

11th 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 - Exodus 19:2-6a

Three months after starting their exodus experience the Israelites came to Mount Sinai. The first month is Nissan, the time of Passover and Unleavened Bread; that is when the exodus began. The second month is the entry into the Wilderness of Sin, where the manna was given (Exodus 16:1); it was the time of the cereal harvest. The third month is the Feast of Weeks (sevens, oaths), Pentecost. As early as the second century B.C. some Jewish groups were recorded as connecting the giving of the Law on Mount Sinai with the Feast of Weeks. There is no hard evidence that mainstream Judaism made the connection between the Law and Pentecost until the third century A.D. Our reading today takes place when the Israelites first arrive at the base of Mount Sinai.

² After the journey from Rephidim to the desert of Sinai, they pitched camp. While Israel was encamped here in front of the mountain, ³ Moses went up the mountain to God.

The exact location of Mount Sinai is uncertain but the peak identified on maps today as Sinai has been identified as such since Byzantine times (5th century A.D.). This particular peak rises to a height of 7,467 feet and can be scaled in approximately 12 hours. Even loftier peaks lie south of this mountain, but they would require about five hours to scale and lack open areas at their bases. This mountain has the adjacent plain of Er-Raha, which coincides with the encampment area at the base of the mountain of God.

Then the LORD called to him and said, “Thus shall you say to the house of Jacob; ⁴ tell the Israelites: You have seen for yourselves how I treated the Egyptians

The people must act by deciding whether to be God’s people or not.

and how I bore you up on eagle wings and brought you here to myself.

See Deuteronomy 32:10-13.

⁵ Therefore, if you hearken to my voice

A covenant is offered, not imposed upon the people.

and keep my covenant,

The Hebrew word *shammar*, translated here as “keep”, can also be translated as “guard”

(keep safe). See Genesis 2:15. A covenant is a sacred family bond; if you enter into a covenant with someone, you become part of their family.

you shall be my special possession, dearer to me than all other people, though all the earth is mine. ^{6a} You shall be to me a kingdom of priests, a holy nation.

In the working out of salvation history, the people of Israel were to enjoy a special place, as firstborn, and a unique intimacy with God, as His family. In turn, much is required of them – to be holy as their very God is holy, and to fulfill their role of priesthood to the nations. This special vocation is not forced on the people, but is left to their free choice. Two verses later, they accept the covenant.

2nd Reading - Romans 5:6-11

Saint Peter may have come to Rome by A.D. 42, but by the time Saint Paul wrote this letter from Corinth around A.D. 58, there was a flourishing Christian community in the city. Saint Paul planned to evangelize Spain (Romans 15:24) and to visit the Christian community at Rome en route. Since he was unknown to most of the Christians of Rome, he wrote this letter by way of introducing himself to them. Paul's background is Hebrew (family covenant) vice the Roman court where many interpreters try to place him. It is from the perspective of family covenant that he writes.

⁶ For Christ, while we were still helpless,

This is the status of the unjustified man. Heaven is closed and man is incapable of doing anything which will attain forgiveness of sin.

yet died at the appointed time for the ungodly.

Paul affirms this historical event in the theological context of man's helplessness and the effect of the event.

"If Christ gave Himself up to death at the right time for those who were unbelievers and enemies of God ... how much more will He protect us with His help if we believe in Him! He died for us in order to obtain life and glory for us. So if He died for His enemies, just think what He will do for His friends!" [The Ambrosiaster (A.D. 366-384), *Commentaries on Thirteen Pauline Epistles*]

⁷ Indeed, only with difficulty does one die for a just person, though perhaps for a good person one might even find courage to die.

From the logical point of view, this self-sacrifice would not take place, although it is possible that for a really good man it might be done.

“How can Paul say this when the Bible is full of martyrs? What were they doing? In fact, the martyrs were not dying for other people but for God, and for Him anyone would dare to die. But every other death is much harder to endure, even if it is just and in accordance with the law of human nature.” [Origen (after A.D. 244), *Commentaries on Romans* 5,8]

⁸ But God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us.

This brings out the truly gratuitous character of Jesus’ sacrifice – He died for all, including the Godless, those who were not really good.

⁹ How much more then, since we are now justified by his blood,

Justification by Christ’s blood can be best understood when a contemporary rabbinical axiom is recalled: “There is no expiation of sins without blood” (Hebrews 9:22). The axiom itself is based on Old Testament purification rites (Leviticus 8:15; 9:15-21; 16:19; 19:24; etc.). This idea was not that the blood so shed in sacrifice appeased Yahweh, nor was the emphasis on the shedding of the blood and the ensuing death a sort of recompense or price to be paid. Rather, the blood was shed either to purify and cleanse ritually, objects dedicated to Yahweh’s service (Leviticus 16:15-19) or else to consecrate objects and persons to that service. On the Day of Atonement the high priest put blood on the ark of the covenant “because of the uncleanness of the Israelites and their transgressions in all their sins” (Leviticus 16:16). The sins were considered to have defiled the land, the Temple, and all it contained. The sprinkling with blood purified and consecrated anew, expiating the sins. The underlying reason is found in Leviticus 17:11: “the life of the flesh is in the blood; I have put it for you upon the altar to make atonement of your lives; for it is the blood that makes atonement by reason of the life.” Blood was identified with life itself because the *nepeš* (breath of life) was thought to be in it. When the blood ran out of a man, the *nepeš* left him. The blood that was shed in sacrifice was not, then, a vicarious punishment meted out on an animal instead of on the person who sacrificed it. Rather, the “life” of the animal was consecrated to Yahweh (Leviticus 16:8-9); it was a symbolic dedication of the life of the person who sacrificed it to Yahweh; it cleansed him of his faults in Yahweh’s eyes and reconciled him once more. Christ’s blood, shed in expiation of man’s sins, was a willing offering of His life to bring about the reconciliation of man with God (Ephesians 2:13). Heaven was opened so that we may approach God individually and have our sins forgiven. Through baptism we can become God’s children; we are no longer considered just His slaves without a right to inheritance,

will we be saved through him from the wrath.

Not past tense, but future sense. Salvation is the end point of the journey. We will be with God in heaven. Not stated here but inherent to this process is our free response to God’s call in living the Christian life.

¹⁰ Indeed, if, while we were enemies,

This is a repetition of verse 8 in a more positive way; the sinner is not just “weak” or “ungodly”, but actually an enemy of God. But the death of Christ brings about the reconciliation of an enemy with God. Reconciliation is the restoration of estranged and sinful man to union and companionship with God.

we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, how much more, once reconciled, will we be saved by his life.

An effect of justification is a share in the risen life of Christ, which brings salvation. Although justification is something that happens now, salvation is still to be realized.

11 Not only that, but we also boast of God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.

The effect of justification is that the Christian can even boast of God Himself, whereas before he stood in fear of His wrath. Having experienced God’s love in the death of Christ, he can now exult at the very thought of God.

Gospel - Matthew 9:36-10:8

Jesus is in His first year of public ministry. He has performed His first miracle (turned water into wine at Cana), talked with the Samaritan woman at the well, has arrived in Galilee and preached the Sermon on the Mount (and the Lord’s Prayer, which is part of the sermon). He has healed numerous people and has recruited Matthew, who before his calling had been a tax collector. In the discourse we hear today, Jesus admits others to share both His mission and His powers, and He commissions them to proclaim on a scale wider than He could reach personally.

36 At the sight of the crowds, his heart was moved with pity for them

From the context, these “crowds” are the sick and diseased, the poor. The Greek word *splanchnizein*, translated here as “pity” derives from the noun for “entrails”, “bowels”, “guts”, as the seat of emotions.

because they were troubled and abandoned,

Harassed or bothered might be a better translation. The Greek word used here is a somewhat vulgar word which would be a good description of the petty annoyances to which the less fortunate are subjected.

like sheep without a shepherd.

This line probably refers to the “people of the land” which is a contemptuous term used by the Pharisees to designate the poor and ignorant who did not know the Law well enough to observe it (John 7:49), and often couldn’t afford to observe it. This same phrase precedes

the multiplication of the loaves in Mark. The compassion that Jesus feels for the hungry in Mark is shown for the spiritually unenlightened in Matthew.

37 Then he said to his disciples, “The harvest is abundant but the laborers are few;

The missionary work of the disciples is compared to a harvest. Jesus will turn this problem into an opportunity.

38 so ask the master of the harvest to send out laborers for his harvest.”

Pray. Only a community that nourishes its faith through powerful prayer is apt to receive and to generate more pastoral workers.

10:1 Then he summoned his twelve disciples

Usually Matthew uses the term “disciple” for a much broader group but here he narrows the focus. The twelve are still part of the larger group, but have been picked as special. The number twelve comes from the number of the tribes of Israel and in Hebrew numerology represents earthly perfection. All Israel is to be restored.

and gave them authority over unclean spirits to drive them out and to cure every disease and every illness.

All the synoptic evangelists stress the importance of Jesus’ emissaries having real power and authority from Him. In calling them, Jesus takes the initiative to resolve the harvest problem.

2 The names of the twelve apostles are these: first, Simon called Peter, and his brother Andrew; James, the son of Zebedee, and his brother John; 3 Philip and Bartholomew, Thomas and Matthew the tax collector; James, the son of Alphaeus, and Thaddeus; 4 Simon the Cananean, the Judas Iscariot who betrayed him.

The word “apostle”, meaning one who is sent, occurs only here in all of Matthew. The surname Iscariot may mean “man of Kerioth” or “liar.” Notice that Peter is always listed first and Judas is always listed last when the apostles are named.

5 Jesus sent out these twelve after instructing them thus, “Do not go into pagan territory or enter a Samaritan town,

The command to avoid evangelizing the Gentiles and Samaritans follows Jesus’ own practice as given in Matthew 15:24. The Messiah would be born into the chosen people, the Jews. In His plan of salvation God made certain covenants (with Abraham, Moses, David) and sent the prophets. This explains why the Messiah and the Kingdom of God were to be preached elsewhere. In their early apprenticeship, Jesus restricts the Apostles’ area of activity to the Jews, without this taking from the world-wide scope of the Church’s mission. In His final “great commission” he charges them to “Go and make disciples of all nations”

(Matthew 28:19).

⁶ Go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.

This phrase refers first to all to Israel as a whole, but it also refers to the “people of the land”; people who for whatever reason were marginalized, alienated from the main circles of religious leadership and zeal. For these, Jesus has a special concern.

⁷ As you go, make this proclamation: ‘The kingdom of heaven is at hand.’

The message of the Apostles is to be the same as John the Baptist’s and Jesus’.

⁸ Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, drive out demons. Without cost you have received; without cost you are to give.

The divine truths of salvation are so important for everyone that they must be taught without regard for the listener’s ability to pay.

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