

Since last December, the Catholic Church has been observing a Jubilee Year. In contemporary practice, these are observed every 25 years and provide special opportunities to make a pilgrimage to Rome. In the Hebrew Scriptures, the jubilee was celebrated every fiftieth year, after a series of seven cycles of every seventh year being a sabbatical, or a longer version of the sabbath observance on the seventh day. In the fiftieth year, God calls for the cancellation of debts, the release of prisoners, and a redistribution of the land which ultimately belongs to God. This cycle of sabbaths, sabbaticals and a jubilee was to ensure that there would never be permanent debt, permanent imprisonment or enslavement, or permanent poverty. There would always be time to look forward to a re-setting of the scales, a recalibration, the renewal of starting over.

In his inaugural sermon in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus describes himself as bringing about this year of favor, no longer limited to a period of 365 days. The terms of the jubilee became the priorities of his mission: setting people free. Over the course of history it became easier to spiritualize the concept of jubilee and shift all of the cost and burden of its observance onto God who cancels our sins and wipes the slate clean. Of course, this is consistent with the nature of God; but it wasn't meant to relieve human beings of this form of mercy and justice towards one another!

Each jubilee year now has a theme, and our present theme was chosen by Pope Francis who opened this Holy Year: hope does not disappoint! This morning's reading from Paul's Letter to the Romans gives us the context for that theme: all of the suffering that marks our earthly existence is temporary, and what God has in store for us is so much greater than any of our travails, so it will one day be clear to us how much our present trials are worthwhile in comparison to future glory. Hope always points us beyond the limits of our present vision, towards something beyond the horizon. In the meantime, Paul insists, we have the accompaniment of the Holy Spirit as our helper.

The certainty of our hope, "that all things work for the good of those who love God", does not allow us to be indifferent to suffering, injustice, and all of the conditions from which human beings long to be set free. On various occasions Pope Francis noted the common danger of losing hope because of our present circumstances: he referred to the Third World War being fought piecemeal (still very much in evidence), the destruction of our common home, the earth; the increase in

the numbers of migrants and refugees because of war and climate change, and the rejection of migrants and refugees by the wealthiest societies. He warned us of the ever-increasing isolation experienced by people at a time when we are more “connected” than ever. And of course, the oft-cited polarization, which convinces us that our differences make us enemies to each other and drive to us to exclude the other rather than allowing our differences to enrich us communally. How many mass shootings and acts of violence have we witnessed in the last week, the last month, the last year?—they are so frequent that we easily lose count.

We gather this morning both to celebrate and hopefully to recommit ourselves to the virtue of justice and to employing a system of law to sustain that justice. We strive to see this as God’s work and in service of God’s justice to the best of our abilities. We need a jubilee in the original sense to provide a re-set and to recalibrate the scales. We hope that our legal system can overcome its own dreadful flaws: unequal protection under the law, disproportionate incarceration of people of color, the unconscionable treatment of the undocumented and double-standards when it comes to accountability. The genius of our constitutional system depends on the separation of powers and we are all watching this separation coming undone in favor of authoritarianism. The hope that all will work together for the good in our political and legal system will require work and a direct, non-violent confrontation with the sources of corruption.

In the secular sense, many of us depend right now on the judicial system to set things right. And if the rot of corruption starts at the top, the grassroots legal community gathered here today is all the more important!

The Gospel passage that we heard comes from the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus stunned his hearers who had been accustomed to seeing the legal specialists, the scribes, and the Pharisees- an elite group priding themselves on strict observance of the law- as being the exemplars for interpreting God’s law. So when he told them- “your righteousness must surpass that of the scribes and Pharisees or you will not enter the Kingdom of heaven.” It was quite an expectation! And there follows a whole series of examples of the higher law that Jesus expects his disciples to follow. “You have heard it said- insert Torah commandment here-, but I say- insert higher standard...” It is not enough to merely avoid killing, but we must work for right relationships and promote reconciliation.

Sisters and Brothers, your work is important for the just and right ordering of society. May you live by and respond to that higher law and higher sense of righteousness.

Hope does not disappoint! I believe firmly that God will fulfill his promises. But the hope of eternal glory does not free us from the command to lift burdens, provide relief and make sure that the most vulnerable enjoy the same rights as the most powerful. When they don't, it is time for a re-set, a jubilee, a new beginning.