

31st Sunday In Ordinary Time, November 4th

Deuteronomy 6:2-6

This passage shows us that the wandering in the desert was not only a punishment but also a test to show the people how utterly dependent they must be on God.²

Moses spoke to the people, saying:

2“Fear the Lord, your God, and keep, throughout the days of your lives, all his statutes and commandments which I enjoin on you, and thus have long life. The commandments are not punishment. They are life giving! They were instituted to direct us towards virtuous living.⁷

3Hear then, Israel, and be careful to observe them, that you may grow and prosper the more, in keeping with the promise of the Lord, the God of your fathers, to give you a land flowing with milk and honey. They envisioned rich crops, rushing streams, gentle rains, and lush fields filled with livestock. The Israelites could have had all that forty years earlier, but their stubbornness and rebellion prevented it from happening.² In some communities of the early Church, the metaphor of the “land flowing with milk and honey” was taken so seriously that neophytes were given milk and honey to drink as a celebration of their arrival in the Promised Land, that is, the saving embrace of the Church.⁵

4“Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord alone! This passage contains the basic principle of the whole Mosaic law, the keynote of the Book of Deuteronomy: since the Lord alone is God, we must love him with an undivided heart. Christ cited these words as “the greatest and the first commandment,” embracing in itself the whole law of God.¹ The great Hebrew prayer known as the “Shema” from the Hebrew word “Hear” begins the prayer. This prayer was recited by devout Jews, as it still is today, every morning and evening,³ and was a proclamation of faith and a desire to serve God. The prayer declares that their God is the only true God which was a very important insight for the people of Israel, because they were about to enter a land with many gods.² Later on Jews had the Shema written on little scrolls and placed in boxes which were worn on the forehead and left arm. These are the phylacteries mentioned in the Gospels. The tube containing the Shema was attached to the right doorpost of a Jewish home to remind the Jew of God at his going out and his coming in. It is called a mezuzah.⁴ In the Catholic Church, verses 4-7 are said at Compline after first vespers on Sundays and solemnities in the Liturgy of Hours.³

5Therefore, you shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength. What God asks of Israel, and of each of us, is not a mere feeling which man cannot control; it is something that has to do with the will. It is an affection which can and should be cultivated by taking to heart our filial relationship with our Father.³ The rabbis agreed that of the 612 commandments of the law, this was the most important.⁴

6Take to heart these words which I enjoin on you today.

Hebrews 7:23-28

Brothers and sisters:

23The levitical priests were many because they were prevented by death from remaining in office, These Jewish priests were simply mortal men.

24but Jesus, because he remains forever, has a priesthood that does not pass away. The author offers this as a proof of the superiority of the new priesthood, the priesthood of Jesus.¹⁰ Death is a consequence of sin and Christ has conquered sin and death. Moreover, death makes it necessary for there to be a succession of human levitical priests in order to provide continuity; whereas the everlasting character of Christ's priesthood renders any further priesthood unnecessary. Being raised from the dead, Christ will never die again. (Rom. 6:9) And so, because he continues forever, he holds his priesthood permanently. (The case of Christian priests is quite different, because they are simply representatives of Christ and they act in his name.)⁸

25Therefore, he is always able to save those who approach God through him, since he lives forever to make intercession for them. When Christ makes intercession for us, he takes the initiative, addresses the Father, presents him with a request or a demand as if Christ were an advocate before the Father, a help, a defender, a paraclete.⁸ All our petitions were gathered up, once for all, in his cry on the Cross and, in his Resurrection, heard by the Father. This is why he never ceases to intercede for us with the Father.⁶ (CCC 2741)

26It was fitting that we should have such a high priest: holy, innocent, undefiled, separated from sinners, This separation is not in the sense that he refuses to have any dealings with sinners or that he despises them, but he can have no sin in him since the presence of sin in his human nature is absolutely incompatible with the holiness of the unique person that Christ is—the divine Word.⁸ higher than the heavens. Christ has been exalted above the heavens not only by virtue of his sublime holiness, but also in his very body through his glorious Ascension. This verse is a poem of praise for Christ.⁸

27He has no need, as did the high priests, to offer sacrifice day after day, first for his own sins and then for those of the people; This is another argument for the superiority of the priesthood of Jesus. We can look at the procedure for the Day of Atonement, the only day in the year when the high priest personally carried out the sacrifices, and he had to offer a sacrifice for his own sins first. He washed his hands and his feet, he put off his gorgeous robes, he clothed himself in spotless white linen and then he laid his hands on the head of a bullock, which he had purchased with his own money, to transfer his sin to it. He then made his confession: "Ah, Lord God, I have committed iniquity; I have transgressed; I have sinned, I and my house. O Lord, I beseech Thee, cover over the sins and transgressions which I have committed, transgressed and sinned before Thee, I and my house." The greatest of all the Levitical sacrifices began with a sacrifice for the sin of the High Priest himself. That is a sacrifice that Jesus never needed to make for he was without sin. The Levitical High Priest was a sinful man offering animal sacrifices for sinful people; Jesus was the sinless Son of God, offering himself for the sin of all men.¹⁰ he did that once for all when he offered himself.

Because Christ died once and for all, he finished all sacrifices. The Jews did not need to go back to the old system, because Christ, the perfect sacrifice, completed the work of redemption. His death brings us eternal life.²

28For the law appoints men subject to weakness to be high priests, This refers to the law of Moses whereby mere human beings were appointed to be high priests.⁹ but the word of the oath, which was taken after the law, appoints a son, who has been made perfect forever. It was the law which had appointed the Levitical High Priest; it was the very oath of God which gave Jesus his office and because he was what he was, the sinless Son of God, Jesus was perfectly equipped for his office as no human High Priest could ever be. The institution of the priesthood according to Melchizedek was confirmed by the oath of God in Ps. 110:4.¹⁰

Mark 12:28b-34

28One of the scribes The whole profession of the scribes was to interpret the law and to be an expert in all its many rules and regulations.¹³ came to Jesus and asked him, “Which is the first of all the commandments?” The scribe is basically saying: of the 613 precepts of the Mosaic Law, which is the one that puts the rest in perspective?

29Jesus replied, “The first is this: Hear, O Israel! The Lord our God is Lord alone!

30You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength. Heart, soul, mind, and strength are simply Jewish ways of expressing a consecration of one’s whole being to the Lord.¹²

31The second is this: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. The scribe asked only about the first commandment, but in his answer Jesus includes what he considers the second. It indicates that for Jesus the love of neighbor is inseparable from the love of God. “Neighbor” in Leviticus 29:18 meant a member of the Jewish people. In the parable of the Good Samaritan all such limitations are swept away. This basic teaching of Jesus on the love of neighbor becomes a foundation stone of New Testament ethics.¹² There is no other commandment greater than these.” The distillation of Yahweh’s revealed Law into two commandments was prefigured by the two stone tablets of the Decalogue.¹¹

32The scribe said to him, “Well said, teacher. You are right in saying, ‘He is One and there is no other than he.’

33And ‘to love him with all your heart, with all your understanding, with all your strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself’ is worth more than all burnt offerings and sacrifices.” The scribe recalls what is often restated in the Scriptures: the moral laws of God are superior to the sacrificial laws of the Temple. It is implied that drawing close to the New Covenant kingdom means backing away from the Old Covenant Temple. Originally, the Mosaic covenant was to consist only of the Ten Commandments and a single sacrificial ceremony where Israelites would renounce idolatry once and for all by slaughtering the very animals they had begun to worship in Egypt. However, the golden calf episode proved that the Israelites were still attached to their idols and needed a

permanent means to eradicate idolatry from the nation. Detailed legislation for priesthood and sacrifice was thus added to the Mosaic covenant as Yahweh's temporary solution to this predicament.¹¹ By placing the love of God and neighbor above all the commandments and sacrifices, the scribe suggests that love has a certain sacrificial and atoning character about it.¹²

*34*And when Jesus saw that he answered with understanding, he said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." This text makes the kingdom nearly identical with faith in Jesus.¹⁴ *And no one dared to ask him any more questions.*

Some of the material for this commentary was taken from: (1) "St. Joseph Edition, The New American Bible," (2) "The Bread of Life Catholic Bible Study" by Deacon Ken & Marie Finn, (3) "The Navarre Bible: Pentateuch," (4) "The Book Of Deuteronomy" by Raymond E. Brown, S.S., (5) "Workbook for lectors and gospel readers: 2006" by Martin Connell, (6) "Catechism Of The Catholic Church," (7) "Responding to God" by the Dominicans of the Central Province of St. Albert the Great, (8) "The Navarre Bible: Hebrews," (9) "The Collegeville Bible Commentary: Hebrews" by George W. MacRae, S.J., (10) "The Letter To The Hebrews" by William Barclay, (11) "Ignatius Catholic Study Bible: The Gospel of Mark" With Introduction, Commentary, and Notes by Scott Hahn and Curtis Mitch, (12) "Mark: Good News for Hard Times" by George T. Montague, S.M., (13) "The Gospel of Mark" by William Barclay and (14) "Dictionary of the Bible" by John L. McKenzie, S.J.

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