

THE TWENTY-FIRST SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME, Year C

Is 66:18-21; Ps 117:1,2; Heb 12:5-7,11-13; Lk 13:22-30

Introduction

Liturgical Use. Heb 12:5-7,11-13 is proclaimed on the Twenty-First Sunday of Ordinary Time, Year C. A longer passage which includes all of the above verses, Heb 12:4-7,11-15 is used on Wednesday of the Forth Week of Ordinary Time, Year I. An even longer passage, Heb 12:2-13 is recommended as an option for the special Mass for refugees and exiles.

The Historical Context. This advice was written to a community that had wandered from God's ways and grown lax in the practice of their faith, and was undergoing a period of intense suffering and hardship that they could not understand.

Commentary

Heb 12:5: You have also forgotten the exhortation addressed to you as sons: "My son, do not disdain the discipline of the Lord or lose heart when reproved by him.

Forgotten exhortations. The people had been taught in the ways of the Lord previously, but they were no longer mindful of what they had been taught.

A Wise Saying. In the Book of Proverbs there is a piece of advice: "The discipline of the Lord, my son, disdain not; spurn not his reproof. For whom the Lord loves, he reproves, and he chastises the son he favors" (Prov 3:11-12).

Discipline. Discipline usually is the consequence of disobedience, and it is intended to correct or instruct, and sometimes to punish. This frequently is the discipline of parents. The parents instruct their small child, "Play in the yard, not in the street." The instruction is not given to be harsh or unreasonable, but out of their desire to keep their child safe. The child forgets, ignores, or defies the instruction and plays in the street and is almost hit by a car. The parents correct the child with a re-teaching, scolding, and a consequence, "discipline," "go to your room for half an hour." The child goes away crying, upset. The discipline is not given to be mean but out of love and concern. It is "tough love." It would be unloving for the parents to ignore the irresponsible behavior. Sometimes parents can be heard saying, "This hurts me more than it hurts you." Loving parents have no desire whatsoever to punish to their children, and it hurts them to do so, but sometimes parents need to use stronger measures to help their children obey and do the right thing.

God as disciplinarian. God sometimes is like a parent who needs to discipline a child. God is good, and God wants nothing but the best for us. God is not mean, and takes no joy whatsoever in being stern, tough, or demanding. Yet, what we think and do matters to God. If we have a bad attitude or if we make bad choices, God is disappointed and saddened, offended, hurt, irritated, and sometimes angered. God gives us

tremendous freedom, and God gives us plenty of room to make mistakes without bad consequences. It is amazing how often we get off easy. But God loves us so much that God is unwilling to overlook sinful behavior indefinitely. Initially, God kindly offers gentle reminders, but the sinner frequently is not paying attention or refuses to take the hint. As sin grows and as the sinner becomes more obstinate, sometimes God needs to take more drastic measures to get a person's attention and secure their cooperation.

Discipline, Another Explanation. Discipline may also be defined as hardship or suffering, not punishment. "The traditional reason given maintains that suffering is the inevitable consequence of imprudent or sinful behavior. However, in situations where no fault can be found, this explanation is seriously wanting. A second and perhaps less satisfying reason given suggests that suffering is really a form of discipline intended to make one strong. The second explanation does not so much address the cause of the misfortune as it suggests an attitude that will enable the one suffering to make the most of the difficult situation. It is the second explanation that is being advanced here" (Bergant, D., *Preaching the New Lectionary C*, 339).

Hardship to Make One Strong, A Reflection. This sort of discipline is part of the training and toughening process. Examples include basic training in the army or "hell week" for a football team. The tasks are extremely difficult and demanding, so hard that they may seem like suffering. The regimen is rigorous, not to inflict pain or punishment, but to make the person stronger, more fit, more proficient, or wiser. A drill instructor or coach who lets the soldier or athlete off easy is doing the person no favor. A person who is soft is not ready for the challenges that are sure to come.

Heb 12:6: For whom the Lord loves, he disciplines; he scourges every son he acknowledges."

Love and discipline. It is unloving to ignore wrongdoing, to fail to give proper instruction or good advice when there is confusion or error, to allow sloppiness or laziness, or to leave a person unprepared for a major challenge of the future. Loving discipline addresses problem situations, attempts to help and guide when a person or a group is off track, and is more constructive than punitive. It is more about logical consequences and Reality Therapy than it is about punishment.

Love and discipline. Discipline, correction, or instruction that is delivered unlovingly is contrary to Jesus and the gospel. The proper intention for discipline is to teach, guide, and be of assistance for another person or group, and it must never be a destructive outlet for anger or frustration.

Heb 12:7: Endure your trials as "discipline;" God treats you as sons. For what "son" is there whom his father does not discipline?

Endure. Endurance is a virtue. Hardships and trials are extremely difficult to bear whether in the short term or over a long period of time. Jesus demonstrates endurance with his own passion and death on the Cross. He endures his suffering in

obedience to his Father for our sake. Trials can make a person stronger spiritually. Endurance demonstrates the depth of a person's faith. It also earns grace.

As sons? A major cultural note. Sons are the focus, not daughters, and this reflects the cultural reality. To understand the author's mentality, it is important to "review the process by which young boys were raised from infancy to puberty. A wife was not fully integrated into her husband's family until she bore a son. The birth of a son was cause for great joy. Boys were raised by all the women with little or no male presence until the age of puberty. They were pampered, pleased, and in modern terms quite spoiled. Lacking male role models during this time of life, they entered puberty with a sense of gender-ambiguity. At puberty, without the assistance of a rite of passage, boys were pushed unceremoniously into the harsh and hierarchical world of men. They ran back to the comforts of the women's world, but the women would simply return them to the men's world. Boys [were] physically disciplined; girls [were] not" (Pilch, J., *The Cultural World of the Apostles*, C,103, 104).

Heb 12:11: At the time, all discipline seems a cause not for joy but for pain, yet later it brings the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who are trained by it.

Pain. Athletes are so aware of this that there is a saying, "No pain, no gain."

At the time, yet later. The positive results of discipline do not come at the time of the trial but later. A well-trained soldier is able to achieve their mission. A well-trained athlete performs at a much higher level and increases the chance of success or victory. A virtuous Christian is on the road to greater inner peace in this life, and eternal glory in the life to come.

The peaceful fruit of righteousness. When a person does the right thing, even if great suffering is involved, the person will enjoy a sense of peace, even in the midst of hardship, knowing that they are right with God.

Heb 12:12: So strengthen your drooping hands and your weak knees.

Strengthen. It is imperative to get in shape spiritually with both strength and endurance training. It is good discipline to work hard and prepare thoroughly for the difficult tasks that are to come.

Drooping hands, weak knees. Hands on the knees are signs of fatigue and exhaustion, the result of strenuous exercise, intense physical exertion (see Job 4:3; Is 35:3). The author uses athletic training as the framework for discipline. In sports the recipe for success is when preparation meets opportunity. Motivators often say, "The harder I work, the luckier I get."

Basic Training or Pre-Season Camp – A Reflection. We are not soldiers disciplining ourselves to prepare for battle. We are not athletes disciplining ourselves to prepare for a game or a race. We are Christians. Our discipline and hardships are to

strengthen us for the battles of life, to run the race of life from birth to our last breath, to conquer evil, to run in straight paths, to run in ways of righteousness, to be virtuous, to be strong in the ways of the Lord.

Heb 12:13: Make straight paths for your feet, that what is lame may not be dislocated but healed.

Straight paths. The Lord, almighty God, the Shepherd “guides me in right paths for his names sake” (Ps 23:3b). “Even though I walk in the dark valley I fear no evil, for you are at my side” (Ps 23:4a). If we walk with God, and if we let God be our guide, we will always walk in straight paths.

Lame. The “reference to ‘lame’ may be the author’s insinuation that the community to whom the letter is addressed needs to ‘shape up’” (Pilch, J., *The Cultural World of the Apostles C*, 104).