

“You shall warn them for me. If I tell the wicked, ‘O wicked one, you shall surely die’, and you do not speak out to dissuade the wicked from his way, the wicked shall die for his guilt, but I will hold you responsible for his death.” God tells us that we are our brother’s keeper; we have a responsibility to build a moral and just society by proclaiming God’s ways to the world. This is the point of St Paul’s words, “Owe nothing to anyone, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law”. True Christian love, is the key that unlocks the shackles of sin that bind the human heart and opens the gates of heaven because true Christian love is a genuine concern for the welfare of another. It is sacrificial and unconditional, it is lived not merely spoken and it is continual not intermittent. It is a love so deep that it calls us to correct our brother when he sins, but to correct him with love and in such a way as to bring him to see the wisdom and the good of God’s ways.

Disputes are bound to happen, but a Christian is called to seek a solution that involves more than merely winning an argument, a Christian is called to seek justice. Justice has nothing to do with punishment or revenge; rather, it seeks to give to another that which is owed to him and what is owed is sometimes fraternal correction. The ancient Hebrew understanding of justice was an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth; proportionality in obtaining vengeance. But vengeance is not justice, for where there is no love, where there is no mercy, where there is no charity there is no justice; justice is about correction, not revenge. What Jesus is calling us to is a higher understanding of God’s justice, a justice that is based on a genuine concern for the well being of another. The commandment to “love your neighbor as yourself” appeared first in the ancient book of Leviticus, long before it appeared on the human lips of Jesus. Jesus’ new commandment to ‘love one another as I have loved you’ is not new news, it is old news proclaimed with the perfection of the cross.

Jesus' words in the gospel are clear: when someone sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. What he is saying is to be reconciled with your brother and do not to allow hatred to dwell in your heart, do not harbor grudges. Elsewhere St. Paul will say: "Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not make room for the devil." It is in harboring grudges that we commit grievous sin, not in confronting sin. But we cannot confront sin and win over our brother unless we are motivated by love for our brother. To correct our brother in justice we must be moved by a genuine disinterested love for the person we seek to correct. All people, even those who do wicked things must be shown respect and love, for this is the only way – there is no other – by which wicked people can become good people. This is the foundation on which the Catholic Church's teaching about social justice is built. People are not born evil; they are made evil by being treated evilly. By the same token, they can only become good by being treated well. This does not mean allowing ourselves to be abused, for that is a sin against our own dignity as a child of God, but it does mean that we do not set ourselves up as judge, jury and executioner, which is what we do when we act out of anger.

Today's gospel is about the necessity of fraternal correction that is owed, in justice, when someone seriously transgresses the common good. Those who form a society have a mutual responsibility for the well being of each and every person in that society and that responsibility includes correcting those who stray or give bad example to others. When we do not speak out against evils in society we fail in our Christian duty and we allow evil to grow. Christian charity compels us first, to do no evil to our brother and second to reach out to our brother in need. It is insufficient to wag our finger at society and say that abortion is a mortal sin; in justice and charity we must work within society to eliminate the causes of abortion

and to help women deal appropriately with surprise pregnancies, only this fulfills the commandments of God. We must live moral lives, but we must also help others to live moral lives. Those who endanger the larger community by their harmful behavior or immoral agendas and those who stubbornly refuse to do what is right must be challenged and corrected, but our correction must be done with the charity that only flows from true Christian love.

Justice without mercy is merely tyranny, whether it occurs in a family, a city, a state, or a Church. True justice cannot exist without true Christian love that requires us to correct those who are in danger of losing their salvation and who endanger the life and well being of others. The relationship between the virtues of charity and justice is precisely the same as the relationship between the love of God for his children and the commandments of God to his children; you cannot have the one without the other. Our motive for everything we do must be love for God, for without him we can do nothing that is good. The fable of the good atheist is a lie, a myth, an oxymoron, a contradiction in terms. God alone is good. Only when we love God from the depths of our hearts can we love our neighbor enough to correct him with charity. God is love and without God there is no love, only self-interest, which is the very antithesis of love. That is why the first of all commandments is to “Love God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind and all your strength.” Only then is it possible to love our neighbor as our self.

So as we approach the table of the Lord, let each of us examine our hearts and ask God’s forgiveness for our own hard heartedness and let us also ask God for the grace to love him above all things, as Mary did, so that we might be able to challenge and correct the sins of society with charity and love, for we are our brother’s keeper.