

The Twenty-first Sunday of Ordinary Time
(Year C)

<i>First Reading</i>	Isaiah 66:18-21
<i>Response</i>	Go out to all the world and tell the Good News.
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 117:1, 2
<i>Second Reading</i>	Hebrews 12:5-7, 11-13
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	I am the way, the truth and the life, says the Lord; no one comes to the Father, except through me.
<i>Gospel</i>	Luke 13:22-30

The 21st Sunday in Ordinary Time for Year C continues the Church's journey through the letter to the Hebrews, the last chapters of that letter with a reading from Chapter 12, verses 5-7 and 11-13. This reading is focused on the discipline of the Lord. Let's see what it has to say. Hebrews 12:5 says this:

And have you forgotten the exhortation which addresses you as sons?—

“My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor lose courage when you are punished by him. For the Lord disciplines him whom he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives.”

It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons; for what son is there whom his father does not discipline?

Then it skips down to verse 11.

For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant; later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.

Therefore lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, and

make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint but rather be healed.¹

So what is this passage about? Why does the Church give it to us? Well, the heart of this passage is that phrase, “the discipline of the Lord”, “the discipline of the Lord.” Now, what is that referring to? Well, the Greek word here for discipline is called *paideia* and it has two different connotations. It has a positive connotation and a negative connotation. The more negative connotation is that the word can be used to refer to punishment. So let me give you an example. From the book of Proverbs, the Greek translation of Proverbs 22:15, it says this:

Folly is bound up in the heart of a child,
but the rod of discipline [*paideia*] drives it far from him.

So you see there *paideia* being used to describe punishment of a child as a way of teaching them no longer to be foolish. However, the expression can also refer a little more positively to education or instruction. For example, in the Greek prologue to the book of Sirach, that's in the old Testament, we read these words:

When I came to Egypt in the thirty-eighth year of the reign of Eu-er'getes and stayed for some time, I found opportunity for no little instruction [*paideia*].

The author of Sirach here is not saying that he got spanked a lot whenever he went to the city. It means that he found opportunity for education and for instruction. So the word *paideia* can mean the punishment of a child that is meant to lead them to instruction or actual just education or instruction. And this is why we get the English word pedagogue, or pedagogy will be someone's philosophy of how to

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

teach. Well, a pedagogue is just that. It's an instructor. Someone who gives *paideia* is a pedagogue.

Now with that in mind, then go back to the letter to the Hebrews and the reading for today. So what Hebrews is describing here is not just the discipline of the Lord. To be quite literal, it's the pedagogy of God. How does God teach his children? Not just teach them the truth, but teach them how to live. And what Hebrews is saying here is that God teaches his children as children, like a father instructs his son. Not just through education, but through discipline.

So if you go back and you look, the passage for today is quoting a passage from the book of Proverbs. It's actually quoting Proverbs 3:11-12, saying

“do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor lose courage when you are punished by him.

Why?

For the Lord disciplines him whom he loves,
and chastises every son whom he receives.”

This is really the heart of the mystery that Hebrews is getting at for this reading today. Remember, the letter of the Hebrews appears to be written to an audience that is facing difficulties and trials and maybe even persecution. And one of the things that can happen when trials and tribulations come our way is that we can think, "Oh, I've been abandoned by God. God's punishing me because he doesn't love me and because he's forgotten me, or he is angry with me, or he's abandoned me." This is a very common, very natural response to difficulties and trials, sickness, whatever it might be, persecution in the Christian life. And Hebrews is saying that's an incorrect way to assess the situation. Just because you're experiencing difficulty, even just because you're being punished by God doesn't mean that he doesn't love you. In fact, the opposite is true.

He goes back to the book of Proverbs and says, just like a father punishes his child in order to instruct him, because he loves him, so too, the Lord “disciplines him whom he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives. It is for *paideia* that you have to endure.” It's for instruction, in other words, that you have to endure. “God is treating you as sons; for what son is there whom his father does not discipline?” Now here, Hebrews definitely reflects an ancient rather than a modern context, because a lack of discipline for children is actually a rather striking feature of contemporary Western secular culture. But in antiquity, that was not the case. The assumption is a father is going to discipline his son. So the author here can draw an analogy and say, if someone is the son of a man, by definition, that man is going to discipline him because that's what being a father means. Therefore, if God is actually your father, you should expect him to discipline you rather than be surprised by it.

Now, unfortunately here, the lectionary leaves out the next verse and I want to highlight it because it's interesting. Because in it basically Paul says, “If you are left without discipline...then you are illegitimate children and not sons.” So he goes even further. He doesn't just say the Lord disciplines those whom he loves, but he said, if God did not punish you or discipline you, then you would be an illegitimate son. Literally he would say, you are bastards. You're a bastard child. You're not a legitimate child of the father. So it's very paradoxical. What Hebrews is saying here is the very fact that you're being disciplined by God shows not only that he loves you, but that you're a legitimate son of God. That you're actually his child, because that's what a father does with those children he loves.

Now, he quickly picks up again in verse 11, by saying, “For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant” And here I think both definitions of *paideia* come into play. Just think back on your own school days. Were they all pleasant? Probably not. But were they useful? Were they necessary? Did they have a purpose and a *telos*, an end that was aimed at teaching you not just skills and truths, but also growing you up, helping you to mature? And the answer is yes. So

in the moment, the difficulty that comes with education, with the pedagogical process can seem painful rather than pleasant, but ultimately it yields fruit. And not just the fruit of knowledge, Hebrew says here, but the “fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.” So the point of God's discipline is not to hurt us. It's actually to instruct us, to heal us and to train us so that we might bear not just earthly fruit, but the fruit of righteousness.

In the next verses at the end, how does the passage end? It says very clearly here:

Therefore lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint but rather be healed.

So here we see Hebrews returning to the image of running a race with perseverance. The members of his audience, they're running the race of faith. They're on the journey of faith, but they're getting weary. Their hands are starting to droop. Their knees are starting to get weak. And in order to encourage them, he reminds them that the Lord disciplines the ones that he loves, just like a father chastises his son, whom he receives. I can't help but think here in this passage, there's a famous story of Saint Teresa of Avila. If my memory serves...she was traveling and the weather conditions were just absolutely awful. And I think they had to cross a river at some point in the carriage. And I think the river almost capsized the horse, the carriage, and a couple of the sisters almost drowned, if I'm not mistaken. But everyone made it through okay. But the story goes that Saint Teresa said to the Lord, "Lord, if this is how you treat your friends, it's no wonder that you have so few." In other words, one of the ironies of the lives of the saints is that the lives of saints are often filled with difficulties. And from the outside, it might look like they're unloved by God. They have sickness, illness, persecution, obstacles left and right, and it can look like they've been abandoned by God. But Hebrews 12 shows us that's not the case. That's not the case. As Teresa was saying, it's the friends of God, the ones he truly loves, who carry the weight of the cross, who he disciplines and who he causes to suffer precisely so that they might learn

how to love like Christ loves, that they might be configured and conform to Christ, not just Christ raised, Christ resurrected, but Christ crucified. That's part of the mystery of God's divine discipline.

And in closing, I would just highlight this. This isn't just the mystery of how God fathers his children, it's also the mystery of how human fatherhood and human parenting should be carried out. Not too long ago, a few years back, I remember Pope Francis got into a little trouble because he talked about disciplining children in one of his general audiences and it shocked some people. In his general audience of February 4th, in fact, in 2015, so this is when he was still fairly newly installed in the papacy. He was giving a general audience and he was talking about the role of the father in a family. And this is what Pope Francis said. It scandalized some people. The Holy Father wrote:

A good father knows how to wait and knows how to forgive from the depths of his heart. Certainly, he also knows how to correct with firmness: he is not a weak father, submissive and sentimental. The father who knows how to correct without humiliating is the one who knows how to protect without sparing himself. Once I heard a father at a meeting on marriage say: "Sometimes I have to strike the children lightly... but never in the face so as not to humiliate them". How beautiful! He has a sense of dignity. He must punish, but he does it in a just way, and moves on.

Now, some people were scandalized, because they said Pope Francis condones corporal punishment. He condones spanking. But you'll notice what the Pope said there. He said that one of the rules of the father is to correct his children with a firmness that involves discipline, but doesn't do violence to their dignity. So the Holy Father here was not condoning the abuse of children, but what he was saying is that one of the distinctive roles that a father has is to discipline the children?. That's a particular gift that the father has, but that he does it in a just way that respects the dignity of the child, but also in a way that's filled with love and has the

instruction, the *paideia* of the child as its end. What does he say? He knows how to “correct without humiliating” the child. That really is a beautiful and powerful gift.

Now I couldn't help noticing whenever this came out and there were all kinds of articles on the internet and lots of people debating this. How could the Holy Father condone the physical discipline of a child? I couldn't help but wonder has anyone read the Catechism? Because all the Holy Father was doing in making this statement was simply giving the official teaching of the Church, but in his own personal anecdotal way. So if you go, there is a section in the Catechism, on the role of parents in disciplining children. Which I think we would do well to reread and pay attention to, because in our own day, although child abuse is a grave evil, that's certainly still prevalent, there's also a rising problem within our own day of a complete lack of discipline for children. So as usual, the Church strikes a balance between either extreme and finds the truth where the scriptures land on the role of parents. So I'll end with this quote here about the role of parents in disciplining children. It says this, this is the catechism of the Catholic Church Paragraph 2223:

Parents have the first responsibility for the education of their children. They bear witness to this responsibility first by *creating a home* where tenderness, forgiveness, respect, fidelity, and disinterested service are the rule.

So notice here, pause. Clearly the Catechism is not talking about the abuse of children. It's talking about raising children and educating them in a home where tenderness and forgiveness are the rule. It continues, however.

The home is well suited for *education in the virtues*... By knowing how to acknowledge their own failings to their children, parents will be better able to guide and correct them:

And then it quotes two scriptures, one from Sirach Chapter 30 and the other from Ephesians 6. Surach 30 says:

“He who loves his son will not spare the rod.... He who disciplines his son will profit by him” (Sir 30:1-2)

And then Ephesians 6:

Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord”

So you see here, the Catechism of the Catholic church...not just the Catechism, but the Bible striking this balance between the disciplining of children... that's a requirement in order to bring them up in instruction... But also doing it in the love of the Lord and in such a way as to not provoke the children to bitterness, in a way that respects their dignity as human beings. So the Church here gives us a beautiful teaching, modeled on scripture itself, of parents having the role, not only of teaching—this is important—but also of correcting the children. Because if the Lord disciplines those whom he loves, how much more should parents discipline children, whom they love? Because if parents never give children, if they never learn the lesson that there are consequences for sin, for small acts of disobedience that children do when they're young, then that's going to grow into a grave problem of not realizing, as adults, that there are consequences for the more grave sins that adults are going to be inclined to commit.

So anyway, in closing then I just wanted to point that out. In defense of Pope Francis, he's simply quoting the Bible here. He's simply talking...following the teachings of the Catechism and the teaching of the Sacred Scripture on the fact that true discipline not only always respects the human person, but flows out of love.