

Sixth Sunday of the Year February 12, 2017

Readings: Sirach 15:15-20; 1 Corinthians 2:6-10; Matthew 5:17-37

God calls us to a radical way of living. We are called to be more than just moral: God calls us to be virtuous. We become virtuous by habitually choosing to do well. Naturally we are not perfect, but God calls us to reflect on how we live and to understand what has gone right and wrong for us. Such reflection can lead us to insight that will help us to live better and be virtuous in the future. Therefore by reflecting on our experience in the light of faith we grow in wisdom. Jesus preaches us a religion that should become increasingly interior and personal to the individual. In today's Gospel Matthew emphasizes the close relationship between Jewish Law and the teaching of Jesus. Here Jesus teaches with examples that he has not come to abolish the Law and the prophets but to bring them to completion. He tells us that the Law still has its force and will not pass away till it has achieved the purpose for which it was given. Jesus on his part is giving us the new law namely the law of love. In the first reading Sirach affirms that God knows every human action. He the wise teacher urges his listeners to make the right choice in life. They have the commandments to guide them. In the second reading Paul reminds us that God has many riches for those who love him and tells us that the rulers of this age failed to recognize God's wisdom in Christ. The wisdom however is revealed to us by the Holy Spirit.

The first reading invites us to take every advantage to make the right choices in life. The reading begins with Sirach's straight forward announcement that God's commandments have the saving power. Moses said this to the people of Israel as he stood at the River Jordan and declared that he set before them the choice, life and prosperity, death and doom. The choice was theirs to make. Sirach now tells the people echoing the words of Moses that God has set before them fire and water, life and death, good and evil. He tells them to stretch out their hand to take which ever they choose. In the later chapters he gives sufficient examples how the choice is made by people before God. The author further motivates us to make the right choice by stating that God's eyes are on those who fear him. It is a strong image that reminds us that we cannot conceal our thoughts and actions from God. He adds emphatically that God does not command people to act unjustly or give them license to sin.

In today's Second Reading Paul continues his theme of wisdom and refers to the knowledge of understanding God's wisdom, what is sacred and hidden, what God decreed before the ages for the glory of all. God had in his mind from all eternity

that Christ crucified would bring glory to all who put their faith in him. Through his incarnation Jesus has revealed this wisdom through the Holy Spirit. In the book of Genesis we read that God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness..." The last words were, "to our likeness", referring to God's characteristics. God decreed that His children would be in His likeness, having His Divine characteristics. The spiritually mature Christian knows what God meant by those words. Paul emphasizes the role of the Spirit in the life of every baptized person as he understands the divine wisdom. He says that the only genuine factor in Christian life is a vital and practical faith in God's gift of Jesus Christ. Through the purifying trials and rapturous joys of life in Christ Jesus Paul wanted union with Christ in his total mystery.

This conceptual understanding of today's first two Readings leads to the Third Reading where Jesus says that unless our righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, we will never enter the Kingdom of Heaven. The scribes were known to be a class of citizens who copied and explained the laws of Moses. The Pharisees based their lives on the written law and thousands of detailed prescriptions handed down by oral tradition. Both were so obsessed with the laws that they had lost the meaning of the purpose of the law, the necessity for flexibility, common sense and even the meaning of mercy. They lacked spiritual maturity. They were worldly in their ways in the sense that they looked for the external observation and interior spirit of the law. Their hearts were cold and darkened. Here Jesus comes to give the practical aspect of the law as it can be fulfilled in Christian life. Jesus constantly objects to their behavior and external observances and tells his disciples not to imitate them. Jesus in today's Gospel which is part of the Sermon on the Mount sets forth among other things basic principles of Christian conduct, namely to observe the spirit of the law. He states that he has not come to abolish the Law found in the Old Testament but to fulfill it. That law was understood as an expression of God's will for his people, but written in human terms.

When the Gospel states that Jesus came not to destroy the law but to fulfill it may have surprised his audience a great deal. This is because Jesus was constantly accused of breaking the law and finally the accusation at his death was that he was breaking the laws continuously. People observed that he did not wash his hands prior to the meal that the law demanded, he healed people on the Sabbath day, and now he speaks of the law with veneration and reverence that no Scribe or Rabbi could exceed. He tells them that not even the smallest part of the law will be changed and he is there to fulfill the law and bring it to completion. The word Law

for the Jews during the time of Jesus held four different meanings. First was Decalogue or Ten Commandments which God gave from Sinai and Moses gave them to the people. The second was the Pentateuch or the first five books of the Bible. Pentateuch meant the Five Rolls, the basic law and for the Jews it was most important part of the Bible. The third was the Law and the Prophets which indicated the entire Scripture, comprehensively called as the Old Testament. Finally, the Oral or Scribal Law which included the religious practices and prescriptions observed by every Jew. These included all the observances like the Sabbath, the worship in the Temple, the fasting, prayer, alms giving and the like.

Matthew's gospel was written primarily for Jewish Christians and today's reading can be seen as words of encouragement for them. Matthew constantly refers to the Old Testament to show that the life of Jesus is not a breakaway from the past Jewish traditions but is a continuation of all that was foretold by the prophecies of the Hebrew Testament. The life and teaching of Jesus is not to be seen as a new religion; Jesus' life is the natural development of the story of salvation. Matthew shows that Jesus is the fulfillment of the Prophecies of the Old Testament. He emphasizes the close relationship between Jewish Law and the teaching of Jesus. He reassures his readers that Jesus has not come to abolish the Law and the prophets but to bring them to completion. So, in a sense, the Law still has its force and it will not pass away till it has achieved the purpose for which it was given. Jesus clearly says that till heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished or fulfilled.

When Jesus said that he has come not to destroy but to fulfill the Law he meant that he has come to indicate the real meaning of the Law. One great Principle that lay behind every prescribed law oral or written was that in all things a man must seek God's will and that he must dedicate his whole life in obeying him. For Jesus the entire meaning is summed up in one word, namely, Respect or Reverence. He summarizes the Ten Commandments in this word, reverence to the person of God, to his name, to his day, reverence to the parents, respect for life, property, personality, respect for truth and to a person's good name and finally respect for self. In other words the entire law is said to be Reverence for God and respect for self and others. For, this reverence and respect did not consist of small rules and norms but consisted in the commandment of love: Love of God and Love of neighbor. He did not abolish the Law but introduced a completely new way of thinking and understanding of the law. He did not abolish or change the Law but went far beyond its requirements. For Jesus, external observance of the law is not enough. To be a disciple of Jesus it is necessary to realize the meaning of the law

which is built on love. To keep the Law without love is like having a body without a soul. That is why he tells his disciples that unless their virtue goes deeper than that of the Scribes and the Pharisees, they will not enter the Kingdom of God.

Jesus did appreciate the Scribes and the Pharisees for their careful observance of the Law and the Commandments. But Jesus was critical of their not keeping of the spirit of the law. They stressed on their personal motive and their own perfection and did not accept the love of God and their neighbor in practice. They were hypocrites in their behavior. In order to make his disciples understand his teaching, Jesus gives six striking examples and in today's Gospel, we have four of them: anger, adultery, divorce and oath. He clearly states that it is not enough simply to keep what the Law tells us but practice the basic virtues attached to them. For him there can be no separation between our relationship with God and the relationship with people. A Christian has to find God in his brothers and sisters and in creation.

The first example Jesus gives is about anger which begins with the ancient law: "Do not kill." But Jesus says that not just anger but use of any insulting word is forbidden. We must deeply respect the dignity and rights of every person and every person is unconditionally loved by God and for whom Jesus has sacrificed his life. Again if we do not respect our brothers and sisters from the depth of our heart, we cannot say we respect God. A disciple has to refrain from insulting the other or destroy his reputation. He adds any contempt and not respecting a person as a creature of God is unchristian. There is the need of reconciliation even at the offering of sacrifice in the Temple. If a person during the sacrifice remembers that he has offended someone, or the other person has offended him, he must leave the gifts behind to go and reconcile with that person and then make his offering in the Temple. Otherwise, his prayers and offering are of no real value. Jesus wants us to realize that life and worship cannot be separated for each influences the other. Further Jesus insists on reconciliation and peace in the community. He gives a practical advice that when there is a quarrel or difference of opinion, there should be an immediate healing or else greater harm can come if he acts under the influence of anger.

In his second example Jesus tells the disciples that they must not commit adultery. Adultery is having sexual relations between two persons, of whom at least one is already married. The Jewish Law prescribes very serious penalties for this, often being stoned to death. Jesus tells them that not only the forbidden action but also the forbidden thought is guilty in the sight of God. Here Jesus is saying that, apart from our external actions, our basic attitude is paramount. We cannot just use

another person just as an object of pleasure or as a thing. Adultery is wrong not just because it is a sexual act outside marriage but because it is an act of serious injustice to the innocent married partner and injures the marriage relationship. It is a breach of trust and fidelity. Here Jesus makes a great and surgical demand insisting that anything which is a cause to sin like the eye or ear or any part of the body, it should be cut off permanently. The eternal life is of greater value than the earthly life.

In his third example Jesus speaks of divorce. In Jesus' time, it was relatively easy to grant divorce. The Law said that whoever wanted to divorce his wife, he could give her a certificate of separation. Divorces took place for very trivial reasons and the woman had no say in the matter and could do nothing about it. The woman in the eyes of the law was not a person but a thing. She was at the absolute disposal of her father or her husband. She had no legal rights and she on her part could not offer divorce to her husband. Jesus says that divorce may be considered legal but was against the dignity and the rights of the woman. He considered it both selfish and unjust and at the same time immoral. For Jesus marriage is a close bond and must be an expression of love and justice. During his time love or happiness had very little to do with marriage. It was governed by the laws and tradition and was seen as the bringing together of two families with the purpose of producing heirs. Jesus was speaking like a practical reformer where he looked for stability and building an ideal family based on love and acceptance.

In the fourth example Jesus speaks about swearing and oath. The law stated that people must not swear falsely and must carry out what they have vowed. It was common for people to guarantee the truth of what they said by making a solemn oath before God. They would take an oath when it was necessary so that such word would guarantee veracity. Secondly if they took oath without God's name being involved then such oath was not binding them. Jesus points out that a good Christian does not have to swear at all, because a true Christian is a reliable and is totally an honest person. He or she is a person of integrity and can be trusted when they speak. They don't need to give external guarantees. Their 'Yes' or 'No' means what is said and there are no mental reservations. The absence of oath manifests goodness and transparency of the person. In all these examples Jesus showed that the meaning of the law is interior depending on the way in which it is lived, with sincerity and love for the divine.

A Siberian shaman asked God to show him a man that He loved. The Lord advised him to look for a certain farmer. “What do you do to make the Lord love you so much?” the shaman asked the farmer when he found him. “I say His name in the morning. I work all day and say His name before going to sleep. That’s all,” the farmer replied. I think I found the wrong man, thought the shaman. Just then the Lord appeared and said, “Fill a bowl with milk, and go to town and then return without spilling a single drop.” The shaman did so. On his return, the Lord wanted to know how many times he had thought of Him. “How could I? I was worried not to spill the milk!” “A simple bowl made you forget me,” said the Lord, “and the farmer, with all his tasks, thinks of me twice a day.”

Many years ago, when a social worker worked as a volunteer at a hospital, he got to know a little girl named Liz who was suffering from a rare & serious disease. Her only chance of recovery appeared to be a blood transfusion from her 5-year old brother, who had miraculously survived the same disease and had developed the antibodies needed to combat the illness. The doctor explained the situation to her little brother, and asked the little boy if he would be willing to give his blood to his sister. All saw him hesitate for only a moment before taking a deep breath and saying, “Yes I’ll do it if it will save her.” As the transfusion progressed, he lay in bed next to his sister and smiled, as all did, seeing the colour returning to her cheek. Then his face grew pale and his smile faded. He looked up at the doctor and asked with a trembling voice, “Will I die right away, or how soon?” The boy had misunderstood the doctor; he thought he would have to give his sister all of his blood in order to save her. WOW!. Beautiful. He loved his sister and gave everything.

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