

the Sunday Readings



Leave your gift there, before the altar, and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister and then come and offer your gift. (Matthew 5:24)

6th Sunday Ordinary Time

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*new standards*¹

introduction

The *Sermon on the Mount* summarises Jesus' instruction to his disciples which is both continuous and discontinuous with *the Torah (Law of Moses)*. In reacting to the distortions which the scribes and Pharisees introduced into the interpretation of Torah, Jesus presupposes the practice of justice. On several occasions he gives guidelines in the form: "*You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times . . . But I say to you*".² In each case Jesus clarifies that GOD's demands are greater than what was the currently accepted interpretation of the Law.

first reading: **Ecclesiasticus 15 : 15 – 20**³

[freedom of choice]

*If you choose, you can keep the commandments,
and to act faithfully is a matter of your own choice.(15)
He has placed before you fire and water;
stretch out your hand for whichever you choose.(16)
Before each person are life and death,
and whichever one chooses will be given.(17)
For great is the wisdom of the LORD;
He is mighty in power and sees everything;(18)
His eyes are on those who fear Him,
and He knows every human action.(19)
He has not commanded anyone to be wicked,
and He has not given anyone permission to sin.(20)*

The Book of Sirach, or Ecclesiasticus, presents the options to us; "Before each person are life and death, and whichever one chooses, will be given" (vv.15-17). This idea is found earlier in Deuteronomy.⁴ The decision is in our hands as we have been created free human beings. Believing in GOD is choosing life – the purpose of the practice of righteousness which is the demand in Jesus' Sermon.⁵ If we limit ourselves to formal observance of the commandments of GOD, we betray GOD's will for us to be life-givers. Believers always run the risk of falling into the hypocrisy of the Pharisees. According to the Wisdom writer, the LORD GOD desires a person to be 'fully alive' so they can respond freely to the commandments.

response: **Psalm 119 : 1 – 2, 4 – 5, 17 – 18, 33 – 34**

[the glories of GOD's law]

*Happy are those whose way is blameless,
who walk in the law of the LORD.(1)*

¹ Cover Image: [Sermon on the Mount](#) by Fra Beato Angelico (1437-1445)

² Mt.5:21

*Happy are those who keep his decrees,
 who seek him with their whole heart,(2) . . . ,
 You have commanded your precepts
 to be kept diligently.(4)
 O that my ways may be steadfast
 in keeping your statutes!(5) . . . ,
 Deal bountifully with your servant,
 so that I may live and observe your word.(17)
 Open my eyes, so that I may behold
 wondrous things out of your law.(18) . . . ,
 Teach me, O LORD, the way of your statutes,
 and I will observe it to the end.(33)
 Give me understanding, that I may keep your law
 and observe it with my whole heart.(34)*

The speakers aren't worried by legalism. They find obedience to the Law of the LORD GOD neither restrictive nor burdensome. Their focus is on life – an absence of frantic moral dilemmas; a sense of priorities; and an absence of anxiety.⁶ In a well-ordered world, such decisions can save us from exhausting and endless reinventing of moral decision-making. Life with the LORD is a two-way street in which Torah-keepers have a right to expect something in return from GOD. Torah-obedience gives access to GOD's attention and gift. Access comes by submission. The song expresses the legitimate expectation among partners who have learned to trust each other.

second reading: 1 Corinthians 2 : 6 – 10

[the true wisdom of GOD]

Yet among the mature we do speak wisdom, though it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to perish.(6) But we speak GOD's wisdom, secret and hidden, which GOD decreed before the ages for our glory.(7) None of the rulers of this age understood this; for if they had, they would not have crucified the LORD of glory.(8) But, as it is written, "What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what GOD has prepared for those who love him"(9) these things GOD has revealed to us through the Spirit; for the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of GOD.(10)

The apostle asserts what he has previously been denying. To the Greeks who, 'are looking for wisdom',⁷ he indeed brings a wisdom, but of a higher order and an entirely different quality. It's the only wisdom really worthy of the name. The

3 The biblical excerpts are drawn from the New Oxford Annotated Bible, New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), published by Oxford University Press (1994).

4 Cf. *Dt.30:15*

5 See *Mt.5:17ff*

6 *Ps. 119* is the longest of all the psalms. A song about *the Law (Torah)* intended to teach the "A-B-C's" of obedience to GOD.

7 Cf. *1Co.1:22*

Corinthians would be able to grasp the apostle's preaching as wisdom and enter into a wisdom-conversation with him if they were more open to the Spirit and receptive to the new insight and language that the Spirit offers. In the face of a choice between life and death, what enables the disciple to discern, is wisdom. It is a gift of GOD rather than the calculated knowing, characteristic of *'the rulers of this age'* (vv.6-7).⁸ If we confine ourselves to a religion of formal and external precepts, if we do not unite prayer with the practice of justice; if we do not choose life, we are crucifying Jesus again (v.8)!

gospel reading: Matthew 5 : 17 – 37 [the Law and the Prophets concerning anger, adultery, divorce and oaths]

Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill.(17) For truly I tell you, until heaven and Earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished.(18) Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.(19) For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."(20) "You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not murder'; and 'whoever murders shall be liable to judgement.'(21) But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgement; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, 'You fool,' you will be liable to the hell of fire.(22)

Jesus states his position concerning the Mosaic Law (vv.17-20). To fulfill the law appears at first to mean a literal enforcement of the law to the least detail (v.18). Yet the *'passing away of heaven and Earth'* is not necessarily the end of the world as understood in much apocalyptic literature, as the dissolution of the existing universe.⁹ Meanwhile, during Jesus' ministry, when the kingdom is already breaking in, his mission remains within the framework of the law, though with significant anticipation of the age to come!

Jesus gives examples of his interpretation of *the Law (Torah of Moses)*: in the case of anger, lust and deceitfulness.¹⁰ The Israelites had the commandment against

8 [vv.7ff] *'GOD's wisdom'* – GOD's plan for our salvation. This was GOD's own eternal secret that no one else could fathom, but in this new age of salvation GOD has graciously revealed it to us. For the pattern of GOD's secret, hidden to others and now revealed to the Church, cf also *Rm.* 11:25-36; 16:25-27; *Eph* 1:3-10; 3:3-11; *Col.* 1:25-28.

9 The *turning-point of the ages*, comes with Jesus' death and resurrection and those to whom this gospel is addressed are living in the new and final age, prophesied by Isaiah (Cf. *Is.* 65:17; 66:22).

10 [v.22] *Anger*: the motive behind murder, as insults are steps that may lead to it. *Fool*: (*Raqa*) is an Aramaic probably meaning "imbecile," "blockhead," a term of abuse. The ascending order of punishment, judgement (by a local council?), trial before the Sanhedrin, condemnation to Gehenna, points to a higher degree of seriousness in

killing. Nevertheless, there were many murders in Israel because it was a society filled with injustice and oppression. Jesus wants us to have a society in which there's no hatred, or scorn, or offences against anyone. That is a society where there's no injustice. Only then can we have a society without crime. It is for that same reason that John the evangelist later says that someone who hates their brother or sister, is a murderer. It's a way of saying that someone who commits injustices is a murderer.

The *Supreme Council*, (v.22), was the highest authority for the Israelites. What is here translated as, '*hell fire*' is something that Jesus called in his language, '*Gehenna of fire*'. *Gehenna* was the rubbish heap of Jerusalem. Since it was the custom to burn the rubbish, fires often raged there. In the time of Christ, '*Geheena*' had already acquired the additional meaning of a place of punishment in the other life – what we would call, '*hell*'. The greatest insult to our neighbour is exploitation – treating people as inferior in position or class. Jesus refers to any insult said to a brother or sister and gives the word '*fool*' or '*renegade*' as an example.¹¹

So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you,(23) leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.(24) Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court with him, or your accuser may hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you will be thrown into prison.(25) Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.(26)

The Israelites believed in sacrifices in the temple and Jesus isn't telling them not to make them (vv.23-4). He is telling them that first they must have love among themselves. Later, Jesus taught that those sacrifices were unnecessary, and that the only sacrifice that pleases GOD is love for others. Later, his disciples totally eliminated sacrifices. The writer to the Hebrews says that serving others and living with possessions in common are the sacrifices that please GOD.¹²

Earlier, Jesus had said that every offence will be punished as murder was punished under the Law of Moses. He spoke of hatred, insults and scorn towards brothers and sisters. He ends by saying to the oppressors, that they better come to an understanding with their victims in time, when they see they are going to be sued in court. If they get punished, or go to hell, Jesus doesn't make it very clear if he is referring to punishments in this life, or in the next one. He first spoke of the punishment of *the Sanhedrin (The Supreme Council)* which was an earthly

each of these offences.

11 But I don't think Jesus meant that we can't use it or that we can use it only informally. With the Pharisees, he used very similar words. He often called them, '*blind*' and '*stupid*' – and '*hypocrites*' and '*a race of vipers*'.

12 Cf. *Hb.* 13:16

punishment. Afterwards he spoke of *Gehenna* which had an other-worldly meaning. Perhaps he wanted to leave it unclear, so that we could interpret it as we wished. Or perhaps he is referring to the two punishments at the same time.

"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.'(27) But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart.(28) If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to be thrown into hell.(29) And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to go into hell.(30) "It was also said, 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.'(31) But I say to you that anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.(32) "Again, you have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not swear falsely, but carry out the vows you have made to the LORD.'(33) But I say to you, Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of GOD,(34) or by the Earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King.(35) And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black.(36) Let your word be 'Yes, Yes' or 'No, No'; anything more than this comes from the evil one.(37)

In giving examples of the conduct demanded of the Christian disciple he introduces each by, *'You have heard that it was said to your ancestors . . .'* or an equivalent formula followed by his teaching in respect to that commandment, *' . . . But I say to you.'* Three of his examples accept the Mosaic law but extend or deepen it.¹³ Three other examples reject it as a standard of conduct for the disciples.¹⁴

The Old Testament commandment that a bill of divorce be given to the woman assumes the legitimacy of divorce itself. It is this that Jesus denies – unless the marriage is unlawful. This *exceptive clause* occurs also in *Mt.19:9*. There are other sayings of Jesus that prohibit divorce absolutely and they seem to represent the stand of Jesus.¹⁵ Matthew's *'exceptive clauses'* are understood as a modification of the absolute prohibition. The unlawfulness that Matthew gives as a reason why a marriage must be broken, refers to a situation peculiar to his community: the violation of Mosaic law forbidding marriage between persons of certain blood and/or legal relationship.¹⁶ Marriages of that sort were regarded as *incest (porneia)*, but some rabbis allowed Gentile converts to Judaism who had contracted such marriages, to

13 *Mt.5:21-22; 27-28; 43-44*

14 *Ibid. 31-32; 33-37; 38-39*

15 Cf. *Mk.10:11-12; Lk.16:18; see also 1 Co.7:10,11b*

16 *Lv.18:6-18*

remain in them. Matthew's '*exceptive clause*' is against such permissiveness for Gentile converts to Christianity. In this inter-pretation, the clause isn't an exception to the absolute prohibition of divorce when the marriage is lawful.

for sharing: ¹⁷

- *The commandments express GOD's wisdom and that GOD watches over us with love: **Comment on Ecclesiasticus 15 : 15 – 20***
- *Our faith is based on the love of GOD for us; a love shown in the crucifixion of the LORD Jesus: **Comment on 1 Corinthians 2 : 6 – 10***
- *In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus calls us to live lives of integrity: more demanding than simply keeping rules: **Comment on Matthew 5 : 17 – 37***

prayer: ¹⁸

*All-seeing GOD,
You alone judge rightly our inmost thoughts.
Teach us to observe Your law from the heart
even as we keep it outwardly.
Purify our desires, calm every anger,
and reconcile us to one another.
Then will our worship at Your altar
render You perfect praise.
We make our prayer through
our LORD Jesus Christ, Your Son,
who lives and reigns with You
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
GOD for ever and ever. Amen*

17 Lectio Divina: reading GOD's WORD in a moment of prayer and allowing it to enlighten and renew us: The practise of *lectio divina* requires a quiet space, a passage of scripture and the willingness to give time to the project. The passage used should be short. For the purpose of this leaflet, we suggest using the gospel reading of the up-coming Sunday. There are four steps in the traditional practise of *lectio divina*. The steps don't have to have the following order: *lectio* (reading) – read the passage of Scripture read slowly – more than once. If a particular word, phrase, or sentence seems significant (even if you don't know why) you may want to write it down. *meditatio* (reflection) – let the significant words fill your mind without straining to analyse them. We are in GOD's presence and so let the Holy Spirit lead your understanding of the words. *oratio* (prayer) – allow your heart to speak to GOD, in words inspired by the passage of Scripture, or by the thoughts that have come to you, while reflecting on it. *contemplatio* (rest) – let go of ideas and words and allow yourself to rest in the presence of GOD, in simple and wordless contemplation. This leaflet gives the context and some commentary on each of the readings and the psalm used in the Sunday's liturgy. Familiarity with the texts and the commentary beforehand, can better prepare our hearing and understanding the passages in our worship. Whatever our preparation for doing this exercise and whatever questions we may use to break open the passage, we must be conscious of Christ's promise: '*Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them*'

18 The prayer that concludes the Lectio Divina is ICEL's 1998 opening prayer from the Proper of the Day. These prayers draw upon the concrete and vivid images of Scripture and conclude with a clearly focused petition inspired by the readings.

review:¹⁹

A child is praised or punished on the basis of strict conformity. In time, however, parents expect their children to enter into their own sensibilities and practical sense so that they know how to interpret the life-giving values which prompted the earlier rules. The same holds true for the Law of the GOD of the universe. We must enter into the life-giving values of the Torah of the LORD, or else we will be 'retarded' within an infantile religion that stifles our maturing.

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¹⁹ The review – at the end of each reflection the review examines one of the themes of the readings, usually drawn from the gospel, and provides an opportunity to check our own performance, in the light of the WORD and Eucharist that we have previously heard and experienced.