

6th 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 15:15-20

The author of Sirach was Jesus, the son of Eleazar, of the family of Sirach. He was by profession a teacher of Wisdom in Jerusalem. Sirach wrote during the early decades of the 2nd century before Christ, just prior to the Maccabean wars. During this critical period of Jewish history, when the Chosen People were in danger of becoming Hellenized and paganized, he stoutly champions the old religion and its sacred books, and shows how its lessons are applicable to every circumstance in life. In order to make his readers proud of being Jews, he eulogizes the heroes of Israel from Noah to Simon (the Greek spelling, *Simeon* the Hebrew spelling) the High Priest.

The wealth of practical wisdom contained in the book of Sirach won for it the honorable title of Ecclesiasticus, as it is called in the Douay-Reims translation, which means “Ecclesiastical Book” or “Church Book” and for its author, the surname of “The Pedagogue” (The Schoolteacher). It appears to have been much used in the early Church as a textbook for the instruction of catechumens (candidates for baptism).

Sirach was originally written in Hebrew. A grandson of the author translated it into Greek about the year 130 B.C. It is the only book in the Bible which contains a prologue, written by the grandson who translated the book, which is not considered inspired.

Today’s reading comes from the section of Sirach’s writing on man’s free will and responsibility.

¹⁵ If you choose you can keep the commandments; it is loyalty to do his will. ¹⁶ There are set before you fire and water; to whichever you choose, stretch forth your hand. ¹⁷ Before man are life and death, whichever he chooses shall be given him.

The heart of the argument presented here is that each individual has the radical freedom to choose “life” by obeying the Law or “death” by refusing to obey (see Deuteronomy 30:15-20).

¹⁸ Immense is the wisdom of the LORD; he is mighty in power, and all-seeing. ¹⁹ The eyes of God see all he has made; he understands man’s every deed. ²⁰ No man does he command to sin, to none does he give strength for lies.

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30:15-20).

2nd Reading - 1 Corinthians 2:6-10

Last week we heard Saint Paul address how his preaching illustrates the fact that man's strength and wisdom are nothing compared to those of God. Today we hear him tell of the true wisdom of God.

6 Yet we do speak a wisdom to those who are mature, but not a wisdom of this age, nor of the rulers of this age who are passing away.

The world has not yet been transformed by the redemptive power of Christ. It lies subject to Satan and the wicked spirits until the final act of the drama of redemption, the parousia of the Lord. Contemporary Jewish theology contrasted "this age" with "the age to come." Christ's giving of Himself has brought about the meeting of the two ages and freed man from the influence of "this age" as He ushered all mankind into "the age to come". The "rulers of this age" are the wicked spirits who, since Adam's sin, have held this world in slavery but with the advent of the Messianic age, they are headed for destruction. The pagans who, blinded by sin, failed to recognize and worship God the Creator, and Jewish interpretations of Scripture, which failed to see in Jesus the promised Messiah. Both Jew and Gentile are enslaved by the elements of the world, the wicked spirits who rule the age.

"The mature are those who preach the cross as wisdom because of the witness of Christ's power at work. They know that actions speak louder than words. Their wisdom is not of this age but of the age to come, when the truth of God will be manifested to those who now deny it." [The Ambrosiaster (A.D. 366-384), *Commentaries on Thirteen Pauline Epistles* 1 Corinthians 2,6]

7 Rather, we speak God's wisdom, mysterious, hidden,

Since Christ, the Wisdom of God, is a mystery, men can know Him only by revelation. The divine wisdom lies hidden in the folly and scandal of the cross. The end of this divine economy of salvation is our glory, our participation in the glorious resurrection of Christ.

which God predetermined before the ages for our glory,

Through the fall, humanity lost the ability to glorify God. Christ had this capacity, and those who belong to Him grow into it gradually (2 Corinthians 3:18). It is in this sense that glory is the goal of the plan of salvation.

"Paul is keen to point out that God always loved us, even from the very beginning, when we did not yet exist. For if he had not loved us, he would not have foreordained our riches. Look beyond the broken relationship which has come in between, and you will see that

God's love for us is more ancient still." [Saint John Chrysostom (A.D. 392), *Homilies on the First Epistle to the Corinthians* 7,5]

⁸ and which none of the rulers of this age knew; for if they had known it, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.

Had the arrogant authorities and wicked spirits known the mystery of Christ and that salvation would have been achieved through the humiliating death of Jesus, they would have tried to frustrate it by letting Him live. "Lord of glory" is a divine title in 1 Enoch 63:2 and Psalm 44:8. Here it implies Christ's messiahship and divinity.

"But if Christ had not been put to death, death would not have died. The devil was overcome by his own trophy, for the devil rejoiced when, by seducing the first man, he cast him into death. By seducing the first man, he killed him (Genesis 3:1-19). By killing the last man, he lost the first from his snare." [Saint Augustine of Hippo (ca. A.D. 417), *The Ascension* 263]

⁹ But as it is written: "What eye has not seen, and ear has not heard, and what has not entered the human heart, what God has prepared for those who love him,"

The formula would indicate that a biblical text is being quoted, but the source of the citation is doubtful. There are a few resemblances to Isaiah 64:3 and 65:16 but the actual citation is not contained in the Old Testament. Origen, The Ambrosiaster and Jerome thought that Saint Paul was quoting from the Apocalypse of Elijah, an apocryphal writing of which only fragments exist today.

¹⁰ this God has revealed to us through the Spirit. For the Spirit scrutinizes everything, even the depths of God.

"Us" may refer either to Paul and his fellow preachers, or all the baptized. The former is probably the case from the context, as Paul proceeds to give a discourse on wisdom.

Gospel - Matthew 5:17-37

We are still at the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus has delivered it and is now applying the beatitudes to the hearers of the sermon. The verses we hear today give the basic legal principles of the sermon. They are the most controversial verses in Matthew because no major Christian church requires observance of all 613 precepts of the Old Testament law, both ethical and ceremonial, but only the ethical commands such as the 10 commandments and the commands to love God and neighbor. In the initial encounter of the Gospel with Judaism, as well as in those primitive churches that were entirely or largely Jewish in membership, the attitude of Jesus and the Church to the Law was an urgent question. The Law had a sacredness and a saving value in Pharisaic Judaism. The Law was thought to be the summary of all wisdom – human and divine, the revelation of God Himself, a complete and a secure guide of conduct and endowed with a sacramental assurance of good relations

with God.

17 “Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets. I have come not to abolish but to fulfill.

It was not the mission of Jesus to annul (break down, as in a camp) the Law and the prophets (these two words, “Law” and “prophets”, were often used to designate the whole collection of the books of the Old Testament), His mission is to fulfill them. “Fulfill” means to bring the Law to perfection, to give it that finality the Pharisees believed it possessed. Jesus affirms indirectly that the Law is imperfect, unfinished; He will perfect and finish it. In popular messianism the Messiah had a relation to the Law, but it was not a relation of binging the Law to completeness. Jesus affirms the enduring, even eternal reality of the Law that we find affirmed in rabbinical writings; but it is the finished and perfect Law that endures, not the Law of Moses with its explanatory oral teachings.

18 Amen, I say to you,

“Amen” is a solemn oath that the truth is being told.

until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter

The Hebrew consonant *yodh*, the smallest of the 22 consonants in the square Hebrew script (a jot).

or the smallest part of a letter

Literally, “little horn”. Probably the small decorative mark added to many Hebrew consonants in the square script (a tittle).

will pass from the law, until all things have taken place.

The Law will not pass until it has been finished and perfected by the messianic work of Jesus.

19 Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do so will be called least in the kingdom of heaven. But whoever obeys and teaches these commandments will be called greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

Jesus accepts the rabbinical distinction between “heavy” and “light” commandments; the rabbis counted 613 distinct precepts in the Pentateuch and classified them along with their seriousness. The non-observance by Jesus of the traditional Sabbath ordinances and of the laws of Levitical cleanliness was a frequent source of controversy. Jesus is not recommending here that which He repudiated in teaching and practice. Jesus’ statement here is addressed to those who teach strict observance but do not practice it (see Matthew 15:3-6; 23:16-26). The Law that the disciples are to do and teach is the perfect and complete law as fulfilled by Christ. Observance of the Law and traditions will secure the

righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees; it is a submission to the will of God that goes beyond the observance of the Law.

²⁰ I tell you,

In each of the six examples in scripture (four of which we hear today), the statement of the Law is directly opposed by the pronouncement of Jesus.

unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter into the kingdom of heaven. ²¹ “You have heard that it was said to your ancestors, ‘You shall not kill; and whoever kills will be liable to judgment.’

The commandment is quoted according to Exodus 20:15 and Deuteronomy 5:18. The added statement concerning the judgment is not a quotation from the Old Testament, but judicial processes for murder are mentioned (see Exodus 21:22; Numbers 35:16-33). Jesus does not distinguish between willful murder and casual homicide, for accidental homicide does not fall under moral consideration.

²² But I say to you, whoever is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment, and whoever says to his brother, ‘Raca,’ will be answerable to the Sanhedrin, and whoever says, ‘You fool,’ will be liable to fiery Gehenna.

What Jesus prohibits is not murder but anger; and the mere feeling of anger is liable to the court’s judgment. Anger is not the object of legal action. Jesus rather means that anger, the passion that impels to murder, is as guilty an action as murder itself. Jesus strengthens the prohibition of murder by going to the very roots of mutual dislike.

²³ Therefore, if you bring your gift to the altar, and there recall that your brother has anything against you, ²⁴ leave your gift there at the altar, go first and be reconciled with your brother, and then come and offer your gift.

Should men yield to anger, which is conceived as unavoidable, the sacred duty of reconciliation arises and that duty is urgent. Worship was to a Jew the most sacred action in which a man could engage, but worship must be postponed for reconciliation. It is irrelevant to the duty of reconciliation who started the quarrel.

²⁵ Settle with your opponent quickly while on the way to court with him. Otherwise your opponent will hand you over to the judge, and the judge will hand you over to the guard, and you will be thrown into prison. ²⁶ Amen, I say to you, you will not be released until you have paid the last penny.

Matthew here has taken the case out of the courtroom and has given it an eschatological overtone which adds to the severity of the commandment.

²⁷ “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’

The commandment is quoted according to Exodus 20:13 and Deuteronomy 5:17. Jesus does not attend to the penalties prescribed in the Law for adultery, which was normally a capital crime (Deuteronomy 22:22). Neither does He mention illicit sexual relations that are not adulterous, although these are treated in the Law.

28 But I say to you, everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart.

As in the discussion of murder, the supreme offense is taken as the point beyond which Jesus advances. The statement is brief – the gaze of lustful desire is as guilty as the adulterous action. The restatement of the Law is directed again at the root of the impulse.

29 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 to have your whole body thrown into Gehenna. 30 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 to have your whole body go into Gehenna.

This obviously is not meant to be taken literally – the logic of one’s decisions and moral choices is important. It is better to sacrifice a part of one’s moral freedom than to lose the whole.

31 “It was also said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife must give her a bill of divorce.’

The statement of the Law is a very loose paraphrase and compendium of Deuteronomy 24:1, omitting the phrases that deal with the occasion of divorce. The law of Deuteronomy actually deals only indirectly with divorce: its object is the prohibition of the reunion of partners after divorce.

32 But I say to you, whoever divorces his wife

In Mark and Luke, the clarity is undisputed – Jesus simply forbids divorce entirely. Mark’s formula reflects Roman law which allowed the wife to institute divorce; Matthew and Luke allude to the Jewish practice, in which only the husband could divorce.

(unless the marriage is unlawful) causes her to commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

This exception clause (“lewd conduct is a separate case” in some translations) is universally regarded as an expansion of the original form. Many interpreters and the Greek church understand it as permission of divorce for adultery – but this is so plainly out of harmony with Mark and Luke that it seems improbable. One commentator has suggested that the Hebrew word *zenūt* would be translated into Greek as *porneia* and would thus designate an unlawful union of concubinage. Then the sentence would literally read “Every one who sends away his woman (except in the case of concubinage) makes her commit adultery.” This seems to me to be a most satisfactory explanation of the passage, and it explains the exception clause from a Jewish background.

³³ “Again you have heard that it was said to your ancestors, ‘Do not take a false oath, but make good to the Lord all that you vow.’

The statement of the Law is not a direct quotation, but a paraphrase of such passages as Exodus 20:7; Leviticus 19:12; Numbers 30:3; Deuteronomy 23:22.

³⁴ But I say to you, do not swear at all; not by heaven, for it is God’s throne; ³⁵ nor by the earth, for it is his footstool; nor by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King.

In particular, Jesus forbids the type of evasion that substitutes for the Divine Name something less sacred. If a sacred object is mentioned in an oath, it is as if the divine name is being used.

³⁶ Do not swear by your head, for you cannot make a single hair white or black. ³⁷ Let your ‘Yes’ mean ‘Yes,’ and your ‘No’ mean ‘No.’ Anything more is from the evil one.

The necessity of an oath is a reflection of the evil condition of man, exhibiting both his tendency to lie, against which the oath is thought to protect, and his distrust of his fellow man. It is better to be known as an honest person who never lies so that no oath is ever needed.