

24th 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 - Sirach 27:30-28:9

Sirach is one of the few books of the Old Testament where there is no question about the identity of the author. This book was written by one man: Jesus, son of Eleazar, son of Sira, who signed his name to the book.

The book has two names: Ecclesiasticus (which means “church book”), and the book of ben Sira (or more simply, Sirach) after the author whose grandfather seemed to enjoy more prominence,

Born and raised in Jerusalem, Sirach was a highly respected scribe and teacher, a man of culture and means, who traveled much in his life; possibly as a diplomatic emissary to foreign courts. In later years he ran a school in Jerusalem, imparting to youth his deep knowledge and love of the Scriptures as well as the practical wisdom he had acquired empirically.

Scholars agree that the book was written 195-169 B.C., most probably about 180. It is the only book in the Bible with a forward, written by the author’s grandson, which although not considered inspired writing, is always included. This forward contains the first explicit mention of the Hebrew Bible’s three-fold division of scriptures (Law, Prophets, Writings). The third division is described somewhat vaguely, indicating that it has not as yet been fully delineated.

Sirach’s book is essentially an apology for Judaism. Written to defend the religious and cultural heritage of Judaism against the challenge of Hellenism, Sirach sought to demonstrate to his fellow Jews in Palestine and the dispersion, and also to well-meaning pagans, that true wisdom resides in Israel.

Sirach is one of the seven deuterocanonical books; it did not fit into the theology of the Pharisaic part of Judaism, which is responsible for fixing the Jewish canon. The book was generally well received in Judaism as is evident from its use in Jewish worship and literature. Its rejection from the Jewish canon may have been partly because of its recent date, but the chief reason is probably that it was associated with Sadducean literature. Sirach was no Sadducee, but the tone of the work with its preoccupation with cult, the lack of any appreciation for the afterlife, and minimal messianism put it in a class with later Sadducean tenets.

The Church, however, has always regarded the book as canonical. Not only is its

influence seen in the New Testament, but its canonicity is more frequently attested by the Church Fathers than many protocanonical books.

In our first reading today we are told that deceit and dishonesty will lead one only to isolation. The wise man will not seek vengeance when wronged (see Matthew 6:12; 18:23-25), but will be faithful to mercy, as the Lord.

27:30 Wrath and anger are hateful things, yet the sinner hugs them tight. 28:1 The vengeful will suffer the LORD'S vengeance, for he remembers their sins in detail. 2 Forgive your neighbor's injustice; then when you pray, your own sins will be forgiven. 3 Should a man nourish anger against his fellows and expect healing from the LORD?

Healing in the moral sense of forgiveness (see [Isaiah 6:10](#), Jeremiah 3:22).

4 Should a man refuse mercy to his fellows, yet seek pardon for his own sins? 5 If he who is but flesh cherishes wrath, who will forgive his sins?

This is almost a commentary on the sixth petition of the Our Father. The rule of the time was “an eye for an eye” and this represents a significant advance; an advance which really didn't gain wide acceptance until the Christian era.

6 Remember your last days, set enmity aside; remember death and decay, and cease from sin!

The motivation doesn't go past this life, it shows no appreciation for the afterlife.

7 Think of the commandments, hate not your neighbor; of the Most High's covenant, and overlook faults. 8 Avoid strife and your sins will be fewer, for a quarrelsome man kindles disputes, 9 Commits the sin of disrupting friendship and sows discord among those at peace.

The quarrelsome man who concentrates on his own grievance will find only further frustration.

2nd Reading - Romans 14:7-9

Today we end our study of Paul's letter to the Romans. We end this study with a reminder of what Jesus' sacrifice on the cross means for us.

7 None of us lives for oneself, and no one dies for oneself.

The liberating act of Christ, freeing human beings from bondage to law, sin, and death, has

enabled us to live for God (Romans 6:10-11; Galatians 2:19). This implies the service of God in all things; it is also the basis of a Christian's social obligations.

"This means that we are not free. We have a master who wants us to live and not die, and to whom life and death matter more than they do to us. ... For if we die, we do not die to yourselves alone but to our master as well. By death, Paul means apostasy from the faith." [Saint John Chrysostom (ca. A.D. 391), *Homilies on the Epistle to the Romans* 25]

⁸ For if we live, we live for the Lord, and if we die, we die for the Lord; so then, whether we live or die, we are the Lord's.

Christians belong to, and must acknowledge their relation to, the risen Christ (1 Corinthians 6:20; 7:23; 8:6).

"Here death refers to the death which we die when we are buried with Christ in baptism, and life is the life we live in Christ, having died not sin and become strangers to this world." [Origen (post A.D. 244), *Commentaries on Romans*]

⁹ For this is why Christ died and came to life, that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living.

Saint Paul states the finality of the passion, death and exaltation of Christ; stressing His sovereignty over the dead and the living, which became His as of the resurrection. This is the universal dominion of the God of all (1 Thessalonians 5:10; Philippians 2:11). The Christian, who shares in that redemption through faith and baptism, will eventually share the glory of the risen Christ Himself (2 Corinthians 5:14-15).

Gospel - Matthew 18:21-35

Last week we heard Jesus' teaching on how to handle a fellow Christian who has sinned against us – first talk with him privately, if this doesn't bring results, bring along several witnesses; if all this fails, bring him to the Church and if he fails to heed **even the Church** (something which is unheard of), treat him as one who is excommunicated, no longer a member of the community. This week we hear about the fellow Christian who, though he repents, continues to sin.

²¹ Then Peter approaching asked him, "Lord, if my brother sins against me, how often must I forgive him? As many as seven times?"

The number of the covenant. Seven is not a definite number in itself, but does signify that there is a definite, although not specified, number – the point at which forgiveness becomes perfect and the duty to forgive the offenses ceases; even if the offenses continue.

²² Jesus answered, "I say to you, not seven times but seventy-seven times.

This is also translated as “seventy times seven” in many Bibles. The specific translation is unimportant because what Jesus is teaching is that seven times, indicating a definite number, is not sufficient but that there is no definite number which makes forgiveness perfect. There is possibly an allusion to the limitless vengeance shown in Genesis 4:24. What we see here is the contrast between man’s ungenerous, calculating approach to forgiveness, and God’s infinite mercy. Jesus will now use a parable to illustrate His point.

23 That is why the kingdom of heaven

The Church. This parable describes conditions within the Church.

may be likened to a king who decided to settle accounts with his servants.

Notice he is not talking about slaves here, but those who serve him.

24 When he began the accounting, a debtor was brought before him who owed him a huge amount.

Many translations say the huge amount was ten thousand talents. A talent was 6000 denarius, and a denarius was a working man’s daily wage. This is 60 million days’ wages – over 191,000 years’ wages. This is not a huge amount, it is an astronomically unreal amount!

25 Since he had no way of paying it back, his master ordered him to be sold, along with his wife, his children, and all his property, in payment of the debt.

The unreal amount is matched with a very realistic and common procedure, the sale of a man and his family into slavery for a debt – even though the sale wouldn’t pay the debt. The remaining amount would be written off but the one making the sale would be sure that the example had been made and that person would never cause anyone a problem again.

26 At that, the servant fell down, did him homage, and said, ‘Be patient with me, and I will pay you back in full.’ 27 Moved with compassion the master of that servant let him go and forgave him the loan.

The official has promised payment and the king not only accepts the promise but forgives the entire debt. This gives us an idea of the immense value of the forgiveness we receive from God when we go to Him in confession.

28 When that servant had left, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a much smaller amount.

Again, many translations say “one hundred denarius” (100 days’ wages).

He seized him and started to choke him, demanding, ‘Pay back what you owe.’ 29 Falling to his knees, his fellow servant begged him, ‘Be patient with me, and I will pay

you back.’³⁰ But he refused. Instead, he had him put in prison until he paid back the debt.³¹ Now when his fellow servants saw what had happened, they were deeply disturbed, and went to their master and reported the whole affair.³² His master summoned him and said to him, ‘You wicked servant! I forgave you your entire debt because you begged me to.’³³ Should you not have had pity on your fellow servant, as I had pity on you?’³⁴ Then in anger his master handed him over to the torturers until he should pay back the whole debt.

The king punishes the official with torture because he has not forgiven as he was forgiven. Torture does not repay the debt, and no end to the torture is possible under these conditions. No wonder Jesus tells us to leave our gift at the altar and be reconciled with our brother first (Matthew 5:24)!

³⁵ So will my heavenly Father do to you, unless each of you forgives his brother from his heart.”

If man does not forgive, he cannot expect forgiveness; if he doesn’t renounce his own claims, which are small, he cannot ask God to dismiss the claims against him. Even though we may treat a sinner as we would a Gentile or a tax collector (last week’s gospel) we also have the obligation to forgive. Although the individual may be excommunicated, this is tough love, not shunning. We are called to keep forgiving the individual to set the example which will cause them to seek the forgiveness of the Church.