

23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time - 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 - Ezekiel 33:7-9

There is no Old Testament writer who has received more varied, even diametrically opposed, interpretations of his person and his writings than Ezekiel. He has been psychoanalyzed and found to be a victim of catatonic schizophrenia, unconscious sexual regression, schizophrenic withdrawal, and having delusions of persecution and grandeur. He has been called “one of the greatest spiritual figures of all time, in spite of his tendency to abnormality.” In fact, no Hebrew prophet would be considered “normal” as they spoke God’s words against the actions of the people. Ezekiel has been described as a mystic – all prophets are mystics.

In Ezekiel we find blended the priest and the prophet, the poet and the theologian, and an organizer of religion as an institution and a preacher of religion of morality and even mysticism, with the sense of a deep consciousness of the presence and transcendence of God.

Ezekiel is thought to have been deported to Babylon in 597 B.C., where he received his call and worked all his life among the exiles.

In our reading today we hear Ezekiel tell of his role as watchman for the Israelites, the one who is to initiate correction.

[Thus says the LORD:] ⁷ You, son of man, I have appointed watchman for the house of Israel; when you hear me say anything, you shall warn them for me. ⁸ If I tell the wicked man that he shall surely die, and you do not speak out to dissuade the wicked man from his way, he (the wicked man) shall die for his guilt, but I will hold you responsible for his death. ⁹ But if you warn the wicked man, trying to turn him from his way, and he refuses to turn from his way, he shall die for his guilt, but you shall save yourself.

Israel is in trouble. Ezekiel is their prophet but he must work on an individual basis. Just as a mile is walked one step at a time, there is no salvation for Israel as a whole, but for each individual according to his merits.

2nd Reading - Romans 13:8-10

Today we hear Saint Paul tell us that the Christian is a fulfilled Israelite and as such still has the obligation of love that sums up the entire Mosaic law.

⁸ Owe nothing to anyone, except to love one another;

All the obligations of Christian life find their summation in this one statement. Love or charity is not a duty owed someone, but is the natural outgrowth of Christian conduct.

for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.

Again, Saint Paul is applying his training in the covenant to show how family building is the goal of the New Covenant.

“Paul wants us to have peace with everyone and love the brethren. Then we shall not owe anybody anything. He who loves his neighbor has fulfilled the law of Moses. The commandment of the new covenant is that we should love our enemies as well. [The Ambrosiaster (ca. A.D. 366-384), *Commentaries on Thirteen Pauline Epistles* Romans 13,8]

⁹ The commandments, "You shall not commit adultery; you shall not kill; you shall not steal; you shall not covet,"

Paul is citing phrases from the Decalogue, the ten commandments (Exodus 20:13-17; Deuteronomy 5:17-21).

and whatever other commandment there may be, are summed up in this saying, (namely) "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

Paul may be echoing the saying of Jesus in Mark 12:28-32. This saying of Jesus sums up the Mosaic law with Deuteronomy 6:4-5 and Leviticus 19:18. In Leviticus 19:18 “neighbor” means “fellow Jew” but Jesus and Saint Paul give it a wider extension.

¹⁰ Love does no evil to the neighbor; hence, love is the fulfillment of the law.

This may seem at first glance to be an abstract conclusion, but Paul is enunciating the basic principle. If Christ is the goal and fulfillment of the Law, then love, which motivated His whole existence and activity, can be said to be the fulfillment of the Law. This becomes the norm for Christian conduct and, when properly applied, achieves all that the Law stood for.

“If you love somebody, you will not kill him. Nor will you commit adultery, steal from him or bear false witness against him. It is the same with all the other commands of the law: love ensures that they are kept.” [Origen (post A.D. 244), *Commentaries on Romans*]

Gospel - Matthew 18:15-20

Today we hear Jesus’ teaching on fraternal correction. This is one of the ways in which the members of the Church must seek out the sheep that has wandered. This is loving correction.

¹⁵ "If your brother sins (against you),

Some early texts do not contain this modifier. The duty of correction is not limited to offenses that are personal.

go and tell him his fault between you and him alone.

This should be done privately so that the brother is not embarrassed or humiliated.

If he listens to you, you have won over your brother.

The word used here is a technical rabbinic term for missionary conversion.

¹⁶ If he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, so that 'every fact may be established on the testimony of two or three witnesses.'

Should the brother be recalcitrant, a few witnesses are to be summoned for another reproof. In the law of Deuteronomy 19:15 the evidence of a single witness is not enough for a conviction. The witnesses add weight to the reproof.

¹⁷ If he refuses to listen to them, tell the church.

Who says Jesus didn't form a visible church? The local Christian community is meant by the Greek term *ekklesia*; a term used only here and in Matthew 16:18 in all the gospels.

If he refuses to listen even to the church,

Something which should be unheard of – something very drastic. There is no higher authority.

then treat him as you would a Gentile or a tax collector.

Let him be excommunicated, excluded from the community. A serious step which is taken only where the welfare of the community is at stake. Jesus welcomes tax collectors (Matthew had been one at the time of his calling) but only when they showed faith and repented of their sins (see Matthew 9:9-13). This is what is called today "tough love."

¹⁸ Amen, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven,

God will do the binding.

and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.

The apostles are given the power to bind and loose, the same power that was given to Peter in Matthew 16:19. Note that there is one significant difference, they have not been given the keys; this symbol of authority has been reserved for Peter as the Chief Apostle (and first Pope).

¹⁹ Again, (amen,) I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything for which they are to pray, it shall be granted to them by my heavenly Father.

From the very beginning the Church has practiced communal prayer. "All those with one accord devoted themselves to prayer, together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus" (Acts 1:14). This does not obviate the need for individual prayer, but rather supports and strengthens it.

²⁰ For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them."

Even two or three can form a prayer group where the prayer of the Church is offered.