

Commentary on Sunday Scripture – Year A

Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time

First reading

(Ecclesiasticus 15.15-20)

Contrasts

A reading from Ecclesiasticus is rare enough for us to remind ourselves of the origin of the book. It is one of the Wisdom Books of the Bible, written towards the end of the Old Testament period, when prophecy had come to an end.

The fierce corrections of the prophets and their inspiring promises of coming salvation were no more, and the word of the Lord came in collections of wise sayings to guide conduct, inspired by acute awareness that the Lord was the source of all wisdom.

This collection of wisdom was brought together by a sage and experienced scribe of the law at Jerusalem named Ben Sira. It was taken by the author's grandson to Alexandria in Egypt and translated into Greek for the Greek-speaking Jews there. Only recently have manuscripts been discovered containing most of the Hebrew original.

In today's passage, Ben Sira sets out the contrasting choices that face us, to which we can freely reach out our hands. It is one of the chief passages in the Bible stressing our own free will. Of our own volition we may turn to good or to ill. God calls for our love and response, but does not force us, for love must be a free act.

Question:

How can I express my love for God and for his loving plan?

Second reading:

(1 Corinthians 2.6-10)

The Wisdom of God

Among the recipients of this letter of Paul's were philosophers who prided themselves on their wisdom, the Greek understanding of the nature of things and the structure of the universe. The wisdom which Paul teaches is beyond human understanding. What, then, is the point of it?

First, it concerns the mystery hidden throughout the earlier history of the world and of humankind. The plan of God has been working itself out throughout history, throughout affectionate and tender, forgiving dealings of God with human beings. But it has been made clear only by the coming of Christ into human history as the keystone that makes sense of the whole structure.

Second, we can still not fully understand it. We still have not fathomed the meaning of life and all its strange and unpredictable twistings and turnings. And yet we are assured by the Spirit of God that there is a meaning, and that this meaning is for our glory. Whatever goes wrong, as well as whatever goes right, is so arranged for our glory.

Third, this same Spirit which penetrates the meaning of everything, even the depths of God, is the divine Spirit that lives in us and informs us as Christians.

Question:

What seeming disasters in your life have, in fact, turned out to be part of the saving plan of God for you?

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Gospel:

(Matthew 5.17-37)

Jesus corrects the Law

Jesus is the completion of the Law of God, given to Israel through Moses. He has come not to sweep it away but to perfect it. In this part of the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew has gathered together six instances (four this week, two next Sunday) of the ways in which Jesus brings the law to perfection.

The first factor to notice, however, is that Jesus does not hesitate to adjust the divine law on his own authority, for he too has divine authority. Each correction begins with a statement of the Old Law and boldly goes on, 'But I say this to you . . .'

Each of the corrections has its own character. The first is about enmity, the sixth about love. About enmity, it is not enough merely to forego violent injury; we must even expel enmity from our hearts, positively seeking reconciliation, whether the offence is our fault or not. About lust, it is similarly not enough to forego acts of lust; we must not even harbour such thoughts in our hearts. About divorce, the easy toleration of divorce in the Jewish law is swept away, and Jesus uncompromisingly calls it fornication. About truth, it is not enough to keep a legal oath; we must be people on whose every word there is reliance. These are Jesus' demanding standards.

Question:

Which is the most difficult of these demands?
