

9th 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 - Deuteronomy 11:18, 26-28., 32

The book of Deuteronomy is a book which, according to Hebrew tradition, was written by Moses for the laity; the book of Leviticus having been written for the Levites; the priests. The central focus of Deuteronomy is an understanding of the Law in terms of the Covenant which the Israelites have with God as His chosen people. This book not only gives the covenant in listing the blessings and curses associated with it, it also details the successes and failures of Israel's checkered history in terms of fidelity and disregard. On the 1st Sunday in Lent (Cycle A) we hear of Jesus' temptation in the desert and how He answers these temptations from the sections of Deuteronomy which tell how Israel failed the same temptations and what the correct response was.

Moses said to the people:¹⁸ “[T]ake these words of mine into your heart and soul. Bind them at your wrist as a sign, and let them be a pendant on your forehead.

These words, taken literally, are the reason some Jews today wear phylacteries. In Jesus' time the Pharisees wore phylacteries on the head and on the arm. The head phylactery consisted of a small capsule made of parchment some ten to fifteen millimeters (about 2 inch) wide. It was constructed with four hollow spaces in which were inserted four passages from the Law: Exodus 13:1-10 (the Matzoth Torah), Exodus 13:11-16 (the Passover Torah), Deuteronomy 6:4-9 (the *Shema*, the profession of the belief in one God), and Deuteronomy 11:13-21 (the commandment to love God and not to serve other gods). The arm phylactery had only one space but contained the same four passages on a single scroll. The head phylactery was fastened around the head by straps so that it hung in the middle of the forehead. The arm phylactery was fastened to the upper left arm by straps so that it hung at the level of the heart.

²⁶ “I set before you here, this day, a blessing and a curse: ²⁷ a blessing for obeying the commandments of the LORD, your God, which I enjoin on you today; ²⁸ a curse if you do not obey the commandments of the LORD, your God, but turn aside from the way I ordain for you today, to follow other gods, whom you have not known.

In the covenant formula, the blessings and the curses were the ultimate sanctions, to be taken extremely seriously. When the covenant was sworn, the parties, by the act of swearing, took the blessings and curses upon themselves. By emphasizing that “this day” the blessing and the curse are set before them, Moses is emphasizing that a firm and final decision is to be made.

³² [B]e careful to observe all the statutes and decrees that I set before you today.

A final warning of the seriousness of the covenant in which they are bound to God.

2nd Reading - Romans 3:21-25., 28

Romans 3:21 begins a new section of the Letter to the Romans, a section which is a discourse on salvation and extends all the way to 8:29. This new section is in contrast to Romans 1:28 which describes the history of Israel and her inability to live up to the covenant relationship she had with God: *“And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God handed them over to their undiscerning mind to do what is improper.”*

21 But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, though testified to by the law and the prophets,

Now, in the age to come which has arrived, the age of the New Covenant, the divine attribute has been revealed; an attribute which is not vindictive but is instead a bounteous and salvific uprightness. This gift has been given, not through obedience of the law, but out of God’s gracious generosity. It is the gift to which the law and the prophets (what we now call the Old Testament) pointed.

22 the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe.

As we learned in our study of Romans 1:5 during the 4th Sunday of Advent (Cycle A), Saint Paul has a very express definition for the word “faith”. The first (Romans 1:5) and last (Romans 16:26) mentions of faith in the Letter to the Romans are “obedience of faith”; this sets the context within which his use of the word “faith” is to be understood. Paul conceives of faith as a process that begins with hearing and ends with a personal commitment and obedient submission. Likewise, “belief” is much more than just taking one’s word for it, “belief” is in fact that personal commitment and obedient submission. The Council of Trent has defined “faith” as it is used here as “the beginning of human salvation” and a person’s will must cooperate with that faith to prepare the ground for the grace of salvation (*De iustificatione*, chap. 8, can. 9). This definition is in full agreement with Saint Paul’s use of the word in this book.

“What else comes through faith in Jesus Christ except the righteousness of God which is the revelation of Christ? For it is by faith in the revelation of Jesus Christ that the gift long ago promised by God is acknowledged and received.” [The Ambrosiaster (A.D. 366-384), *Commentaries on Thirteen Pauline Epistles* Romans 3,22]

“In order to stop anyone from asking: ‘How can we be saved without contributing anything at all to our salvation?’ Paul shows that in fact we do contribute a great deal toward it – we supply our faith!” [Saint John Chrysostom (A.D. 391), *Homilies on the Epistle to the Romans* 7]

For there is no distinction; ²³ all have sinned and are deprived of the glory of God.

“All have sinned” is used in the collective sense as it is in Psalm 14 and Isaiah 59:4. It’s like saying “I gave a party and the whole neighborhood came;” it doesn’t mean that each and every individual in the neighborhood was there, just that a large and representative crowd from the neighborhood was. This particular verse has been used to attack the immaculate and sinless condition of Mary but, as is clear in Psalm 14, there are some who have the Lord as their refuge even though “all have sinned”. All men need to be liberated from sin and God the Father has a redemptive plan which is carried out in the atoning and bloody sacrifice of Christ on the altar of the cross; faith is a necessary condition for sharing in the redemption which has been obtained by Christ. In Mary’s case it was carried out in a preemptive manner by Christ from the moment of her conception.

²⁴ They are justified freely by his grace through the redemption in Christ Jesus,

The justification which God gives is the gratuitous gift of God – a gift which is given freely but was bought with the price of Jesus’ life. It is a gift which is freely offered and which we don’t deserve, but we must give up ourselves in order to receive it. When we receive this gift, we receive a new life; a life which is propelled by grace and requires free and active cooperation on man’s part. The fact that grace is a gratuitous gift of God does not mean that man does not have an obligation to respond to it.

²⁵ whom God set forth as an expiation, through faith, by his blood.

The expiation was the cover or mercy seat of the Ark of the Covenant, which stood in the center of the Holy of Holies in the Temple (Exodus 25:17-22). It was made of beaten gold and had a cherub at either end, each facing the other. It had two functions: one was to act as God’s throne (Psalm 80:2; 99:1); the other was to beseech God to pardon sin through a rite of sacrifice on the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16): on that day the high priest sprinkled the mercy seat with the blood of animals which had been sacrificed in order to obtain forgiveness of sins for the high priest and the people. Jesus’ sacrifice in our behalf was prefigured in the Temple sacrifice and was announced by John the Baptist when he pointed to Jesus as the Lamb of God (John 1:29). Jesus himself referred to his sacrifice in Matthew 20:28 when he said *The Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.*”

“Christ, being an ‘expiation by His blood,’ teaches each one thinking of this to become himself a propitiation, sanctifying his soul by the mortification of his members.” [Saint Gregory of Nyssa (ca. A.D. 375), *On Perfection*]

²⁸ For we consider that a person is justified by faith apart from works of the law.

No one, not even the Jew, is justified by the works of the Law (circumcision, animal sacrifice, dietary restrictions, etc.). What justifies a person is faith: not faith alone, as Martin Luther wrongly stated, but the faith which works through charity (Galatians 5:6); a faith which is not presumptuous self-confidence in one’s own merits, but a firm and ready

acceptance of all that God has revealed. A faith which causes one to place their hope in the merits of Christ and to repent for one's sins. The New Testament points to the fulfillment of the Old; in this case, the Mosaic Law receives from Christ the fullness it was lacking.

"Paul says that a Gentile can be sure that he is justified by faith without doing the works of the law, e.g., Circumcision or new moons or the veneration of the Sabbath." [The Ambrosiaster (A.D. 366-384), *Commentaries on Thirteen Pauline Epistles* Romans 3,28]

Gospel - Matthew 7:21-27

Last week in our introduction to the gospel reading we learned that Matthew 6:19-34 and 7:1-27 is a collection of sayings from the life of Jesus. Those sayings which are contained in chapter 6 all have a common theme: singleness of purpose. The sayings in chapter 7 appear to all be detached from one another with no perceptible unity of theme. Matthew obviously considered these sayings to be basic and almost all of them find a parallel presentation in Luke. The themes which are addressed are: judging others (7:1-5); casting pearls before swine (7:6); prayer and its answer (7:7-11), the golden rule (7:12); the narrow gate (7:13-14); genuine good works (7:15-20); and our gospel for today: self deception (7:21-23) and hearers and doers (7:24-27).

²¹ "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven.

Devout invocation of Jesus as Lord and the reception of the charismatic gifts do not guarantee that one is a genuine disciple. Saint Paul tells us that these gifts are in vain if we do not also have love (1 Corinthians 13:1-3).

²² Many will say to me on that day,

On the day in which the individual appears before Jesus for judgment, at the end of their earthly life

'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name? Did we not drive out demons in your name? Did we not do mighty deeds in your name?' ²³ Then I will declare to them solemnly, 'I never knew you. Depart from me, you evildoers.'

This formula of reprobation comes from Psalm 6:9 and is directed at false disciples within the Christian community.

²⁴ "Everyone who listens to these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock.

This is truly a challenge to action: merely understanding the words and not acting on them is not a sufficient response.

25 The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and buffeted the house. But it did not collapse; it had been set solidly on rock. 26 And everyone who listens to these words of mine but does not act on them will be like a fool who built his house on sand. 27 The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and buffeted the house. And it collapsed and was completely ruined.”

In Palestine, large houses and public buildings were built on foundations; the ordinary dwelling was not. What Saint Paul envisions here is a river in flood which would erode the slopes of the hills and those buildings which were not anchored to the bedrock would be swept away as the soil was eroded from beneath it. The Palestinian winter rains often had this effect. It is action, not knowledge or profession of belief, that furnishes the secure foundation for the life of the disciple; and the love, without which Saint Paul says the charismatic gifts are in vain, is action, not mere profession of belief. If we are to stay strong in times of difficulty, we need, when things are calm and peaceful, to accept little contradictions with a good grace, to be very refined in our relationship with God and with others, and to perform the duties of our state in life in a spirit of loyalty and self-denial. By acting in this way we are laying down a good foundation, maintaining the building of our spiritual life and repairing any cracks which make their appearance.

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