

## 17th Sunday in OT

I don't know how many copies of C.S. Lewis's book, "The Great Divorce", I've purchased. I know I don't have a copy now. I am always lending that book out to people and you know the old saying, "lend a book, loose a book", I forget who I lent it to, and they forget who they borrowed it from.

But I have read the book so many times, that I can remember many of the sections even if I do not have it to look over. And I remember that in one part of the book there is a man who has the chance to enter heaven - he, is, in fact, on the very outskirts of heaven, but before he can he has to let go of a sin which has tortured him and every one around him for years - a self pity that has lead to constant grumbling.

We are told by the man the author designates as the guide of the main character in the book that this man had many chances

to change and repent, that, in fact, he had had no harder a life than anyone else. But he positively refused to accept happiness.

The main character asks how God could let him go on like this. Why didn't God help him - give him a little more time. Then maybe he would change. And the guide tells him that if one more chance will do any good, God will always give it. But there comes a time when one more chance will do no good.

He gives the example of a burning coal which seems to have gone out. Sometimes, even in a coal that seems cold and dead, there is a little spark of fire hidden down under the ash. The guide tells us that God will fan that coal and blow on it trying to get that little spark to burst forth into flame - but only as long as there still is a spark. God will not go on fanning ashes. When the coal has in fact become just ash, there is no longer any use

fanning it.

And the poor man in the story had ceased being a man who grumbled, and turned into just a grumble that once was a man.

I have always been a little scared by that story - but sometimes its good to be a little scared. But along with being a little frightening, the story is also comforting. God will not give up on you as long as there is the slightest chance that you will give up your sins and accept his happiness.

And it is that that his mercy consists. Make no mistake, when we say that God is merciful, we do not mean that in the end he is just going to forget about all our sins and wave his magic wand over us and transform us all into creatures of heaven. If you have been told that that is what mercy is, then you have been told a lie - and a terrible lie, because it will lead you down

the wide and easy path to hell. God's mercy, as C.S. Lewis so beautifully points out, consists in his willingness to give us the grace and strength and wisdom - even after countless rejections - to abandon our sins and turn back to him.

That, I think, is the message of the OT reading. God will spare the city of Sodom as long as he finds 10 good people there. Why? Because as long as there is some good in the city, there is hope that, like leaven in a loaf of bread, that goodness will transform the entire population.

In the Gospel Jesus reminds us that if we ask for God's help to be the kind of person he made us to be, we will get it. And this proves God's great mercy and magnanimity. How many of us would be willing to constantly give help to someone who has consistently kicked us in the teeth in the past every time we have helped him. And yet that is precisely what God does for

**us. He pours out his steadfast love even on those who have offended him.**

**He will continue to do this as long as it will do any good. And that is a comfort. But don't test him. It's all well and good to comfort yourself with the thought that God will not give up on you as long as there's hope of your conversion. But every day, every second we persist in sin is another step down a road that is extremely difficult to retrace. How many lies can you tell before you become just a liar? How greedy do you have to get before you become a confirmed miser? How long can you go on giving in to every bodily craving before you have become the slave and not the master of your passions?**

**I have told you before that the devil's favorite temptation is not to tell us that there is no God, or that there is no Devil, but that there is no hurry. You can always change tomorrow - you can**

**always repent tomorrow. But we have only so many tomorrows here on this earth. There is nothing so pitiful as postponed virtue.**

**The message to all of us is clear - use the grace and strength which God in his mercy pours out upon you to make the changes you know you need to make today. And if you do, then you will begin to live in heaven even as you still walk upon the earth.**