

November 4, 2018

[152] Thirty-first Sunday in Ordinary Time

Deuteronomy 6:2-6 / Psalm 18 / Hebrews 7:23-28 / Mark 12:28b-34

Moses exhorts that honor and obedience to God brings forth the blessings of long life and prosperity upon his people. Indeed, if they expect the LORD to keep his promises for a land of their own then they must reciprocate with their own fidelity. This illustrates a profound message about justice— God rewards faithfulness, punishes disobedience and protects his own who love him. This appreciation is the glue that preserves the identity of the Jews as God’s chosen people, from the time that they were a family and tribe through their transition as a nation and then a religion. Indeed, it may be argued that such an appreciation is the seed, first for the ordering of the Jewish community and later for the emergence of Christianity and a Judeo-Christian civilization. Such a community, ordered around both divine truth and justice, is now in the wane as it is increasingly replaced by a secular culture that makes man and not God the measure of all things. The Church today is ever more an isolated sign of contradiction in this modern world. As such, power, money and politics manipulate the larger community even as its pawns endlessly belabor about invented rights and fraudulent freedoms. It must be said that a general chaos reigns (everyone doing their own thing) and the error of subjective truth (disorientation around a false foundation) wrongly countermands what is objectively true.

The responsorial carries forward the theme of our dependence upon God. Note that the psalmist calls the LORD his rock. Many of the ancient pagan believers literally were idolaters. While their statues over time came to represent false deities, initially the idols of metal or stone or wood were worshipped in themselves. Certain anthropologists argue that next to the worship of celestial elements like the sun and moon, many early people actually worshipped rocks. These rocks were eventually carved into various shapes. Any visitor to the Holy Land will know that it is a place littered with rocks. That is why stoning became a routine manner of enacting capital punishment. The rocks took on an importance

because they could be used in defense, hunting and building. They were particularly effective in fighting, either against other people or in killing animals for food. Indeed, heavy rocks were also used in crushing grain in the process of making life-giving bread. Contrasted to the idolaters, the Hebrew people were called to follow an invisible God. While he was the Creator, he could not be identified with his creation. God's people strenuously fought against the use of idols but it may be that they borrowed something of the language of their pagan neighbors. Calling the LORD their rock, they were asserting that he was both their firm foundation and that he had sufficient power to protect his own.

Illustrated in both our first reading and the Gospel, the backbone to all the commandments is their relationship with the living God. This is why idolatry was regarded as the vilest sin: "Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD alone! Therefore, you shall love the LORD, your God, with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength." While we appreciate our saving faith in Jesus as the Son of God, this command retains its binding force for Jews and Christians, alike. All sin or rebellion signifies a turning away from this truth—placing either persons or things before our allegiance to God. Adherence to this command changes everything. A failure to embrace this truth corrupts discipleship as a matter of external show or exhibition. It is this love of God that should fuel all human charity. It is the unseen element by which all souls will be judged. St. Paul as the Pharisee-turned-Christian knew this truth well. He wrote the Corinthians: "If I speak in human and angelic tongues but do not have love, I am a resounding gong or a clashing cymbal. And if I have the gift of prophecy and comprehend all mysteries and all knowledge; if I have all faith so as to move mountains but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away everything I own, and if I hand my body over so that I may boast but do not have love, I gain nothing" (1 Corinthians 13:1-3). The fidelity of men is not like the actions of pre-programmed ants. God wants our hearts. He wants us to prize him as our treasure before all else. He is a jealous God and does not want to share us— it is all or nothing!

Jesus adds as a corollary of the great commandment toward the Lord one that includes the neighbor: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." The scribe that comes to him affirms the answer and Jesus tells him, "You are not far from the

kingdom of God.” If we were to imagine this love as water in a cup it would be brimming over. It cannot be contained. That is why such a love of God must spill upon our brothers and sisters.

The courts order the removal of the Decalogue from the walls of courtrooms and from display on public grounds. (There was one notable exception when authorities said they would permit an edited listing that subtracted the commandments about God.) The problem is, take God out of the equation and the commandments become mere suggestions. We have faced similar problems in the public schools. Efforts to teach virtues in public schools have collapsed because who is to say what is wrong if there is no divine command? What are the consequences? We can no longer even agree about questions of gender. Despite obvious disordered elements, sexual orientation and behavior has become a free-for-all. Children can celebrate the Wiccan and occult elements of Halloween but only the Easter Bunny and a sanitized Santa have survived the purging of Christ’s birth and resurrection. Mother’s and Father’s Day has been removed from calendars or transformed so as not to offend those with no acknowledged male or female parents. Instead of telling children to wait until marriage for sexual intimacy, school nurses pass out condoms and in some cases schedule abortions for the children under their care. Nevertheless, they still cannot give those same children an aspirin for a headache. Tired of teaching children to behave, many children are drugged for purported attention disorders (which they may or may not have). When children are challenged for bad behavior their answers are quick and to the point. “Who are you to tell me what to do?”

Note the first half of the traditional Act of Contrition: “O my God, I am heartily sorry for having offended Thee, and I detest all my sins, because of Thy just punishments, but most of all because they offend Thee, my God, who art all good and deserving of all my love.” The essential message from Moses to Christ was love; however, if love should be found wanting, then at least the fear of punishment would make possible contrition and help to insure proper behavior. At a minimum, the fear of punishment (the loss of heaven and the fires of hell) protects the good from evil men and upholds a moral society. However, today it could rightly be said that many people neither love God nor fear punishment. It

should not surprise us that this attitude has arisen at the same time as when atheism is claimed by a quarter of the U.S. population. Worse than this, many who are believers live as if there were no God. Separated from God, we do not know how to be good.

As an aside to this homily theme, the second reading speaks about the priesthood of Christ. Here we can also say something about the love of God and the fidelity we should show him. While the priests of old could only serve until their deaths, Christ's priesthood is eternal. Indeed, his priestly service can save all who approach him for mediation. While the Jewish priests daily offered a sacrifice that could not fully appease the dishonor of God caused by sin, the oblation of Jesus on Calvary makes true satisfaction and has lasting value. Men ordained to the priesthood in the Church share in his one priesthood. The Mass is a real and unbloody re-presentation of Calvary behind the sacred signs of bread and wine. While ordained clergy stand at our altars, it is Jesus who celebrates every Mass. Jesus is our high priest and our divine and innocent victim. While our priests may offer the Mass daily, it is only because they live and minister in time. The underlying truth is that every Mass participates in the onetime sacrifice of Jesus. Jesus realizes the full meaning of the commandment of love. Given his identity, he joins within himself the power of divine love with the fidelity that we are commanded to grant to the Father. Jesus spreads his arms on the Cross as the offering of a love beyond measure.

- Can you truly say that the priorities of your life illustrate fidelity to the two-fold commandment of love?
- Can you really say that you love God while you hate your neighbor?
- What competes with our intimacy and loyalty to the Lord?
- What motivates our prayers and acts of charity?
- Can people really love the Lord as they should if they fail to pray and to worship with the believing community of the Church?
- Is it well appreciated that the priest is Christ and that the Mass is Calvary?
- Can we really be good without God?
- Are we moved more out of fear or love of God?