where similar attitudes reared ugly heads perhaps without the drama and blatant discrimination found in the South back then, and right here in Birmingham. Dr Martin Luther King's *Letter from a Birmingham Jail* is a classic document on balancing patience, prudence and political action to right grievances. That solidified forces to the 1963 March on Washington and the famous “I have a dream” cry at the Lincoln Memorial. Which in turn greatly influenced the passing of the Civil Rights Law to change the climate, some instantly, most little by little. Law can change discrimination, it can influence hearts to betterment even though lots more needs further attention.

However there is another **discrimination** that reared its head shortly afterwards, when the Supreme Court wrote off protection, not of equal social footing, but of life itself, to another category of humans: the **pre-born**. In 1973 the Court decided that in various stages, through artificial non-biological terms called trimesters, a growing human could be expended with, cut off, aborted. And government leaders, senate and house members vote to maintain that killing, while courts rationalize on a flimsy postulate that these tiny humans are not recognized as **persons**. That reversal of social thought hearkens back chillingly to the US Supreme Court's Dred Scott decision which gave the court opinion that the Black man was not a person either. This involved The United States fighting our costliest war in terms of **persons** dead, both Black and White combatants in the War Between the States with some 600,000 casualties on both sides. After the carnage, human rights regardless of color were codified into Law in the 13th 14th 15th Amendments, almost a hundred years before the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

The civil rights movement of our day is the greatest grass roots struggle to end the greatest discrimination of all – that against the unborn. God help us, without the bloodshed of a war or violence of any sort. It may mean strong civil disobedience. More than discrimination it is elimination a genocide, and in numbers far greater than property rights or non-lethal freedom discrimination found in other struggles. As it stands, unborn children have no rights today. In fact anyone under the age of 41 didn't have legal protection for the first nine months of your lives until you were born. We are seeing further **discriminatory** approaches with those who would push legal killing even months after birth. If that sounds horrific today, do we forget how legal abortion across the board sounded to our national ears in 1973? Personhood is a means to assure protection, even this today has its pros and cons in securing.

But in the meantime we need to ask the question: if what is growing in the womb is a human being, do you know of any human being that are not persons? We need to allow the simple logic of that reach our hearts and make this the civil rights effort of today. Non-discrimination against pre-born, even as we maintain and champion non-discrimination in other rightful areas already protected by law.

On another front we see an encroachment, a ***discrimination*** into ***religious freedom***. Again by the government. It's ironic that when the President speaking about human dignity at a recent prayer breakfast said this:

History shows that nations that uphold the rights of their people, including the freedom of religion, are ultimately more just and more peaceful and more successful. Nations that do not uphold these rights sow the bitter seeds of instability and violence and extremism. So freedom of religion matters to our national security.

These are noble sounding words, put in the context of defending religious liberty globally where there is gross discrimination to the point of killing those who have no rights other than the state religion, predominantly Islam. Catholics have been suffering in this world-wide discrimination from the time of Roman empire to the present, both emanating from established Christian nations (France, Spain, Mexico, Russia) and non-Christians (Middle East, northern Africa and China to name just the big areas). SO addressing human intolerance and religious persecution by foreign government and by the president of our country is welcome.

But does he not realize that these words fly in the face of what is taking place on a discriminatory level in this country, which was similar to what gave rise of totalitarian regimes in recent history? Namely, that a court,

government, or executive order encroaches on the same religious freedom in THIS country. And brought about and insisted on by his policy? I am referring to the ***discrimination*** against the Catholic Church and other bodies who find it intrusive that institutions under its aegis such as hospitals and schools now need to carry an insurance policy providing free contraceptives and abortion producing drugs, a demand which runs counter to the Gospel of Life and the commandments.

You may have noted that the ***Little Sisters of the Poor*** were challenged on this recently, and we congratulated them and their legal counsel in staying the hand of the government's HHS mandate ordering religious-affiliated bodies to provide for these drugs in their insurance policies. I also look forward to complete legal victory of ***Priests for Life***, the fourth of many— schools, hospitals, industry – to resist this infringement by filing suit against the HHS mandate and the administration promoting it. You can follow the status of our lawsuit spelled out in our website at priestsforlife.org. It's important to galvanize effort to put pressure on the government so it stops interfering with what a church body chooses. This is clearly unconstitutional. The President also spoke about human dignity in his Prayer Breakfast speech saying: “***Central to that dignity is freedom of religion – the right of every person to practice their faith how they choose.***” Yet his own HHS mandate prevents countless americans from practicing the moral tenets of their faith in the way they choose.

As a society of believers we cannot be content with the government restricting our freedom to a house of WORSHIP here. Religion, as shown on Pentecost, as shown in Mary's Visitation, goes outside of comfort zones and sacred spaces largely to build God's work in public areas that include further efforts actually to ***stop discrimination*** against others and

to promote justice and freedom. Under God, not just for some but for all, born and unborn, regardless of color, creed and capability.

O Holy Spirit, You fired up the hearts and minds of the Apostles with a new understanding of Christ's Passion, Death and Resurrection and You drove them forth into the world to roll back discrimination and look to justice through divine guidance. Now fire up our hearts to be courageous in defending what is rightfully ours, for the vulnerable poor, for the discarded and for the pre-born who have no choice even whether they are to live or not. May we end discrimination in the womb, in the workplace, in the hospital ward, in the color of skin, and against religious freedom by any government. And We trust in You! In Jesus Name we pray. Amen