

Injustice v. Inconvenience

29th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year C)

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Fr. Tony Davis

In today's world where everyone seems to be offended about everything, many people throw out the word 'injustice' for anything they believe interferes with how they want to live their lives. For some, their concerns are entirely legitimate. They are victims of injustice or right in calling for accountability. For others, their concerns are more about protecting their status, privileges, or comfort. When they feel threatened, they quickly speak out. As Christians, how do we know what is a true injustice from what is perhaps an inconvenience?

Our Gospel reading for this weekend is a story about knowing true injustice. The key insight is that injustice is not just about the facts of the case, vital as they are, but also about the people involved. Notice that the one calling for justice in the parable was a widow. Widows were one of the three groups of people, along with orphans and foreigners, commonly defined by the Bible as disadvantaged. None of these groups had protection, stability, or a safety net. Yet, the widow in today's Gospel persevered in calling for justice 'for a long time' and finally got it without resorting to violence.

Knowing the backgrounds of the people involved in various issues can be a significant factor in deciphering between an injustice and an inconvenience. This is much different than the way many of us understand justice. We are much more like the judge in the parable, a man who neither "feared God nor respected any human being." Following the Ancient Greeks, many of us believe that justice is blind. In other words, the merits of the facts of the case decide whether an injustice has been committed and the people involved are highly irrelevant. While blind justice is a great ideal, we know that our human reality is much more complex. People carry within them a history, their social status, and their resources (or lack thereof). Because of this, the Bible's understanding of justice is not blind, but rather eye opening. It sees everything, most especially the people involved.

To illustrate why the people behind various issues are important, I want to give one example from moral theology. We all know that the 7th commandment forbids stealing: 'Thou shall not steal.' Is it always and everywhere the case that stealing is wrong? All of us would likely say 'yes.' The moral answer, however, is 'most likely yes, but also that it depends on the person doing the stealing.' Following the Church Fathers and the Christian tradition, Vatican II reiterated our teaching on distributive justice. It stated, "everyone has the right to possess a sufficient amount of the earth's goods for themselves and their family." It goes on to say, "persons in extreme necessity are entitled to take what they need

from the riches of others." (*Gaudium et Spes*, 69) It is interesting to note that Pope Leo included this very same reference in his latest document, *Dilexit Te*, that came out earlier this month. Those with plenty of riches tend to make an injustice out of what is really an inconvenience to them whereas those experiencing true injustice are likely to lose almost everything they have.

We can better tell an injustice from an inconvenience by listening to the disadvantaged people in our world.

What are the pressing injustices in our societies today? How can these true injustices help us work through our inconveniences?

As we continue with this mass, let us pray that we may take off our blindfolds and open our eyes to all the modern-day orphans, widows, and foreigners who have a much better sense of injustice than most of us. As it turns out, the judge in the parable was not dishonest for giving in to the widow. God was finally allowing him to understand Biblical justice. May this same God who sides with the disadvantaged help all of us to secure the rights of all those who call out to him day and night.