

7th Sunday in Ordinary Time – Cycle A

Note: Where a Scripture text is underlined in the body of this discussion, it is recommended that the reader look up and read that passage.

1st Reading - Leviticus 19:1-2, 17-18

The book of Leviticus focuses mainly on one of the tribes of Israel: Levi, and particularly on its priests and their duties in regard to divine worship. It is a book intended primarily for priests (Levites) while Deuteronomy is intended primarily for the laity.

The Leviticus account begins with the second year of the exodus, when the Hebrews are already in the middle of the wilderness. As you will recall, the Levitical priesthood came about as a result of the sin of the golden calf (Exodus 32). After Moses had come down the mountain and smashed the tablets, burned the calf and made the Israelites drink water containing the ashes, he stood at the entrance to the camp and said “Whoever is for the Lord, come to me”, and all the Levites rallied to him. They then went through the camp and slew about 3,000 people. Then Moses declared “You have been set apart to the Lord today (the Revised Standard Version says “Today you have ordained yourselves ...”), for you were against your own sons and brothers, and he has blessed you this day.” Thus the Levitical priesthood was born. The tabernacle is made, with its altars and regulations about the worship to be given to Yahweh. Now, Moses develops these forms of worship in much more detail: Leviticus is really a manual for that liturgy.

To understand the book properly one must bear in mind two basic reference points: First, Yahweh, the God of Israel, is infinitely holy, inaccessible to man (Exodus 19:21), and therefore totally transcendent (unknowable); Second, despite this He dwells in the midst of His people (Leviticus 23:32; 26:12). Therefore He asks of them not only reverence, love and adoration, but a holiness of life which enables them to live as His true children forever in His presence (Leviticus 11:44; 19:2). Worship and holiness of life are the two main concerns of Leviticus.

Today, we hear one of the rules of conduct which are set out in chapter 19; that of love of neighbor. Other rules included reverence for parents, observance of the Sabbath, avoidance of idolatry, upon harvesting leaving some of the grain in the fields for the poor, and the practice of justice and charity in social dealings.

¹ The LORD said to Moses, ² “Speak to the whole Israelite community and tell them: Be holy, for I, the LORD your God, am holy. ¹⁷ “You shall not bear hatred for your brother in your heart. Though you may have to reprove your fellow man, do not incur sin because of him.

The sin would lie in the failure to correct your fellow man. Correction to ensure proper

conduct is a very serious responsibility.

18 Take no revenge and cherish no grudge against your fellow countrymen. You shall love your neighbor as yourself. I am the LORD.

According to the teaching of Christ in Luke 10:29, “neighbor” is to be taken in its widest possible extension. Also, according to Jesus in Matthew 22:37-39 and Mark 12:30-31, this command, taken together with Deuteronomy 6:5, “*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and might*”, sums up the whole of the Law and the Prophets.

2nd Reading - 1 Corinthians 3:16-23

As we work our way through the first part of 1st Corinthians, last week we heard Saint Paul tell of the true wisdom of God. This week he again addresses the divisions in the people of God and reminds the Corinthians (and us) who we really belong to.

16 Do you not know that you are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?

The Corinthian community is a temple of God, because the Divine Spirit dwells in it. Later, in chapter 6 (6:19), the metaphor of the Temple is applied to the body of the individual Christian, because the Spirit dwells in every one of the baptized. The individual application is secondary. The Spirit comes into the community and gives Himself to individuals through the community.

17 If anyone destroys God’s temple, God will destroy that person; for the temple of God, which you are, is holy.

The community is holy because it belongs to God; this is a fundamental theological reality to which Saint Paul often refers. Pagans, as well as Jews, regarded desecration of a temple as a heinous crime.

“Paul says this in order to prick the consciences of those who have corrupted their bodies through evil living, especially the man who was having an affair with his father’s wife.” [The Ambrosiaster (A.D. 366-384), *Commentaries on Thirteen Pauline Epistles* 1 Corinthians 3,17]

18 Let no one deceive himself. If anyone among you considers himself wise in this age, let him become a fool so as to become wise.

Become a fool by accepting the foolishness of the cross (1 Corinthians 1:18-25)

19 For the wisdom of this world is foolishness in the eyes of God, for it is written: “He

catches the wise in their own ruses,”

“How does God catch the wise in their own craftiness (Job 5:13)? By showing them that while they imagined they can do without God, just then they would have all the more need of Him. They are reduced to such a strait as to appear inferior to fishers and illiterates, whose wisdom they cannot now do without.” [Saint John Chrysostom (A.D. 392), *Homilies on the First Epistle to the Corinthians* 10,3]

²⁰ and again: “The Lord knows the thoughts of the wise, that they are vain.” ²¹ So let no one boast about human beings,

This is the thought of 1 Corinthians 1:10-13 (3rd Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle A). In their vain and merely human appraisal of the ministers of the gospel the Corinthians have shown themselves to be fools, judging by the wisdom of this world. If the Corinthians were genuinely wise, they would see everything in the world and those with whom they exist in the Church in their true relations with one another.

for everything belongs to you, ²² Paul or Apollos or Kephas, or the world or life or death, or the present or the future: all belong to you,

No Christian should glory in men, calling himself a disciple of any preacher, to the detriment of the unity of the Church. The ministers of the gospel are for the faithful, not the faithful for them.

²³ and you to Christ, and Christ to God.

Paul associates to the preachers all creation and all the happenings of history. God ordains all things for the good of those who love Him (Romans 8:28). Belonging to Christ, who in turn belongs to God, the Christian dominates the world and its happenings. He shares already by faith and hope in the triumph of the Lord. Notice the scale of ownership: God to Christ to Church members to Church leaders; and the scale of obligation to serve: Church leaders to Church members to Christ to God.

“We are Christ’s because we have been made by Him [by grace]. But Christ is God’s, not as a creature but as His own Son.” [Saint John Chrysostom (A.D. 392), *Homilies on the First Epistle to the Corinthians* 10,4]

Gospel - Matthew 5:38-48

We continue for the fourth straight week with Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. On the 4th Sunday in Ordinary Time, we heard Jesus deliver the beatitudes. Since that time, each Sunday we have heard Jesus enlarge on the general statements of the beatitudes by concrete examples. Today we hear of revenge and love of one’s enemies.

³⁸ “You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’

This quotes a legal rule called *talion* (meaning “such” or “same”) regulating revenge and retaliation for damages (Exodus 21:22-25); Leviticus 24:20; Deuteronomy 19:21). The law of revenge was an ancient custom of the Near East that protected individuals by obliging the next of kin to avenge injury or murder or to purchase back property in order to pay the debts of a kinsman (the Hebrew word *goel* means “kinsman-redeemer”). The laws of the Pentateuch are actually restrictions that limit the injury inflicted by the avenger to injury proportionate to the damage done by the aggressor (only one eye, not two). When first introduced, it constituted genuine moral progress. By the time of Jesus the rabbis already felt it too harsh and began the process of commuting the penalty to fines, but the principle of corresponding restitution remained dominant in legal thinking.

39 But I say to you, offer no resistance to one who is evil.

The customary principle of self defense is rejected by this saying of Jesus. This leaves open the possibility of psychological or moral resistance (media fighting) exemplified by Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King. The goal is to shame the opponent into a change of heart. This presupposes the requisite dispositions of the opponent, which are not always present.

When someone strikes you on (your) right cheek, turn the other one to him as well.

Striking the right cheek with the back of the hand is considered particularly dishonoring (Lamentations 3:30).

40 If anyone wants to go to law with you over your tunic, hand him your cloak as well.

Having addressed the law of revenge, Jesus now tells the disciples not to meet legal action with legal action, but to yield what is contested and even beyond what is contested. The tunic is a long shirt worn next to the body, and the cloak is a heavier outer garment that protects against the cold and rain. These were normally the only two garments worn by the Palestinian peasant. In Exodus 22:25-26 the creditor who takes the cloak in pledge is directed to return it at sundown so that the debtor may have covering for the night.

41 Should anyone press you into service for one mile, go with him for two miles.

Forced labor or service was a part of the contribution of the subjects of ancient states to the government. Roman garrisons had the right to requisition the property and services of the native population.

42 Give to the one who asks of you, and do not turn your back on one who wants to borrow.

The theme of giving to beggars and borrowers goes beyond the scope of non-resistance to evil to advocate general kindness, forbearance, generosity, and an open attitude toward people.

43 “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’

The precept of the love of one’s neighbor is quoted from Leviticus 19:18 (our 1st reading); the precept of hating one’s enemy is not found in the Old Testament, nor is it a summary of rabbinical teaching. The “neighbor” of the love commandment however was understood to be one’s countryman, it did not extend past national bounds. The enemy is specified in Matthew as the persecutor, probably a reflection of the experience of the early Church.

44 But I say to you, love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you, 45 that you may be children of your heavenly Father, for he makes his sun rise on the bad and the good, and causes rain to fall on the just and the unjust.

The disciples are to show the same indifference to who is friend and who is enemy that God shows in the distribution of sunshine and rain; in exhibiting this godlike providence they vindicate their title as sons of God.

46 For if you love those who love you, what recompense will you have? Do not the tax collectors do the same? 47 And if you greet your brothers only, what is unusual about that? Do not the pagans do the same?

Matthew uses terms that identify two despised classes among the Jews: the Gentiles (pagans), and the tax collectors.

48 So be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect.

By this kind of love the disciples will be perfect as the heavenly Father is perfect. This final verse is taken from Deuteronomy 18:3 and Leviticus 19:2 where the word “holy” is used. “Perfect” represents the Hebrew word for “whole” or “integral”; it is the love of one’s enemies that assures the integrity of Christian morality and distinguishes it from merely ethical morality.