

7th Sunday in Ordinary Time (C)
(1Samuel 26:2.7-9.12-13.22-23 / Luke 6:27-38)
20.02.2022
Do not judge

“Do not judge and you will not be judged yourselves.”

This verse is often quoted in religious and non-religious circles, it has become something of a popular saying. Its meaning is perhaps not just as obvious as it seems. We have to ask ourselves: is Jesus truly asking us not to judge?

The reality is that we all judge all the time. Through our senses we are in contact with a constant flow of information from the world which surrounds us. Our brain is forever evaluating all this data according to our educational background, our psychology, our value system and our interests. Our growth and our survival depend a lot upon our capacity to judge and to judge correctly. To say to somebody that he or she is a bad judge of character is not a compliment.

In the chapters which follow the passage we heard today, Jesus says to Simon who assesses a situation well: “You have judged rightly” (Lk 7:43). Elsewhere he asks those who are unable to discern the signs of the time: “Why do you not judge for yourselves what is right?” (Lk 12:57)

Clearly for Jesus, the statement “do not judge” has to be properly understood.

In order to discern what Jesus means, we need to remember a saying found in the writings of St Paul: “We know only in part (...), now we see in a mirror, dimly.” (1Co 13:9.12)

None of us sees the whole of the picture of our lives and the lives of those around us. None of us has access to the deep recesses of other people’s hearts and minds. The conclusion is that most of our judgements are imperfect, limited and susceptible to be challenged and corrected. That does not mean that we are completely unable to judge, but the point is that we have to be humble about the fact that we can rarely claim to have a definitive word on people or events.

In fact Jesus himself gives us a glimpse into what he means when he says “do not judge.” Immediately after these words he adds, “do not condemn.” So if we can sometimes judge, if we have to judge, we should never condemn.

Obviously here Jesus does not deal with the legal system which is in place in our country. He knows that we need courts and magistrates. In our Gospel reading, Jesus is dealing with the tribunal that we have in our hearts and minds where we are the ones who make the laws and the ones who apply them.

For us the most common sentence we impose on others may take on many forms: we can decide to reject and exclude others from our lives, we can keep others prisoners of their mistakes and failures, branding them and preventing them from moving on; or again we can deprive others from the intellectual, spiritual or cultural food they need, and so we can perpetuate situations of discrimination. In all these cases the person, or the group has been demonised, considered as irredeemable, unable to change and grow.

While most of the time, we do not impose a physical death penalty we can nonetheless impose upon others a form of death, we can put hope to death. While we may not put others into a physical prison building, we can lock them into a present that has no future.

The problem is that, if my sister or brother has no future, then, in a way, I have no future either. The Orthodox theologian John Zizioulas believes that “it is communion which

makes beings 'be': nothing exists without it, not even God." In our family or friendship circles, in our Christian communities, to judge and to condemn prevents us from being in communion with one another and so we become less ourselves, we cannot fully be who we are called to be.

In all this, what matters is our intention: do we judge out of our proud and wounded ego in order to confirm our self-righteousness or do we judge out of concern for the other and for the common good in order to heal and restore true communion between us?

There is an art that we must develop if we want not to become judgemental and self-righteous people: it is the art of dialogue, of attentive listening. Often we judge and condemn others because we think we know more and better than they do. We do not try to understand where they come from. Our values and belief systems are so rigid that they do not allow us to meet others where they are. When judgement is informed by the hard work of dialogue, when it is grounded in reality, not in clichés and stereotypes, then it can open new doors and allow us to grow in better mutual understanding.

However what is absolutely necessary is humility. To come back to what Metropolitan Zizioulas wrote, it seems to me that what we need to really believe is that this brother, this sister, this woman or man that we do not know and whom we think we know too well actually matters to us. We need one another in order to be.

I am not self-sufficient, I cannot do it on my own, I must be humble enough to realise that I need you to be me. To judge and condemn can temporarily boost my pride and sense of self-sufficiency but in the long term it makes my humanity shrink, it makes me small and lonely, it mars the image and likeness of God within me.

As institutions and as persons, we have to be careful not to take the place of God. This makes life difficult for us and for others. Life is complicated enough, let us not add to those difficulties by judging and condemning one another.

Who are we to judge? Who are we to condemn?