

HE SHALL PROCLAIM JUSTICE TO THE GENTILES

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Homily of Thursday, 2nd Week of the Year, January 21, 2016
1 Samuel 18:6-9; 19:1-7; Psalm 55; Mark 3:7-12

Scripture quotations are from the RSV unless otherwise noted.

“Jesus withdrew with his disciples to the sea, and a great multitude from Galilee followed; also from Judea and Jerusalem and Idumea and from beyond the Jordan and from about Tyre and Sidon a great multitude, hearing all that he did, came to him” (Mark 3:7-8).

Here we see vast crowds now coming to Jesus. At first he was alone, when he went out to look for and call his disciples. But now his message has been heard, and his power to heal has become known. Word of mouth traveled fast, to all parts of Palestine, and even to places outside Israel, such as Tyre and Sidon and Idumea; and those individuals from all these parts who felt themselves drawn to him and to what he was saying and doing came to see him, to hear him speak, and, if they were sick, to touch him to be healed. And there were vast crowds of such individuals who came from all parts.

These great crowds came because he was truly speaking the word of God to them, a message that touched their hearts and drew them to him. He spoke to them a word of salvation from God, and his healings gave clear, verifiable external and physical evidence that he really was who he claimed to be, the Son of God (Mark 12:6), and that he really was now establishing the kingdom of God on earth (Mark 1:14-15).

St. Matthew, in his version of this passage, quotes Isaiah 42:1-4, saying that Jesus' attracting, preaching to, and healing so many people is the fulfillment of Isaiah 42:1-4. Matthew says: “This was to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah: ‘Behold, my servant whom I have chosen, my beloved with whom my soul is well pleased. I will put my Spirit upon him, and he shall proclaim *justice* to the Gentiles. He will not wrangle or cry aloud, nor will any one hear his voice in the streets; he will not break a bruised reed or quench a smoldering wick, till he brings *justice* to victory; and in his name the Gentiles will hope’” (Matthew 12:17-21).

Jesus is indeed the fulfillment of this prophecy. He is the Suffering Servant of the Lord, the Son of God (Mark 12:6), for the word for “servant” in Greek (*pais*) can also mean “son.” And it is God who is saying, “Behold my servant [*pais*, servant or son] ... my beloved with whom my soul is well pleased. I will put my Spirit upon him, and he shall proclaim justice to the Gentiles” (Matthew 12:18).

Justice or righteousness is a key biblical concept that comes to mean salvation in many places, such as Isaiah 61:10: “I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my soul shall exult in my God; for he has clothed me with the garments of *salvation*, he has covered me with the robe of *righteousness*, as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.”

This is indeed Jesus’ mission to the world, to bring it God’s salvation, God’s justice and righteousness. He will bring it beyond Judaism, to the Gentiles. “He shall proclaim *justice* to the *Gentiles*” (Matthew 12:18). “He brings *justice* to victory; and in his name will the *Gentiles* hope” (Matthew 12:20-21). This is the mission of the Servant of the Lord. And Jesus Christ fulfills it.

But in what sense does he bring justice and righteousness to the Gentiles, to the nations, *ad gentes*? He does so in a profound sense, not, for now at least, in seeing to it that the earth has just kings and just laws so that everyone is treated properly, correctly, and justly, but in a much deeper sense that Gentile sinners will themselves be declared to be just and righteous by God, that sinners who were not right with God will, by divine decree, be declared now to be right with him and to be righteous and holy in his sight, even though they were unrighteous sinners.

Actually Scripture says that for someone to justify or declare a sinner to be righteous is an abomination: “He who justifies the wicked and he who condemns the righteous are both alike an abomination to the Lord” (Proverbs 17:15). But that is precisely what this Servant of the Lord will do. This is how he “shall proclaim justice to the Gentiles” (Matthew 12:18).

But in his case it will not be an abomination, precisely because this Servant will take the sins of the Gentile sinners upon himself (2 Corinthians 5:21; Isa. 53:6) and suffer their chastisement for them (Isa. 53:5). In this way their sins will be expiated for them by Jesus, whose sacrificial death on the cross as a sin offering will make atonement for all the sins of the world, thus enabling God now to do in all justice what Proverbs 17:15 says is an abomination, a miscarriage of justice, namely he will justify the ungodly (Rom. 4:5), declaring them to be righteous.

Since Christ satisfies divine justice for us by himself suffering instead of us what is justly required that we should suffer for our sins, God can now declare us unjust sinners now to be just, righteous, and holy in his sight, without compromising his own justice.

This is how he proclaims justice to the Gentiles: he declares them henceforth to be just and righteous if they accept him with faith. And this is, furthermore, a matter of faith “apart from works” (Romans 4:6), for if it were based on works, the Gentile sinners could never have been declared righteous, for as far as their works go, they were not righteous, but sinners.

However, through their faith they are connected to Christ, whose death as a sin offering makes atonement for their sins before God, and so their sins have been expiated, and God has been propitiated by the very propitiation that he himself has sent to us to be propitiated by, namely “Jesus Christ, whom God set forth as a propitiation by His blood, through faith” (Romans 3:25 NKJV), “for He Himself is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole world” (1 John 2:2 NKJV).

This, then, is how Jesus fulfills the work of the Suffering Servant of the Lord of Isaiah 42:1-4 and Isaiah 53. He does so by becoming a sin offering to make atonement for all human sins. This is because “*he* was wounded for *our* transgressions, *he* was bruised for *our* iniquities: the chastisement of *our* peace was upon *him*; and with *his* stripes *we* are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the Lord hath laid on *him* the iniquity of *us all*” (Isaiah 53:5-6 KJV).

The Lord laid on him our iniquities and bruised him for them instead of bruising us for them. Indeed “the Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all” (Isaiah 53:6 KJV). Because *he* was chastised, *our* sins are justly atoned for and expiated, divine justice is propitiated by God himself, and peace and righteousness come to us.

We are in this way now regarded by God as righteous, and if it is God who so regards us, we are righteous indeed. The reason that God now regards us as righteous is because “the chastisement of our peace was upon him [the Servant, Christ]” (Isaiah 53:5 KJV). He paid our debt of punishment for our sins for us. He served our sentence for us, and so we are declared to be innocent, acquitted, absolved, and exonerated.

This is how Jesus proclaims justice to the Gentiles. This is how he justifies them. This is how he declares them to be just and righteous, and so indeed they now are, through their faith, which connects them to Christ and to his work of reparation for our sins on the cross.

This is how we who were not right with God become right with him. It is not by *our* effort or works, but by *his* work on the cross. Our part is *faith*, which connects us to him and thereby applies his reparation-making work on the cross to us. This is how God lifts his condemnation and wrath from us, and instead of these, reckons to us his own righteousness (Romans 4:3, 5, 23-24).