

30th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A

Exodus 22:20-26

Neither Moses, nor the elders, nor the judges, nor even later kings could make laws for the Israelites. They could administer and execute laws, collect taxes, keep the peace and make judicial rulings, BUT YAHWEH WAS THE LEGISLATIVE BRANCH OF THE GOVERNMENT! Justice was reasonable and compassionate. It was NOT arbitrary. Justice was the same for all social classes. There was no favoritism for either the rich or for the poor.⁴ Our selection today comes from a section of Exodus called the Book of the Covenant. The verses just previous to our reading legislate the death penalty for sorcery, sodomy, and idolatry. God is playing HARDBALL with the Israelites. They were chosen to be a sign of God's presence in the world so they had to live according to a standard that set them apart.²

Thus says the Lord:

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

The reason a person became an alien was usually because of war, famine, plague or blood-guilt that made him leave his home. The Bible ranks resident aliens with widows and orphans who had no family to support them. In that tribal society, they were all marginalized people who needed special protection.⁵ The Catechism expands on this by saying that there are “sins that cry to heaven”: the blood of Abel, the sin of the Sodomites, the cry of the people oppressed in Egypt, the cry of the foreigner, the widow, and the orphan, and injustice to the wage earner.¹ (CCC 1867)

21You shall not wrong any widow or orphan.

22If ever you wrong them and they cry out to me, I will surely hear their cry. Yahweh Himself would hear their cry like an avenging kinsman.⁹ There were no police forces at this time. Might was law.²

23My wrath will flare up, and I will kill you with the sword; then your own wives will be widows, and your children orphans. The very force of this threat impresses us with just how outrageous it is to mistreat the helpless.⁷

24If 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. The issue here is taking advantage of the misfortunes of the poor to enrich oneself.¹⁰ Yahweh wanted His people to treat each other like family. People didn't borrow money to set up businesses nor to buy houses at this time. They only borrowed when they were broke. Yahweh wanted them to lend without interest and out of love for one another.⁴ Note that this only applied to their countrymen whom the scripture calls “poor neighbors among my people.” Leviticus and Deuteronomy clearly allowed interest to be demanded of a foreigner.⁵

25If you take your neighbor's cloak as a pledge, you shall return it to him before sunset; A “cloak” was a very valuable possession as most people only had one and they used it as a blanket, as a sack to carry things, a place to sit, a pledge for a debt and an article of clothing.³

26for 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 compassionate God watches over the weak.⁹

1 Thessalonians 1:5c-10

The importance of the Christian community in Thessalonica was great, for it was an influential city, a crossroads to other lands, and the church there was the first Christian community in Europe. From there the gospel could spread both west and east. This church was crucial to the missionary success of the new faith.⁷

Brothers and sisters:

5You know what sort of people we were among you for your sake. Paul and his companions toiled with their hands night and day to earn their living while they carried on their apostolic work. They preached the Gospel to the Thessalonians for their own sake, not for any profit, which was very different from the preaching of wandering heathen teachers with which the people were familiar.⁶

6And you became imitators of us The reason that Paul and his companions were models for the Thessalonians was because the gospel was the basis of their lives. Thus to imitate them is to imitate the Lord. This imitation is a combination of affliction and joy, an experience of sharing Christ's cross and his resurrection.¹⁰ Essentially, the apostles imitate Jesus and their converts imitate them.⁹

This certainly reminds us of the importance of good example! **and of the Lord, receiving the word in great affliction,** This may have been some actual harassment the Thessalonians suffered when they converted, or to inner turmoil each person felt as they did so.¹¹ **with joy from the Holy Spirit,** Joy in the faith in spite of persecution is a fruit of the Holy Spirit. In the natural course of events afflictions do not produce joy but it is the privilege of those who ACCEPT sufferings for the sake of Jesus Christ. Joy is also tied in with the imitation of Christ whose acceptance of his passion and death are the perfect model for the Christian vocation and the path to glory. The "word of God" which the Thessalonians received is not just a message or doctrine, it is a divine activity!⁵

7so that you became a model for all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. Though young in the faith, the strength of their belief is already praised and emulated in distant lands.⁷

8For from you the word of the Lord has sounded forth Their faith sounded forth like a trumpet! When all prudence and all commonsense would have dictated a way of life that would have escaped notice, and so avoided danger and persecution, the Christians defied their dangers and blazoned forth their faith. They were never ashamed to show whose they were and whom they sought to serve.¹²

not only in Macedonia and in Achaia, This refers to northwestern and southwestern Greece.¹¹ **but in every place your faith in God has gone forth so that we have no need to say anything.** Travelers reported what they had seen and heard of Christian life at Thessalonica and thus the faith of the new Church became a theme of discussion in every place which had trading connections with the city.⁶ These people became missionaries without leaving town!

9For 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. Their conversion involved a departure from the worship of idols or false gods for the service of the one true God. The worship of idols was a capital offense in Israel. This conversion was probably not easy. What Paul calls "idols" were the only gods the Thessalonians knew. To turn from them meant turning from upbringing, family, friends, ancestry, and culture.¹¹

10and to await his son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus, who delivers us from the coming wrath. This is a summary of Christian preaching to the Gentiles for it includes a call to turn from false gods to the one true God, a proclamation of the death and resurrection of Jesus and the anticipation of Christ's second coming on the day of judgment. The saving action of Jesus is already operating but it will have its supreme manifestation at the end of time when we will see God's punishment of justice toward the unrepentant sinner.⁵ This is described in 2 Thessalonians 1:7

which speaks of “when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels; when with flaming power he will inflict punishment on those who do not acknowledge God nor heed the good news of our Lord Jesus. Such as these will suffer the penalty of eternal ruin apart from the presence of the Lord and the glory of his might on the Day when he comes to be glorified in his holy ones and adored by all who have believed.”

Matthew 22:34-40

In the preceding verses of this chapter, the Sadducees tried to discredit Jesus by questioning him in regard to the resurrection of the dead in which they did not believe. They presented him with what they thought was a clever way to ridicule the idea: a woman had seven husbands and no children and they asked whose wife she would be after the resurrection. Jesus explained that after the resurrection of the dead, people would neither marry nor be given in marriage but would live like angels in heaven. The Sadducees were the party of the priestly aristocracy, the wealthy and the governing class. They accepted only the five books of Moses as Sacred Scripture and rejected the full authority of the Old Testament prophets. Jesus was aware of this since he could have cited several passages from the prophets that speak clearly of the resurrection. However, he tailored his response by strategically citing one of the books of Moses in which God revealed Himself in the burning bush as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God could not be the God of dead men and of mouldering corpses. The living God must be the God of living men. The Sadducees' case was shattered. Jesus had done what the wisest Rabbis had never been able to do. Out of Scripture itself he had shown them that there is a life after death and that life after death must not be thought of in earthly terms.⁸

34When the Pharisees heard that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them, The Pharisees are back because they did believe in the resurrection of the dead and they are giving Jesus another chance because he has bested the Sadducees.²

35a scholar of the law, tested him by asking,

36“Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?”

37He said to him, “You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is a quotation from Deuteronomy which was recited several times a day by pious Jews as part of the Shema, the Jewish profession of faith.⁵

38This is the greatest and the first commandment.

39The second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. There were 613 commands of the Mosaic Law, 248 positive and 365 negative. These were divided into ‘grave’ and ‘light’. Offenses against the former could be expiated only by death. Offenses against the light commandments could be atoned for by penance. The Rabbis spoke also of ‘great’ and of ‘little’ commandments and of ‘smallest’ and ‘greatest’ commandments. Thus the questions would naturally arise, “Which is the greatest and first commandment? Jesus goes beyond what is asked when he also defines the second commandment. His meaning is clear that you can’t be a true Christian if you do not observe these two commandments.⁶

40The whole law and the prophets depend on these two commandments.” Fulfilling the law by loving God and neighbor appears continually throughout the Old Testament but Jesus teaches that there is a RELATIONSHIP between these two commands. Jesus is saying that we can’t have one without the other. Love of neighbor springs naturally from genuine love of God; love of God is demonstrated and strengthened in love of neighbor.⁷

Some of the material for this commentary was taken from: (1) "The Catechism Of The Catholic Church," (2) The Commentary Notes of Sean Innerst and Tim Grey, (3) "The Bread Of Life: Catholic Bible Study" by Deacon Ken & Marie Finn, (4) "The Story Of Stories" by Karen Lee-Thorp, (5) "The Jerome Biblical Commentary," (6) "The Sunday Epistles And Gospels" by Monsignor Patrick Boylan, (7) "Workbook for lectors and gospel readers Year A," by Aelred R. Rosser, (8) "The Gospel Of Matthew" by William Barclay, (9) The St. Paul Center for Biblical Theology Online founded by Dr. Scott Hahn, (10) "Workbook for lectors and gospel readers Year A 1999" Lawrence E. Mick, (11) "Workbook for lectors and gospel readers Year A 2008" by James L. Weaver, and (12) "The Letters To The Philippians, Colossians, And Thessalonians" by William Barclay

In loving memory of Peg Schneller, who compiled these commentaries.