

26<sup>th</sup> Sunday 2011

## Context Controversy Conversion

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Three words to frame this reflection. We've just heard scriptures that ask us to think about the context out of which the word of God arises, the controversies that are at the heart of two of them and the call to conversion of heart that we are all invited to.

The **context** for the reading from Ezekiel is the prophet's challenge to the people of Israel's to change their ways of thinking, to stop judging by human standards and see things differently, as God sees them.

The **controversy** has to do with an interpretation of the law that denies individual responsibility for one's actions. The prophet is challenging a way of thinking that says that the sins of the father are passed down from generation to generation. From this perspective there is no possibility of forgiveness for the child of a parent who has sinned. Each generation is imprisoned by circumstances. If you are born into a family where a father has sinned, as the offspring of the wicked, you carry this burden with you. There is really no hope for the child of a sinful father (It seems like mothers are off the hook for this one.) In contrast to this way of thinking and interpretation of the law, the prophet speaks on God's behalf to say that each individual is accountable for his/her actions. "A child shall not suffer for the iniquity of a parent, nor a parent suffer for the iniquity of a child: the righteousness of the righteous shall be his own and the wickedness of the wicked shall be his own.

The call to **conversion** comes at the end of the passage: "Cast away from yourselves all the transgressions that you have

committed against me and get yourselves a new heart and a new spirit.”

## Context, Controversy, Conversion

There is a certain irony that we hear this reading on a weekend that is being promoted by the US Bishop's conference in connection with Justice for Immigrants as **Pray for the Dream Sunday**. The bishops have asked us to pray in support of the Dream Act. As many of you know, the DREAM Act would provide a pathway to citizenship for young people who came to the US with their parents. The **context** of the conversation is the larger issue of immigrants who are not in the country with legal documentation. But really the **larger** context of this controversial issue is the human context. It is about families and the sacrifices that parents have made for their children. It is about children who have grown up and received an education in this country while their parents do their best to make a living, contribute to the economy and avoid being detained by legal authorities. Is it the case that in our country the “sins of the parents” are inherited by the sons and daughters who know nothing of their country of origin and everything about the country in which they have been raised?

To put a human face on this controversial issue, I wonder if you know a family who would benefit from the passage of the Dream Act? Can you see the faces of a family who may have come to this country going through all the proper channels and then overstayed their welcome? After years of living in this country they feel that returning to their homeland is not a viable option. Where once they were strangers in a strange land, their children now will be strangers in the country of their origin.

The US Conference of Bishops is calling for a conversion, a creative way of thinking about a challenge that faces our nation and that can dramatically affect the lives of many young people.

## Context, Controversy, Conversion

The Gospel we just heard is part of one of a series of debates, controversies between Jesus and the religious leaders who see him as a threat to their laws and traditions. The context for these controversies is Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem and his casting out the money changers in the temple. This dramatic and provocative act heightens the tension between Jesus and the religious leaders. When Jesus is asked by whose authority he is acting, he turns the tables on the leaders as he did in the temple with the tables of the money changers. He asks them about John's baptism. Where did it come from? They hesitate to answer because they realize that their words will convict them. Jesus highlights the chasm between those who are known sinners (prostitutes and tax collectors) and who have come to believe. They are the ones who are compared to the son who initially says "no" but then does what the father asks. The religious leaders are the "yes" men who can not conceive of turning around their way of thinking. It is too ingrained in the law and the traditions.

And with whom do we identify? What side of the controversy do we find ourselves on? To automatically say we are on the side of Jesus is much too easy. Can we honestly say that we would rather align ourselves with the outcasts of society, the tax collectors and prostitutes of our world rather than the power people of our society, religious or otherwise? Can we honestly say we would rather align ourselves with our undocumented brothers and sisters in Christ rather than the laws of the land? To really ally ourselves with this Gospel that includes the outcast demands a new heart and a new spirit.

## Context/ Controversy/Conversion

The context for the letter to the Philippians is Paul's imprisonment. He writes to the people at Philippi whom he dearly loves, who do not have the wealth and power of the people of Corinth and urges

them to be of “the same mind, with the same love, united in heart, thinking one thing.” Paul is not interested in debates, viewpoint, controversies. He is only interested in conversion here. The way to conversion is to “have the same mind that is also in Christ Jesus.” This is the conversion of mind and heart that we are called to over and over again. It is only with this conversion that we may be able to hear the word of God that calls us to a new way of thinking, even daring to dream a dream for those who ask for justice and mercy. Not our version of justice and mercy but God’s justice and mercy.