

The Twenty-Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time September 11, 2022

Marcion of Sinope was an early Christian believer in what today is Turkey. He was born just about fifty years after Jesus' death in 85 AD and died in 160 AD.

During his lifetime, he caused a lot of controversy because of his unusual teaching. When he read the Old Testament, he thought he saw there a God of anger and punishment whom he thought was totally different from the God of love and mercy that Jesus Christ preached. He concluded that the God of the Old Testament and the God of the New Testament were not the same God, but two rival gods. So, he began to teach people that they should not read the Old Testament because it was about an inferior, legalistic God who wanted blood sacrifices. Instead, they should be praying to the God of Jesus Christ who forgives and saves us from our sins.

Many early Christian leaders were quick to condemn Marcion. They pointed out that the God of the Old Testament and the God of the New Testament were the same God. While it's true that there are a lot of passages in the Old Testament that depict God as severe - such as today's first reading - there are also many other passages that speak about God's tenderness. And while the New Testament does describe God as a loving Father who wants to save sinners - such as today's gospel - there are also many passages where Jesus warns sinners who will not repent that they will be punished.

So, the God of Jesus Christ is the same God who led the people out of slavery in Egypt and revealed Himself to Moses. The Old Testament is the word of God just as the New Testament is the word of God. We need both testaments if we are to have a full picture of the God of Jesus Christ.

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Why is this important? Because it will help us when we read difficult passages in the Bible like today's first reading. It seems as though God's anger is so great that, if not for Moses, He would have killed all the Israelites in the desert. How can we make sense of this reading, especially in light of the tender God whom Jesus speaks about in today's gospel?

The first reading takes place after God has led the people out of slavery in Egypt. They did not know how to live as a free people. For all their lives, and all their parents and grandparent's lives, they had been told what to do by their slave masters. They made very few decisions for themselves. Therefore, they had to learn what it meant to be a free people. That is why the journey through the desert took forty years. They were not ready to conquer the Promised Land and live there in peace. God had to train them how to live as a free people. That was the reason for all the rules He instructed them to live by.

Think of it this way. Parents do not have the same rules for their three-year-olds as they do for their older children. Toddlers need to be watched over constantly to make sure they don't hurt themselves or get into trouble. They don't have the ability to make good decisions the same way older children do. As their children grow in age and maturity, parents are able to give them fewer rules and more freedom.

The same is true with God and His people. As the people grew in their ability to understand and live God's law, He was able to give them fewer rules. That is why there are so many rules in the Old Testament like the dietary and ceremonial rules which we no longer follow. It is not because somehow God has changed. It is because we have progressed as a people

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in our understanding of God and of our dignity as His sons and daughters.

Also, we should always understand God's anger in light of His justice. God is passionately in love with His people and He reacts with anger at anything that threatens our health, safety, and welfare. Our biggest enemy is sin. So, sin arouses God's anger because it hurts us and separates us from Him. He is not so much angry with us but hurt at seeing how our sinful choices have damaged us. And so, He is anxious to set things right so that we can be healed. That is what's happening in today's first reading. Worshiping false gods will lead the people of Israel into all kinds of problems throughout their history. So, God wants to put an end to it out of love for His people.

Moses' prayer on behalf of the people is also a lesson for us. We know that God loves sinners, and that all of us are sinners. He wants us all to be converted, to discover how much He loves us, and to let that love transform our lives. So many people resist the love of God, however. Like the people in today's first reading, they might be pursuing the false gods of power, pleasure, and wealth. Or they might have so much hurt and disappointment in their hearts that they cannot believe in a God of love and mercy.

That is where we come in. Like Moses, we should be praying for God to show mercy to sinners so that they will open their hearts to Him and be changed. There are many ways we can do this. The three shepherd children of Fatima made sacrifices and offered them up for the conversion of sinners. We can do the same by going without food or other pleasures for the sake of sinners. We all have family and friends who have stopped practicing their faith. Prayer and sacrifice might be the only way of reaching them. God is

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inviting us to join Him in opening up more and more hearts to His great love and mercy.

Sin separates us from God and it causes pain to us and to our relationships. That is why God is so passionate in opposing it. Because He loves us, He is also quick to welcome us back into His friendship when we have fallen away from Him. If sin has hardened your heart and caused you pain, give God a chance to reach in and heal you. If it has been years since you've been to confession, don't put it off another day. You will meet a God of love there who will forgive you and set you back on a path of joy and peace. And let us all join together in prayer throughout this week that sinners like us will turn back to God and experience His love and mercy.