

Reflection for the 30th Sunday of Ordinary Time

“The Lord is a God of Justice, who knows no favorites.” Sirach 35:12

The first verse of our first reading this Sunday, taken from the Book of Sirach provides us with the foundation or starting point for all the readings that we have this Sunday. The first thought, the first statement in our readings this Sunday is that our God is a God of Justice. These three words can lead the reader in a direction that sets the tone for all the readings this Sunday. Sirach 35:12, is not the only place in sacred scriptures that refers to the God of Justice, there are 21 places in the Bible that refers to the God of Justice, the Hebrew word for justice, *mishpat*, appears 400 times in the Old Testament. So, seeing God as the God of Justice is not unique to the Book of Sirach. Today all our readings, in one way or another connect God with justice. Our First Reading from the Book of Sirach might be the most direct in connecting God with justice but all the readings this Sunday do connect God with justice in some form or manner. All our readings this Sunday also point out that our God has a love and concern for those who are in need, those who are hurting.

So, knowing that God is connected with the word *mishpat* (justice) 400 times in the Bible it might make sense to see how this word is defined in the Bible, in our modern world, and even the etymology of the word. The word justice in the Bible can be used to define a fundamental attribute of God's divine nature reflecting His righteousness, fairness, and moral integrity. Also, in the Bible we can see our just God allowing us to face the consequences of our choices, we can see this as our God punishing us so we can learn from our mistakes. He is just because even though He loves us He is willing to punish us for our sins, so that we can grow in faith. We can define justice in our modern world as being free from favoritism or self-interest or bias or deception or conforming with the established standards. In looking up the etymology of the word *just* we discover that the word comes from the proto-Indo-European word *yung* which means to be joining. The word *joust* also comes from the word *yung*, and can be defined as a tilting match, a mock combat between two mounted knights using lances. It is interesting to see how one word *yung* is the root of two very different words *just* and *joust*. In thinking of the God of Justice, we can view Him as virtuous and right which is one way that people define the God of Justice. Another way is to focus on the God of Justice as punishing us for our sins, so that we can grow in faith. Seeing the God of Justice as virtuous and willing to punish us is difficult to reconcile. How can our God be virtuous and punishing at the same time, it does not seem to make sense that the word *just* could provide us with both the idea of virtue and punishment. Knowing *just* and *joust* have no connection with each other, but for the fact that they have the same proto-Indo-European word *yung* as their root word, might be helpful. If we struggle with seeing the God of Justice as both virtuous and willing to punish us, perhaps we need to see the God of Justice in a new light.

Our Gospel reading this Sunday taken from the Gospel of Luke can help us see our God as the God of Justice in a new light. In the Gospel this Sunday we hear of Jesus addressing a parable to those who were convinced of their own righteousness. In the parable Jesus speaks of two men who go to the temple to pray, one the Pharisee is proud of all the good that he does, and the other a tax collector humbles himself before God recognizing his sins. At the end of the parable Jesus points out that the tax collector went home justified but the Pharisee did not. Our God, the God of Justice, provides us with the opportunity to head down the path of virtue or to choose the path that leads to just punishment. Because the tax collector humbled himself before God and knew he needed to become a better person he encountered the goodness of the God of Justice. The Pharisee on the other hand did not enter the Temple with a humble heart and so he chose to encounter the God of Justice that will help him learn from his pride. Our just and virtuous God wishes to be with us in this world and the next, but He has given us free will and so may we freely choose to humble ourselves before our loving God so that we can be with Him in this world and the next. May we also know that our just and loving God will allow us to learn from our mistakes, and when we turn back to Him, we will encounter the embrace of our loving and just God. We encounter this embrace every time we receive the Sacrament of Reconciliation with a contrite heart.