

23rd Sunday In Ordinary Time, Cycle A

Ezekiel 33:7-9

We know very little about Ezekiel except that he was a priest who lived by the river Chebar in Babylonia and that he was married and his wife died. He prophesied between 593 and 571 BC.⁵ His entire prophetic career occurred in captivity.¹⁵ With the fall of Jerusalem, Ezekiel turns to the task of assuring the exiles that God's purpose continues. However, he conceives of his mission as being for individuals, because Israel as a body seems doomed.⁴ The verses just before our reading speak of the role of the watchman who blows the trumpet to warn the people of an approaching army. If people ignore the warning and die as a result, they are responsible for their own death. But if the watchman does not give the warning, then he is responsible for anyone who dies.¹ This passage tells us that God will hold us responsible for not speaking out to those who violate His teachings. Ezekiel tells us that God has called us to warn the wicked. Silence indicates to many a degree of acceptance of the condition.⁷

Thus says the Lord:

7You, son of man, This is a serious message from God to Ezekiel.¹ **I have appointed watchman for the house of Israel;** The duty of the watchman is to protect the city but in this passage we see that duty redefined to include watching out for individuals within the city.² **when you hear me say anything, you shall warn them for me.** This is the role of the prophet but every Christian also shares in the mission.¹

8If I tell the wicked, "O wicked one, you shall surely die," and you do not speak out to dissuade the wicked from his way, the wicked shall die for his guilt, but I will hold you responsible for his death.

9But if you warn the wicked, 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. The penalty is harsh for those who are too timid or complacent to address wrongdoing. However, the reward is great for those whose best efforts seem, nonetheless, to fail.²

In a recent interview, Cardinal Cipriani of Lima, Peru spoke strongly on a number of pro-life, pro-family issues and emphasized that, for the "modern apostle" who neglects his duty on these issues, "the sin of omission is as serious as the sinful deed." "The modern apostle must not be afraid to stand up for what is true and good, even if it means losing a job, coming under attack, and at times offering one's life." He ended by calling the Church the "watchman" of his nation's soul.³

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.¹²

Brothers and sisters:

8Owe nothing to anyone, This is certainly a strong reprimand for our culture! **except to love one another,** All the obligations of Christian life find their summation in this one statement.¹² This debt is always outstanding and is never paid off.⁶ **for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.** In verse 7 Paul counsels his readers to pay their public debts and here in verse 8 he is advising them to pay their private debts. The role of charity is essential in ALL Christian conduct and is NOT limited only to dealings with other Christians.⁴ In Jewish understanding “neighbor” meant compatriot or kin. In the Jesus tradition, neighbor has a much wider scope.¹⁴

9The commandments, “You shall not commit adultery; you shall not kill; you shall not steal; you shall not covet,” and whatever other commandment there may be, Paul distills four of the seven commandments of the Decalogue from Exodus 20 into one.⁶ **are summed up in this saying, namely, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”** We think of this as the essence of the New Testament but it is a quote from Leviticus (19:18), the basic Old Testament Rule Book.² By loving one another, we imitate the love of Jesus, which we have received from him (John 15:9: “This is my commandment, that you love one another AS I HAVE LOVED YOU.”)⁷

10Love does no evil to the neighbor; hence, love is the fulfillment of the law. 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.¹²

Matthew 18:15-20

This reading follows the section on the lost sheep . Fraternal correction is one way in which the followers of Jesus continue his ministry by seeking and finding those that are lost.⁴ The word “if” occurs six times in this selection, reminding us of the variable and unpredictable circumstances that continually recur in any human community that strives to put on the mind of Christ.¹⁰

Jesus said to his disciples:

15“If your brother This refers to those who belong to the community of the Church for they are brothers in Christ as children of the same heavenly Father and of the same Mother, the Church.¹⁰ **sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone.** This first stage of discipline refers to giving scandal and to secret or private sins. Correction should be given privately, just to the person himself, to avoid unnecessarily publicizing a private matter and also to

avoid hurting the person and to make it easier for him to mend his ways.⁹ It is hard to reconcile this teaching with the one cautioning us not to remove the splinter from our brother's eye until we have removed the beam from our own. It is our motive that makes all the difference for the great test we need to give ourselves is whether our motive is genuine love for the person we correct.² The whole process that is outlined here places a considerable responsibility upon the *offended* party. In a worldly perspective, a person sinned against is seen to have full freedom to respond in kind, to hold rancor, to be vindictive, or at least to cut off the offending party forever with a clean conscience. But that is not so in the family of Jesus for the aggrieved brother must ponder the situation and make every effort to gain back his brother. If I am a follower of Christ, it is his interests and not my private concerns and grudges that must determine my attitudes, words, and actions. It is also very clear that the reconciliation between brothers must take place on the basis of the truth.¹⁰

16If 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.' The criteria for judicial testimony in Old Covenant Israel was "two or three witnesses" and Jesus' language reinforces the Church's identity as the restored Israel of the New Covenant.⁸ The witnesses are to add weight to the reproof, which they can only do by sharing it.⁴

17If he refuses to listen to them, tell the church. This refers to a local congregation of Christians.⁸ **If he refuses to listen even to the church, then treat him as you would a Gentile or a tax collector.** These two groups were generally despised by first-century Jews. The choice of these terms suggest that Jesus requires a policy of non-association (excommunication) with those who are disciplined by leaders of the Church.⁸ Jesus welcomes tax collectors but only when they showed faith and repented of their sins.¹²

18Amen, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. In 16:19, Peter was invested with Christ's authority as the visible head of the Church. Peter is the only one to whom Christ gave the keys AND the power to bind and to loose.¹¹ (CCC 553) Here the office of binding and loosing is also assigned to the college of the apostles UNITED to its head.¹¹ (CCC 1444) To this section about correction is added the following saying about prayer.⁴

19Again, amen, I say to you, This phrase is used to introduce solemn affirmations with a note of authority.⁵ **if two of you** Love is unconceivable if there is only one person for by its nature it implies the presence of two or more.⁹ **agree on earth about anything for which they are to pray, it shall be granted to them by my heavenly Father.**

20For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them." Even two or three form an assembly where the prayer of the Church is offered. The reason for this efficacy is that Jesus himself is present in any community of Christians, and two or three are as small a number as one can

have in a community.⁴ This is the reason that the Church, from the very beginning has practiced communal prayer. Saint Josemaria Escriva points out that there are some few, short, daily practices that have always been lived in Christian families and which he thinks are marvelous such as grace at meals, morning and night prayers, and the family rosary. He thinks that one should always encourage such acts of piety which the family (as a basic community) can do together in a simple and natural fashion.⁹ It is encouraging to hear Jesus speak of the church as “two or three gathered” in his name. It reminds us that the church is not the structure nor the hierarchy nor the ministers alone, but that it includes the community of the baptized gathered in the name of Jesus.²

Some of the material for this commentary was taken from: (1) “Workbook for lectors and gospel readers” by Lawrence E. Mick, (2) “Workbook For Lectors And Gospel Readers” by Aelred Rosser, (3) An Interview with Agenzia Fides by Juan Luis Cardinal Cipriani, (4) “The Jerome Biblical Commentary,” (5) “Dictionary Of The Bible” by John L. McKenzie, S.J., (6) “Ignatius Catholic Study Bible: The Letter of Saint Paul to the Romans” With Introduction, Commentary, and Notes by Scott Hahn and Curtis Mitch, (7) “The Bread of Life Catholic Bible Study” by Deacon Ken e3 Marie Finn, (8) “Ignatius Catholic Study Bible: The Gospel of Matthew” With Introduction, Commentary, and Notes by Scott Hahn and Curtis Mitch, (9) “The Navarre Bible: St. Matthew,” (10) “Fire Of Mercy, Heart Of The Word” by Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis, (11) “The Catechism Of The Catholic Church”, (12) The St. Paul Center for Biblical Theology Online founded by Dr. Scott Hahn, (13) “Workbook for lectors and gospel readers Year A” by James L. Weaver, (14) “The Collegeville Bible Commentary: Romans” by John J. Pilch,

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