

Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Year A

Ex 22:20-26

Ps 18:2-3, 3-4, 47, 51

I Thess 1:5c-10

Mt 22:34-40

Joseph S. Mostardi, O.S.A.

When I was a student at Bonner, I would volunteer at St. John's Orphanage on weekends to help mentor and tutor these poor unfortunate children who did not have any parents. The concept of an orphan was a bit foreign to me. I realized quickly how fortunate I was and why we were challenged to reach out to be of service to them. As time went on, the entire notion of orphans in the United States seems to have faded. In a recent edition of *National Geographic*, Africa was the focal point. I would not have normally paid much attention to this but I was about to venture to South Africa with our six Augustinian Volunteers to set up their work site for the next year. I started to read through the various articles until I stumbled on the one about AIDS orphans. Immediately my mind returned to my teenage years and I recalled the various opportunities I had to assist or companion the orphans at St. John's. In reading further, I found the situation in Africa quite different. The statistics are staggering. In the continent of Africa there are 15 million AIDS orphans. Of these, 12.5 million are in South Africa. How this number would translate into reality for our volunteers was soon discovered. Upon our arrival we found that in one of our missions alone there are 57 AIDS orphans who have identified themselves by their registration in our elementary school. For the most part, since their parents have all died of the disease, their care is up to extended family.

Today in our Scriptures we hear about the care that must be given to widows and orphans since they are some of the most vulnerable in society. The book of Exodus is very clear about the treatment of those who live on the margins of our global communities and calls upon the People of God to reach out to them so that they too can find their way to God even in the midst of their trials. In our own culture we talk about human rights and how they are so often abused. Yet there is even a lesson to be learned from Old Testament theology as our ancestors in faith called the people then and now to accountability when it comes to actually being neighbor to all, especially the most needy .

Jesus too invites us into a world that does not distinguish between race and culture. If we are to love God then we must also love our neighbor no matter what the circumstances. This commandment places all the other laws of both the Hebrew and Christian tradition in context. Obey this commandment and you will have no trouble with any of the others. Christ tried to make it simple. We may need to reverse the order in which we love, for it may be harder for us to love a God we cannot see, so we might first try to love our neighbor which includes those who are so very different from us. In the midst of war, we may find it hard to love those who are killing our sons and daughters serving in the armed forces but the law of Christ makes no distinction. Our Augustinian Volunteers may find it hard to accept each and every assignment they receive in South Africa, but if they are going to be true to their own commitment to serve the poor and needy, then they have to set aside whatever prejudice they might have in order to fulfill their

mission.

St. Paul commends the Thessalonians for their ability as one of the earliest Christian communities to adhere to the Word of God, despite the criticism they receive from their neighbors. Their example of what a faith community should be was a model for other communities just getting started and can be an example to us as we continually struggle with how to love God and our neighbor when there are so many cultural obstacles in our way.

National Geographic reacquainted me with the notion that there are still many orphaned children in the world who need someone to help them along the way. I actually met some of them while visiting our parish in Durban. The Scriptures this weekend only reinforced this understanding. How we treat one another is certainly reflective of how we see our God. What remains is, how does God see us?