

First Reading: Jeremiah 33:14-16

Second Reading: 1 Thessalonians 3:12- 4:2

Gospel: Luke 21:25-28, 34-36

INTEGRITY IN PUBLIC LIFE

Around this time, we see many business organizations in Zambia taking stock of their dealings. At the end of the year, it is a time to evaluate their programmes. But for us Christians, Advent time is the start of a new year. It's a time to do self and communal examination of our relationships with God and with each other. This season of Advent is a wonderful moment of grace for all who believe in Christ. And also we in Zambia are certainly grateful for our peaceful just-ended tripartite elections, with hopes for good leadership in the service of the people.

In the past, we might have allowed "wrong leaders" to assume positions of influence through fraudulent practices. But the time has come for us to re-orient ourselves towards the person of Jesus Christ and his Gospel values. Our political leaders are all called to practice integrity in public life and in private life. Integrity is doing the right thing when no one is watching us! This should eventually influence our actions in the eyes of other people especially those we are leading.

In the first reading today, the prophet Jeremiah is not hiding his words. As the Chewas would say: "Mneneri Yeremiah sabisa mpeni pa nyama" (The prophet does not hide his sharp words which are like a sharp knife). He is exhorting us to be women and men of integrity. We must allow our hearts to become sanctuaries of God's goodness in order to promote justice in our beloved country.

Now is the time when we need to repent our sins of selfishly serving our own interests at the expense of the common good. In the past our way of life was "might is right". If we participated in reducing our communities into jungles where only the fittest and the richest could survive, where did we throw our Christian virtue of solidarity? Integrity in public life is a call to recognize each individual as members of one Zambian human family regardless of our ethnic, tribal, economic and political differences. A woman or man of integrity is always willing to regard injustices committed against another person as no less serious than an injustice against oneself. That is the meaning of what our Church's Social Teaching calls "solidarity." And it is our Christian obligation, especially for all those in leadership positions, to have what the Church's Social Teaching calls "a preferential option (concern) for the poor."

In today's second reading, St. Paul is teaching us that true and authentic integrity is expressed in solidarity. Ignorance cannot be used as an excuse for failure to act with those suffering and oppressed in our communities and country. Nelson Mandela always exhorts us to live our "*ubuntu-nse*" (I am because we are). Similarly, one Chewa adage says, "Kalikeka nkanyama tili tiwili ntiwanthu" (only human beings live in unity and solidarity, but animals live in isolation).

We have seen in the past how some Zambians who were sick or injured were treated. Too often, rich and political cadres whenever they were sick were sent to Morning Side Clinic in South Africa. The poor were left to die in the hospitals without medicines and no proper equipment. Worse still, in rural areas pregnant women walked long-distances, others died in child labour before reaching the health centre. Doctors or nurses were on strike. It seemed in the past it paid to be a party cadre.

The late Pope John Paul II in his encyclical *On Social Concern* (1989) notes: "Solidarity as virtue is not a feeling of vague compassion or shallow distress at the misfortune of so many people, near or far. It is a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good."

Nowadays, our leaders must consolidate all the different parts of our society to build a culture of

peace – “One Zambia, One Nation!” They must promote unity in diversity, instead of promoting a dangerous tribalism. Our leaders must help us reconcile with one another. Together we must cultivate a culture of excellence. We must learn to reap the good that we sow, not surviving on a “tidyena” mentality (we have to share the spoils). This destroys our hardworking culture and is a breeding ground for laziness and corruption.

In the Gospel of today, our Lord Jesus is telling us how to live in this world without being carried away by all the cares of life. Our Lord is cautioning us not to allow our hearts to be soaked in debauchery and drunkenness. For these vices move us Christians away from our real mission here on earth – to cooperate together with Christ to build the Kingdom of God.

Such uncontrolled desires could lead us into all kinds of evils such as sexually abusing children or joining satanic organizations. Sometimes we misuse God’s good gifts to corrupt ourselves through alcoholism and infidelity. But in this Gospel reading from Luke, we hear Our Lord challenging us to “stay awake” and not to be carried away by evil vices. Christians who lack a mature will are always tempted to embrace a culture of over-indulgence and abuse of freedom.

Mature leaders are agents of justice. As we prepare ourselves during this Advent to celebrate the birth of Our Lord, let us build a culture of integrity and solidarity. This can be translated into very practical ways of doing things. Remember, we are children of one family who should show mutual concern and respect for one another.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND SHARING IN SMALL CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES

- What do you think are the qualities of a really good leader today?
- How can we help our leaders in the nation and in the Church to be women and men of real integrity?
- How can we train our youth to be good and reliable leaders?

SKETCH

Have three or four members of a family, crying because they are suffering from hunger, sickness, poor housing. The father complains that no one in the community cares and the government doesn’t do anything. A young man comes by and noticing their suffering he offers to assist the family, to bring some food from his own home and to help carry the sick person to the clinic where he will pay the admission fee. The family looks at him in surprise at his generous spirit of integrity and solidarity with them, and then tells him he should run for local councillor, for MP, or even for President! “You are the kind of politician we all need, one who looks out for others and not just for themselves!”

COMMUNITY PRAYERS

- We pray that the government leaders may allow themselves to be guided by God in their service of God’s people. *Lord, hear our prayer! Lord graciously hear us!*
- We pray for leaders in the Church that they may guide God’s people in truth and in love, helping them to pattern their lives after the example of Jesus. *Lord, hear our prayer! Lord graciously hear us!*
- We pray that God may increase our concern, compassion and solidarity for one another, especially for the needy in our society. *Lord, hear our prayer! Lord graciously hear us!*