

A THOUGHT WHEN WE FEEL THE NEED TO JUSTIFY OURSELVES

WE ARE ALL ONE FAMILY

Some newspapers are full of bitter recriminations at the ways in which youngsters 'get away with it'. We too are often ready to add to it. We're quick at establishing the difference between 'us' and 'them'. It's so reassuring. We define ourselves to those differences. Whether with foreigners or hooligans, it must be made clear that they have nothing to do with us. They're a blot on the landscape and have no place here.

The Gospel, of course, holds up a different lesson. Not only is the self-proclaimed virtuous man rebuked for his condemnations and boasting, but the good-for-nothing gets the praise. Aware of his own failings he has simply said: 'Have mercy on me God, for I am a sinner.' He's quick to acknowledge his own weakness, and slow to condemn others. He refuses to put himself a cut above the rest.

The parable of the prodigal Son makes a similar point. The loving father stands by his errant son. He doesn't pretend there's been no wrongdoing. But he never withdraws his love. No matter how heinous the crime, the criminal is to be welcomed home.

Most families understand this truth all too well. No matter how badly behaved their children might be, they don't usually totally disown them. Many will utterly condemn the crime that has been committed, but they'll still care deeply for their young offender. They'll still retain the deep bond of family ties, even if at the time it brings nothing but tears.

Today we need to sustain the belief that we're all one family. No matter what happens, we still belong to one another. The criminal is still one of us. He, or she, can't simply be put away in a different box. Our true identity is drawn not from our differences, but from our shared humanity.

Archbishop Vincent Nichols