

1st Sunday of Advent, Year C

Fr. Samuel Springuel

28 November, 2021

1st Reading Jeremiah 33:14–16

Responsorial Psalm Psalm 25:4–5,8–9,10,14

2nd Reading 1 Thessalonians 3:12–4:2

Gospel Luke 21:25–28,34–36

The idea of justice has been in the news a whole bunch over the course of the past year. Just in the past couple of weeks alone, two legal cases which have become central to this discussion have come to a conclusion. Both cases hinged on the definition of “self-defense” and what responsibility the accused had for creating the circumstances which lead to them feeling a need to react with deadly force to a claimed threat on their lives. Each case had its own particular set of circumstances, its own particular questions of law, that made them uniquely about determining the guilt or innocence of the men who stood accused in each case. At the same time, however, the context in which the events which led to each trial took place meant that societal weight was attached to these cases. For too long, our so-called “justice system” has systematically denied justice to some communities. These cases, and the path each took to come to trial, were, to varying degrees, seen as emblematic of this history and thus their verdicts were freighted with implications on the progress our society has made towards our ideal of “justice for all.”

Justice has been defined by the philosophers as “giving to each one their due” and is classified as one of the four cardinal virtues, those “hinges” on which the good life swings. Without the virtue of justice, that is the ability to determine what is due to another and then the power to render that to them, a person cannot be a good person. By extension, a society cannot be a good society if it does not exercise justice in its collective actions. It is thus essential that we, both individually and as a society, work on becoming more just in our actions. Justice, like the other virtues, is not some static property that we either have or don’t have. It’s not even some sliding scale that allows us to say we are more just now than we were at some other time. Justice is a habit of action. It is something that we do, and must do regularly. Even if we never act unjustly, never are deliberately malicious, we are not just people if we do not use justice to guide our daily actions.

It should be noted, however, that while justice is a human endeavor, something open to improvement through our own efforts, its origin, like that of all virtues, is divine. Jeremiah’s prophecy points to the LORD as the “root of justice” and as Christians we recognize in this a reference to Christ. Jesus is our

Just Lord, the one who, in the words of the psalmist, “guides the humble to justice.” It is, therefore, worth reminding ourselves of what divine justice looks like, so that we can translate that into our daily lives.

Divine justice is the King of Kings born in a stable and laid in a manger; the Lord of Lords who had not goose-down to cushion his head, but hay, and borrowed hay at that. Jesus was born as the least of his time were born, without a place even to call is own, away from home and soon to be on the run: a stranger, a refugee, in a strange land.

Divine justice is the man that babe grew into who wandered the roads of a backwater far away from the halls of power. Who preached not to the rich and powerful of his day, but the poor and needy. Who healed the sick, even when it wasn’t convenient, and dined with those whose faults indicated that they needed his presence, not that they deserved it.

Divine justice is the walk of an innocent man to his execution. It is the willingness to lay down one’s life to redeem the faults of another. It is the cry in the midst of agony not for vengeance on those responsible, but for mercy towards them. It is the pouring out of self that cares for others even in the midst of one’s own suffering.

Divine justice is the overcoming of death. It is the rising to new life in the glory of the Resurrection. It is the guiding hand that leads back those who have left and the welcoming embrace which celebrates their rejoining of the community.

Divine justice goes beyond human justice. It focuses not merely on what is deserved, but incorporates mercy and asks what will heal. Rigid condemnation and punishment may be sufficient to satisfy human justice, but divine justice bends them to serve the restoration of community, a community inclusive of all God’s children. Human justice is ever incomplete, imperfect, in progress. Divine justice is final, perfected, achieved in the coming of Christ once and for all. Make no mistake, we must continue to work for human justice; to look at the world around us and ask ourselves if what we see happening is right and good, if everyone is receiving what they are due. But as we pray for the rising of the Sun of Justice this Advent, we must act as God’s instruments in the world around us. Divine justice comes from God, is rooted in the coming of Christ that we now anticipate, is fully realized in the one and final sacrifice of the Cross, and made manifest in the Resurrection. These things have been given to us not so that we may hoard them as if they were our possession alone, but so that we might share them, pass them on to others and see them multiply 30-, 60-, or 100-fold.

As St. Paul tells us, we have been taught what we need to do. In some ways we are already doing it, but we have an everlasting obligation to do more. To go above and beyond the standards that human justice sets, and seek out the divine justice from which it flows. It is only by striving ever to do more that we will follow Jesus’s command to “not become drowsy.” It is only through our willing participation in the justice of God that we will “be vigilant at all times” and ready for the day when we “stand before the Son of Man.”