

30th 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 - Exodus 22:20-26

Like his forebears, Abraham and Isaac, Jacob led a semi-nomadic existence in Canaan. He was forced by a severe famine to emigrate with his entire family to Egypt, where they settled around the beginning of the eighteenth century before Christ.

Over the next four hundred years the Scriptures tell us nothing about the stay of the Jews in Egypt. God makes no revelation during this period. All we know is that by the end of it the Hebrews had become a numerous, strong, hardworking people; so much so that the Egyptians, growing afraid of them, forced them into slavery.

The book of Exodus (which means “leaving”) is a continuation of the story of Genesis. The fact that it takes its name from the Israelites’ going out of Egypt shows the importance of this episode in the life of Israel.

Although this book takes the form of a popular narrative, easy for the people to understand, it also contains important religious teachings. The episodes in this history obviously involve special divine intervention: there is no other explanation for the liberation of Israel or the crossing of the Red Sea or its survival for so long in the wilderness.

As we approach our reading today we find ourselves with the Israelites at the base of Mount Sinai. God has offered a covenant [“Therefore, if you hearken to my voice and keep (*shammar*) my covenant, you shall be my special possession, dearer to me than all other people, though all the earth is mine. You shall be to me a kingdom of priests, a holy nation” (Exodus 19:5-6)]. *Shammar* is a word which can be translated as “keep” but might be better translated as “guard (keep safe)” (see Genesis 2:15). The people have accepted the invitation [“Everything the LORD has said, we will do” (Exodus 19:8)].

The people however are afraid to go up the mountain so they send Moses in their stead. Moses receives the ten commandments verbally and verbally delivers them to the people. Moses then ascends the mountain again and God gives him other laws: the treatment of Hebrew slaves, rules of conduct for personal injuries, the rules and penalties for the protection of property, laws of justice and mercy, and laws of social responsibility – it is from these laws that our reading for today is taken. Today’s reading appears as Exodus 22:21-27 in most translations but the New American Bible, Jerusalem Bible, and New Jerusalem Bible have it as Exodus 22:20-26.

²⁰ "You shall not molest or oppress an alien, for you were once aliens yourselves in the land of Egypt.

The alien is one who, because of war, plague, famine, or bloodguilt, was forced to leave his home. In his new abode, his civil rights are, understandably, less than those of his neighbors. As assurance

that the Israelites would be hospitable to these unfortunates, the code reminds them of their former status as aliens in Egypt.

²¹ You shall not wrong any widow or orphan. ²² If ever you wrong them and they cry out to me, I will surely hear their cry. ²³ My wrath will flare up, and I will kill you with the sword; then your own wives will be widows, and your children orphans.

Any wrong done to the unprotected widow and orphan would incur a wrathful Yahweh as their avenging kinsman.

²⁴ "If you lend money to one of your poor neighbors among my people, you shall not act like an extortioner toward him by demanding interest from him.

Extortion of interest on a loan to a fellow Israelite, particularly if he were needy, was sharply prohibited. However, the Old Testament does not proscribe all interest. From both Leviticus 25:35-38 and Deuteronomy 23:20-21, the injunction clearly regarded only a loan to one's countryman. The deuteronomic code clearly allows interest to be demanded from foreigners. The loans addressed here are not for commercial purposes but to alleviate distress: to take interest on them would be to profit from another's misfortune.

²⁵ If you take your neighbor's cloak as a pledge, you shall return it to him before sunset; ²⁶ for this cloak of his is the only covering he has for his body. What else has he to sleep in? If he cries out to me, I will hear him; for I am compassionate.

The poor are specifically protected; their cloak, which also served as their blanket at night, had to be returned to them by evening. The compassionate God watches over the weak. Amos 2:8 accuses the wealthy of sleeping upon garments taken in pledge.

2nd Reading - 1 Thessalonians 1:5c-10

In evangelization the initiative lies with God and it is He who causes the preaching of the Gospel to bear fruit. The election of the Christian is made by God and proceeds from His love (1:4); His son, Jesus, "who delivers us from the wrath to come (1:10), sustains our hope (1:3); the action of the Holy Spirit renders the preacher's word persuasive (1:5) and fills with joy those who listen to it no matter what trials may befall them (1:6). The core of preaching is the gospel (1:5), that is, the good news of salvation foretold by the prophets and brought to fulfillment by our Lord Jesus Christ. The proclamation of this news tells those who listen that they are "beloved by God," specially chosen by Him (1:4). They are called to turn to God (1:9), who will give the three theological virtues (faith, hope and charity) to those who accept the Christian message (1:3). Faith and the sanctifying action of the Holy Spirit lead believers to salvation, to attaining the glory of the Lord Jesus (2 Thessalonians 2:13-14). Let's read last week's reading along with the one for this week.

^{1:1} Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy to the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: grace to you and peace. ² We give thanks to God always for all of you, remembering you in our prayers, unceasingly ³ calling to mind your work of faith and labor

of love and endurance in hope of our Lord Jesus Christ, before our God and Father, ⁴ knowing, brothers loved by God, how you were chosen. ⁵ For our gospel did not come to you in word alone, but also in power and in the holy Spirit and (with) much conviction. You know what sort of people we were (among) you for your sake.

The reading for last week closed with a proclamation about how evangelization (preaching the gospel) was carried out. This week's reading completes that verse by stressing that the apostle's lifestyle is an important witness to the authenticity of their message.

⁶ And you became imitators of us and of the Lord,

Christianity is an imitation of God after the manner revealed by Jesus. The apostles imitate Jesus and their converts imitate them.

“Those who, eager to believe, suffer insults and injuries from their fellows, are precisely those who may be called imitators of the apostles and of the Lord Himself. He suffered the same things from the Jews, as did the apostles who endured persecution as they pursued their faith in God.” [The Ambrosiaster (between A.D. 366-384), *Commentaries on Thirteen Pauline Epistles* 1 Thessalonians 1:6]

receiving the word in great affliction, with joy from the holy Spirit,

Joy in the faith in spite of persecution is the work of the Holy Spirit and the imitation of Christ.

⁷ so that you became a model for all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia.

Modern day Greece.

⁸ For from you the word of the Lord has sounded forth not only in Macedonia and (in) Achaia, but in every place your faith in God has gone forth, so that we have no need to say anything.

The conversion of the Thessalonians is celebrated.

⁹ For they themselves openly declare about us what sort of reception we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God

In the Septuagint and in the New Testament, idols are synonymous with false gods; they do not exist and their worship is related to demons. Their conversion involves a departure from the worship of non-existent gods for the service of a God who truly lives and is what He claims to be.

¹⁰ and to await his Son

To the monotheism of the living God is added Christology. Jesus of Nazareth is the son of God, and God has raised Him from the dead.

from heaven,

The dwelling place of God.

whom he raised from (the) dead, Jesus, who delivers us from the coming wrath.

The end times are also mentioned – this same Jesus who was raised from the dead will come and rescue us from the definitive manifestation of God's wrath, The unrepentant sinner will be punished.

Gospel - Matthew 22:34-40

Last week we heard Jesus' reply to the question of paying taxes – a question which had been designed to trip Him up. After this, and before today's reading, Jesus is approached by the Sadducees who question Him about the resurrection and whose wife the woman with seven husbands will be. Jesus reply is that in heaven there is no marriage because all are like angels, but there certainly is an afterlife because God had called Himself the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (Exodus 3:6) and He is the God of the living and not the dead. He has sidestepped the Sadducees and has again astounded the crowd.

³⁴ When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, ³⁵ and one of them (a scholar of the law)

Some translations call him a lawyer. He is a scribe, one learned in the Torah.

tested him by asking, ³⁶ "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?"

The Pharisees had enumerated 613 commandments but there was no agreement as to what the ranking was. After all, one of them must be the most important, the first from which all the others descended.

³⁷ He said to him, "You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. ³⁸ This is the greatest and the first commandment.

Jesus cites Deuteronomy 6:5. Love is not primarily a feeling but covenant fidelity – a matter of willing and doing. Although this is part of the *schema* (Deuteronomy 6:4-9, 11:13-21, Numbers 15:37-41), a prayer recited daily by faithful Jews and the principal Jewish confession of faith, it was not numbered among the commandments.

³⁹ The second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.

Jesus now cites Leviticus 19:18, another one not numbered among the commandments.

⁴⁰ The whole law and the prophets depend on these two commandments."

The rabbis said that the world hangs on Torah, temple service, and deeds of loving kindness – or on truth, judgement and peace. Jesus makes the Law itself depend upon deeds of love.