

31st Sunday in Ordinary Time – Cycle B

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 - Deuteronomy 6:2-6

Life, for Moses, meant serving God and leading his people to the promised land. Here, with his characteristic humility and patience, he repeats the precepts and directives given him by God. He wants to engrave them on the minds and hearts of his people, to keep them loyal to the commitment made by their parents (he is now addressing a new generation of Israelites, all of those who would have been under the age of twenty when the exodus began). As a permanent reminder for future generations, when they cross the Jordan they must write the Law on stone (Deuteronomy 27:2-3), and from then on the Law is to be read out to the people every seven years (seven being the number which is representative of the covenant) to ensure that they obey it.

The Decalogue (the ten commandments, but literally in Hebrew, “the ten words”) have just been read and our 1st reading today is an explanation of the 1st commandment. In this reading we see the two basic principles in Deuteronomy:

- 1) Monotheism - Israel has to believe in the One True God.
- 2) It must love Him above all else.

[Moses spoke to the people saying;] ² [F]ear the LORD, your God, and keep, throughout the days of your lives, all his statutes and commandments which I enjoin on you,

The giving of the law is intimately connected with the promise of the land; the land being one of the “blessings” for keeping the covenant.

and thus have long life. ³ Hear then, Israel, and be careful to observe them, that you may grow and prosper the more, in keeping with the promise of the LORD, the God of your fathers, to give you a land flowing with milk and honey.

The promise made to Moses at the burning bush (Exodus 3:8). The land of the Canaanites was seen as a temptation for the Israelites because of its fruitfulness after 40 years of wandering in the desert and also as a theological problem because this fertility was seen as a divine blessing on the Canaanites (see Deuteronomy 8:7-20).

⁴ “Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD alone!

This refers to other gods worshiped by pagans; especially the Baal of Canaan. Yahweh is the only real, the only living, God.

⁵ Therefore, you shall love the LORD, your God, with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength. ⁶ Take to heart these words which I enjoin on you today.”

Why does God give these things to Israel? Because He loves them. Here, they are enjoined to reciprocate and love the Lord their God in return. A covenant is a sacred family bond and they are to respond to God’s love as God’s children. Love is covenant fidelity. Verses 4-9 are a prayer called the *Shema*. It is a summary of true religion: “**⁴ Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God is one Lord; ⁵ and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. ⁶ And these words which I command you this day shall be upon your heart; ⁷ and you shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. ⁸ And you shall bind them as a sign upon your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. ⁹ And you shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.”** (Deuteronomy 6:4-9, Revised Standard Version).

The *Shema* is the Hebrew profession of faith. As we use the creed in Christian worship, so do the Jewish people use the *Shema* in their synagogue service.

In verse 8 of the *Shema*, the “sign”, was taken literally and resulted in the phylacteries worn on the left arm and forehead. The phylacteries contain four passages from the Law [Exodus 13:1-10 (the matzoth-unleavened cakes); Exodus 13:11-16 (the Passover); Deuteronomy 4:6-9 (the *Shema*-profession of belief in God); and Deuteronomy 11:13-21 (the commandment to love God and not serve other Gods)].

2nd Reading - Hebrews 7:23-28

Last week we heard Jesus called “A priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek” (Hebrews 5:6, Genesis 14:15, Psalm 110:4). As a means of introduction to today’s reading we will learn a little more about Melchizedek, Jesus’ comparison to him, and their relationship to the covenant. Hebrews 7:1-3 says “**This ‘Melchizedek, king of Salem and priest of God Most High,’ ‘met Abraham as he returned from his defeat of the kings’ and ‘blessed him.’ And Abraham apportioned to him ‘a tenth of everything’** [a tithe]. **His name first means righteous king, and he was also ‘king of Salem,’ that is, king of peace. Without father, mother, or ancestry** [this is technical priestly language. Levitical priests must prove their genealogy (Ezra 2:62-63; Nehemiah 7:64-65) (paternal for 10 generations and maternal for 4 generations with no unclean marriages (to non-Jews) and no illegitimacy)], **without beginning of days or end of life** [a Levitical priest began apprenticeship at age 25 and served as priest from age 30 to age 50 at which point the requirement was that he retire], **thus made to resemble the Son of God, he remains a priest forever.”** Shem-Melchizedek is a priest prior to the golden calf and the institution of

the Levitical priesthood. He does not have to prove his genealogy or serve only for a designated period of time.

Now, moving along to Hebrews 7:11-22: **“If, then, perfection came through the levitical priesthood, on the basis of which the people received the law [the sacred author now shows the superiority of the priesthood of the order of Melchizedek to that of the Levitical priesthood], what need would there still have been for another priest to arise according to the order of Melchizedek, and not reckoned according to the order of Aaron? When there is a change of priesthood, there is necessarily a change of law as well [see [Ezekiel 20:21-26](#) which describes the rise of the Levitical law and consequent change from the priesthood of the firstborn son to the Levitical priesthood]. Now he of whom these things are said belonged to a different tribe, of which no member ever officiated at the altar. It is clear that our Lord arose from Judah, and in regard to that tribe Moses said nothing about priests. It is even more obvious if another priest is raised up after the likeness of Melchizedek; who has become so, not by a law expressed in a commandment concerning physical descent but by the power of a life that cannot be destroyed. For it is testified: ‘You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek’ [Jesus has a genealogy (Matthew 1:1-16) but it does not support a Levitical priesthood. The priesthood has become as God originally intended, the priesthood of the firstborn.]. On the one hand, a former commandment [the Levitical laws, not the ten commandments] is annulled because of its weakness and uselessness, for the law brought nothing to perfection; on the other hand, a better hope is introduced, through which we draw near to God. And to the degree that this happened not without the taking of an oath – for others became priests without an oath, but he with an oath, through the one who said to him: ‘The Lord has sworn, and he will not repent: ‘You are a priest forever’” [quoted from Psalm 110 where God is talking to a son of David, king of Salem] to that same degree has Jesus (also) become the guarantee [the guarantor-cosigner] of an (even) better covenant [Jesus is the new high priest and since a new priesthood requires a change in the law, the new covenant has come into being with the new priesthood of Jesus. This new covenant is better because it remains as long as the priesthood on which it is based remains and we have God’s word that it is forever. Jesus, the new high priest, guarantees the permanence of the New Covenant.]”**

²³ Those priests were many because they were prevented by death from remaining in office, ²⁴ but he, because he remains forever, has a priesthood that does not pass away. ²⁵ Therefore, he is always able to save those who approach God through him, since he lives forever to make intercession for them.

Although some regard the work of atonement synonymous with Jesus’ death on the cross – an event of the past, the parallel drawn in this book (chapter 9) between Jesus’ sacrifice and the sacrifice offered by the high priest on the Day of Atonement suggests that the sacrifice of Jesus cannot be thought of as limited to his death, his rising and ascension are also essential parts of it. Therefore, the sacrifice cannot be considered past, since its completion takes place in Heaven where time has no domain. Recall Saint John’s vision in

Revelation 5:6 where he sees the sacrifice being offered in the Eternal Now. Romans 8:34 also shows Jesus' constant intercession in our behalf; not just a one-time act of redemption, but a continual offering of His sacrifice in our behalf.

²⁶ It was fitting that we should have such a high priest: holy, innocent, undefiled, separated from sinners,

He has ascended to where no sin is allowed to enter (Revelation 21:27).

higher than the heavens.

He has passed through the intermediate heavens (the Jewish understanding of the universe was that above the earth was the firmament of the sky, above that were the waters above the firmament, and above all this was the heavenly seat of the divinity) (Hebrews 4:14; 9:24).

²⁷ He has no need, as did the high priests, to offer sacrifice day after day,

There is no requirement for the high priest to offer daily sacrifice of the type described here, only annually on the Day of Atonement. Perhaps this wording was used to emphasize the singularity of Jesus' sacrifice which is never repeated.

first for his own sins and then for those of the people; he did that once for all

One death, resurrection, and ascension for all persons for all time. Revelation 5:6 shows His continual presentation of that once for all sacrifice – not suffering and dying again, but the continual offering of the meal which seals the covenant.

when he offered himself. ²⁸ For the law

The Levitical law

appoints men subject to weakness to be high priests, but the word of the oath, which was taken after the law, appoints a son, who has been made perfect forever.

The promise of the non-Levitical priesthood of Psalm 110 came long after the institution of the Levitical priesthood. The high priest of the New Covenant has been consecrated forever. "Amen, Amen. Unless you eat my flesh and drink my blood ..." (John 6:51-58).

Gospel - Mark 12:28-34

Last week we heard of the healing of blind Bartimaeus. Today's reading is placed by all three synoptic gospel writers during Jesus' days in Jerusalem after His triumphal entry

(Palm Sunday) and before His passion begins (Holy Thursday).

The scribes were the scholars and intellectuals of Judaism. They received the title “rabbi.” His scholarship was the knowledge of the Law, which he regarded as the sum of wisdom and the only true learning. His position in the Jewish community was a respected position of leadership. The scribe as such was not a member of any Jewish sect or party (Pharisee, Sadducee, Zealot, Essene), but in fact most scribes were Pharisees, adhering to a strict interpretation of the Law.

Jesus was a threat to their influence which is why most New Testament references show them hostile to Him. This story is unique in that it portrays a friendly, rather than a controversial, discussion between Jesus and a scribe. This scribe has been impressed with Jesus’ earlier reply (verses 18-27, where He answers the question “In the resurrection, whose wife will a woman who has had seven husbands be?” This scribe wants to learn more.

[One of the scribes came to Jesus and asked him,] ^{28b} “Which is the first of all the commandments?”

Teachers of the Torah (scribes/rabbis) argued about the relative importance of the many commandments in the Old Testament. They wanted to find the “parent commandment” from which all others could be deduced. They had totaled 613 commandments, but had no agreement as to which was the parent.

²⁹ Jesus replied, “The first is this: ‘Hear, O Israel! The Lord our God is Lord alone!

Jesus cites Deuteronomy 6:4-5 (our first reading), the opening verses of the Shema, which Jews recite daily. This, however, was not among the 613 commandments they had totaled.

“Since God is one, it is ridiculous to suppose that there could be still another ‘Lord’ of heaven and earth in addition to the Lord who is one. There is simply no room for a second Lord of all, if the one true God fills all things in the compass of heaven and earth” [Saint Athanasius (ca. A.D. 318), *Treatise Against the Pagans*, 6,4].

³⁰ You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.’

Jesus is still quoting from the *Shema*. The references to heart, soul, mind, and strength do not refer to the various parts of the person but are a way of stressing that the whole person should love God with all available resources. It is interesting to note that Deuteronomy only lists heart, soul, and strength and the parallel gospel of Matthew (22:37) lists heart, soul, and mind – almost as if Jesus, the perfect Jew, equated the mind (knowledge) with strength. When we make the sign of the cross, we are tracing the *shema* upon our bodies as we touch our head (soul), heart, and shoulders (strength) and pledge them to God’s service.

³¹ The second is this: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’

Here Jesus quotes Leviticus 19:18, which was also not among the 613 commandments. Although He had only been asked for one commandment, He has provided two. The two commandments have a common theme – LOVE – the force which binds a family together.

“This is the summit of virtue, the foundation of all God’s commandments: to the love of God is joined also love of neighbor. One who loves God does not neglect his brother, nor esteem money more than a limb of his own, but shows him great generosity, mindful of him who has said, ‘Whoever did it to the least of my brothers did it to me.’ He is aware that the Lord of all considers as done to Himself what is done in generosity to the poor in giving relief. He does not take into consideration the lowly appearance of the poor, but the greatness of the One who has promised to accept as done to Himself what is given to the poor” [Saint John Chrysostom (A.D. 388), *Homilies On Genesis*, 55,12].

There is no other commandment greater than these.” ³² The scribe said to him, “Well said, teacher. You are right in saying, ‘He is One and there is no other than he.’

The scribe expresses agreement with Jesus by paraphrasing Him without any hint of hostility or irony.

³³ And ‘to love him with all your heart, with all your understanding, with all your strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself’ is worth more than all burnt offerings and sacrifices.”

This merely echoes Hosea 6:6 and 1 Samuel 15:22. It is not a condemnation of the sacrificial system.

“My brothers, shun not only the holding, but even the hearing, of the judgment that bans mercy. For mercy is better than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices” [Pope Saint Callistus I (ca. A.D. 217), *Second Epistle to All the Bishops of Gaul*, 6].

³⁴ And when Jesus saw that (he) answered with understanding, he said to him, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.” And no one dared to ask him any more questions.

Like the rich man, the scribe is close to the coming kingdom. The scribe’s correct understanding and willingness to learn is what is important (see Mark 10:13-16). Unlike the rich man, Jesus doesn’t say “there is one more thing” (Mark 10:21); the scribe has no impediments.