

the Sunday Readings



“Your Father in Heaven makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous”. (Matthew 5 : 45)

7th Sunday Ordinary Time

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*discipleship and the Living Law*¹

introduction

In today's gospel passage we have two further statements setting out the way of keeping the Law which Jesus – the new Moses – demands. It is a matter first of going beyond the limits of the law or retaliation, which was common in ancient cultures. Jesus challenges us to re-examine this principle in the name of a greater justice than, *“let the punishment fit the crime”*. Jesus preaches non-violence and a refusal to reciprocate evil, but he goes even further. The First Testament already enjoined that a person should love their neighbour as oneself. But for Jesus, neighbour extends to everyone; even an enemy or a persecutor.

first reading: Leviticus 19 : 1 – 2, 17 – 18²

[ritual and moral holiness]

The LORD spoke to Moses, saying:(1) of the people of Israel and say to them: You shall be holy, for I the LORD your GOD am holy.(2) . . . , You shall not hate in your heart anyone of your kin; you shall reprove your neighbour, or you will incur guilt yourself.(17) You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbour as yourself: I am the LORD.(18)

The second half of *the Book of Leviticus* is a collection of commandments that has been called, *'the holiness code'*.³ Chapter 19 is a vision for communal welfare in Israel. The love of neighbour is shown as the key component of a vision of holiness. We are commanded to be holy like GOD (v.2). An expression of our holiness will be our refusing to hate others (v.17). *Leviticus* puts the laws of honest dealings at the centre and the sexual sins at the periphery.⁴

The effect of using unedifying sexual deviations to build a frame around chapter 19, under-scores the concepts of justice which are expounded in the middle chapter. The pure and noble character of Israel's GOD is contrasted with the sexually deviant customs of false gods. This does not mean that sexual deviations are not counted as sinful, but it implies that they are less significant than sins against justice, false oaths, stealing, cheating and false witness.

Holiness isn't purely a matter of ritual purity, but requires a correspondence to what GOD's people must do for each other in their secular context. There's a parallel between what people do for GOD and what people do for each other.

1 Cover Image: Rain Storm, Union Square by Childe Hassam, oil on canvas (1890).

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

3 Cf. *chs.17-26* plus an addition in *ch.27*

4 See *Lv. chs. 8 & 20*

These ritual laws are grounded in justice. The meaning of *Leviticus* is found here in *ch.19*.⁵

response: Psalm 103 : 1 – 4, 8 – 13

[thanksgiving for God's goodness]

*Bless the LORD, O my soul,
and all that is within me, bless his holy name.(1)
Bless the LORD, O my soul, and do not forget all his benefits - (2)
who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases,(3)
who redeems your life from the Pit,
who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy,(4) . . .
The LORD is merciful and gracious,
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.(8)
He will not always accuse, nor will he keep his anger forever.(9)
He does not deal with us according to our sins,
nor repay us according to our iniquities.(10)
For as the heavens are high above the earth,
so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him;(11)
as far as the east is from the west,
so far he removes our transgressions from us.(12)
As a father has compassion for his children,
so the LORD has compassion for those who fear him.(13)*

The formula, "*Bless the LORD, O my soul*", is calling ourselves to praise; i.e., reminding ourselves of the fact that all of life must be finally referred to GOD's goodness. The reason for giving praise is the memory of GOD overcoming every kind of disorientation by forgiving, healing, redeeming, crowning and satisfying (vv.3ff). *Verse 8* contains a recital of belief, based on the Mosaic statement in *Exodus*.⁶ It marks the LORD GOD as faithful and reinforces the words of *verse 4*.⁷

The next verses announces that the LORD's way of working and standard of judgement isn't like any we would expect (vv.9-13). We may expect enduring anger – but we don't receive it. The '*payoffs*' the LORD does not exact. Rather GOD shows a stunning generosity. Such is the nature of GOD's goodness. The LORD GOD shows the generosity and concern of a caring parent. The basis for newness isn't in needy Israel but in the will of the loving Father. The psalm began by calling the self but ends with calling all creation – Earth creatures and heavenly angels, who are needed to adequately assert who this unutterable GOD is (vv.19-22)! The key to this discernment of the LORD is, '*GOD's steadfast love*".

5 We tend to not remember that this astonishing rule has an Old Testament origin. The *Leviticus* reveals the cornerstone of holiness teaching. The arrangement of the material subordinates holiness and purity, to justice!

6 *Ex.34:6-7*

7 See also *Ps.145:8-9*

second reading: 1 Corinthians 3 : 16 – 23

[addressing the divisions at Corinth]

Do you not know that you are GOD's temple and that GOD's Spirit dwells in you?(16) If anyone destroys GOD's temple, GOD will destroy that person. For GOD's temple is holy, and you are that temple.(17) Do not deceive yourselves. If you think that you are wise in this age, you should become fools so that you may become wise.(18) For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with GOD. For it is written, "He catches the wise in their craftiness",(19) and again, "The LORD knows the thoughts of the wise, that they are futile".(20) So let no one boast about human leaders. For all things are yours,(21) whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future - all belong to you,(23) and you belong to Christ, and Christ belongs to GOD.(23)

The building metaphor allows Paul to speak of the community as GOD's temple. He speaks a plural 'you' (v.16). He means, "*You together are GOD's temple*". . . , "*GOD's Spirit dwells in you together*". Paul and his co-workers have constructed a building – a temple – out of a group of people. While an individual's actions may either contribute to or threaten the life of a community, the destruction of the temple of GOD to which Paul refers, is an action that threatens the life of the whole community. Elsewhere in the Letter, Paul speaks about the human body as belonging to GOD and about the need to live in conformity with that understanding,⁸ but here it is not the individual but the community, that is the focus.

Paul introduces the theme of boasting, with a caution about self-deception (v.18). Like those who evaluate the crucified Jesus by human standards of power or wisdom (v.22), those who trust in themselves deceive only themselves. GOD's wisdom is such, that human wisdom turns into foolishness by contrast. Boasting about human wisdom, or about human leaders, reveals a short-sightedness in regarding GOD's own wisdom. Any boasting about human leadership shows a lack of confidence in GOD. That '*all things belong to believers*' (vv.21-23) underscores the power of GOD's care for humankind. Believers may trust that, '*all things belong to them*', because they in turn belong to Christ and Christ to GOD. The passage summarises the points that Paul has been making about the responsibilities of Christian leaders.⁹

gospel reading: Matthew 5 : 38 – 48

[concerning retaliation and the love of enemies]

"You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.'⁽³⁸⁾ But I say to you; Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also;⁽³⁹⁾ and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well;⁽⁴⁰⁾ and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile.⁽⁴¹⁾ Give to everyone who begs

8 1 Co.6:12-20

9 1 Co.2:5ff

from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.(42) "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy'.(43) But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,(44) so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.(45) For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same?(46) And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?(47) Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.(48)

Within *the Sermon on the Mount*, Matthew collects and summarises some of the training sessions that Jesus held with his disciples. Matthew offers case studies which show how Jesus trained his disciples to live out *the Law (Torah of Moses)*, so as to be '*salt of the Earth*' and '*light to the world*'. Jesus cites a text which his disciples were used to hearing: "*You must love your neighbour as yourself*".¹⁰ That would have been standard procedure for a master of the Torah. Then Jesus begins to explain the meaning of the Law. He opposes those who would define '*neighbour*' so narrowly as to exclude, "*those who persecute you*".

He uses two arguments. Firstly, the LORD of the Universe distributes blessings of sunshine and rain on both friend and enemy. Therefore it follows, anyone who would be a son or daughter of this Father, must follow the same Torah. Secondly, Jesus makes the point that tax-collectors and pagans; who know nothing of the Torah, already practise the code of honourably looking after their friends and benefactors. It follows therefore, that anyone only practising this code, can't be, '*salt of the Earth*' or '*light to the world*', because they conform to already existing standards. A disciple of *the Living Torah* must exhibit higher standards (v.48).

When Jesus proposes that his disciples must learn to love their enemies (v.44), this doesn't imply an insipid, '*be nice to all*'. Nor does it imply being timid and a willingness to always back-down when confronted. We look at the way Jesus' lived the Torah, so we make sense of his verbal Torah. Jesus is the kind of lover who disturbs the status quo. He makes enemies.¹¹ When Jesus refers to, "*loving one's enemies*", it must mean initially to act benevolently towards those blood relatives who oppose one's new calling. Jesus himself, was opposed by his relatives.¹² The Pharisees, also became his, '*enemies*'.¹³ Jesus used the events of his own life, to make clear to his disciples, the full intent of what he meant by, '*love your enemies*'. We have to remember that Matthew records only a bare outline of the original training sessions in his account.

10 Lv.19:18

11 Mt.10:34-36

12 See Mt.12:46-50 & 13:53-58

13 Mt.12:1-45

These training sessions, summarised by Matthew, indicate that Jesus has no intention to feed his disciples with highly-learned doctrines about GOD. This case-study can be regarded as showing GOD doesn't play favourites. GOD takes care of good and evil alike. Jesus doesn't present this revelation as a doctrine to which the would-be disciple must assent. Rather he makes it a proposal to be implemented: *"You must therefore be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect"* (v.48). Jesus trains disciples in a functional holiness. It consists of them harmonising their attitudes and their performance standards with the excellence shown by their Father's performance standards. *"In this way you will be sons and daughters of your Father in heaven"* (v.45).

The Sermon on the Mount is often interpreted as presenting Jesus, as handing down divinely-revealed laws and obligations. At the same time, GOD is made to appear as the One who can impose any restrictions that GOD may want upon us creatures. The mentality is: *"I must obey this or GOD will punish me"*. In thinking this way we reduce Christianity to a set of servile obligations motivated by a spiritualised greed for rewards and fear of punishments. We can lose sight of the Israelite horizon of understanding, where Torah is the wisdom lived by the Father and entrusted to His cherished children! GOD cannot be arbitrary. There can be no religious obligation that GOD does not impose upon the Father GOD's Self, first before offering it to those whom the Father nurtures in His likeness. It is quite inconsistent for us Christians to condemn the supposed legalism of Israelite religion and then turn around and impose a new legalism in the name of Jesus.

Jesus had been criticised for being too liberal in making exceptions.¹⁴ But he repeatedly shows that the wisdom of the Father requires, knowing how to make exceptions when circumstances warrant. The Pharisees were scandalised by Jesus' freedom in making exceptions to the requirements of Torah. Similarly, Jesus gives no suggestion that *'perfection'* lies in cultivating mystical experiences or in being over-whelmed by the holy Spirit. There are the experiences of Jesus' apprenticing, but they are the experiences of how the Father's rain falls and how pagans take care of their own. And, as for the spirit that may overwhelm a person – it must be strictly tested by the deeds that it promotes. As a consequence, Jesus never boasts of having received the Holy Spirit. He points to the fruit that his life bears and allows his supporters and his enemies to draw their own conclusions.¹⁵

¹⁴ Mt.9:11,& 14; & 12:2, & 10; 15:2 & 17:24

¹⁵ Cf. Mt.11:2-5, 12:22-28; 21:28-32

for sharing: ¹⁶

- *Remembering our Israelite roots is one way of restoring our trust in human beings, who are created as the psalmist says, 'a little less than GOD'. (see Ps.8:5): **Comment on Leviticus 19 : 1–2, 17–18***
- *Belonging by association to the Christian community isn't enough. True wisdom demands an active imitation of Jesus' own skills of imitating divine mercy and love: **Comment on 1 Corinthians 3 ; 16–23***
- *The ability to sustain loss and failure is a normal part of life. The Beatitudes take seriously the reality of failure and sin. But our instinct is to be vindictive. The Beatitudes are learned attitudes to act differently: **Comment on Matthew 5 : 38–48***

prayer: ¹⁷

*Heavenly Father,
in Christ Jesus You challenge us
to renounce violence and to forsake revenge.
Teach us to recognise as Your children
even our enemies and persecutors and to love them
without measure or discrimination.
We ask this through our LORD Jesus Christ, Your Son. Amen*

review: ¹⁸

Jesus teaches that would-be disciples, and not only GOD, are destined to be holy! We are called to approximate our performance to GOD's. We are invited to acquire and practise the quality of holiness that characterises GOD by doing the works of love and justice. Knowing GOD means doing justice. The Israelite tradition

16 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'*.

17 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.

18 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.

emphasises the imitation of GOD. The Talmud, or books of interpretation of the Torah of Moses, explicitly state that we are able to imitate GOD's actions – "It is possible to imagine that human beings can be as holy as GOD".

The tradition also attributes to GOD a holiness which surpasses that of human beings – "My holiness is higher than any degree of holiness you can reach". But the rabbis' insistence on the supreme holiness of GOD still doesn't deny the emphasis on our human capacity for holiness. Created in the image of GOD, we therefore are able to imitate GOD. The Talmud in answer to it's own question about the meaning of the text – "You shall walk after the LORD your GOD" – answers that the meaning is, "to follow the attributes of the holy One, blessed be He: as He clothed the naked, so do you clothe the naked, and as He visited the sick, so do you visit the sick". Again and again the tradition quotes different parts of the Scriptures to emphasise the notion that it is possible and necessary to imitate GOD.

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