Homiletics | February 12, 2023

The prophet Jeremiah spoke of the day when the Lord with make a new covenant with Israel and write his Law/Torah upon the *heart* of His people and then they would *know* the Lord (Jer 31:31‒34; Ezek 36:25ff.).  As Jesus gives His first great Sermon, known as the Sermon on the Mount, He continually underlines the fundamental purpose and meaning of the Law.  Indeed, the commandments are not just written on tablets of stone, but we should allow the Holy Spirit to write them upon the tablets of our hearts.

The context of the first reading is important because the people of Israel were at the foot of another Mountain, Mount Sinai for over a year receiving commandments that were written on *stone* *tablets* by the finger of God (Exod 24:12: 31:18; 34:1) anticipating the day when the Lord would write the Law on their hearts (Ezek 36:25ff.).  Moreover, in Leviticus 18 a detailed description is given of the sins of the Canaanites who lived in the Land that Israel would enter and in this context the Lord commanded His people live in holiness, ‘You shall be Holy, for I the Lord your God am holy’ (Lev 19:1).  That which is *holy* has been *set* *apart* for a **special purpose and a specific** **purpose and it cannot come into contact with anything that is profane or impure**.  Secondly, as a holy we people we *belong exclusively* to the Lord.  Hence, Israel was called to be unique, set apart, they belonged exclusively to the Lord through their covenant relationship, which was likened to a sacred marriage (Exod 6:6‒7).  This meant that each Israelite had to consider and recognize the special purpose of their vocation and respond accordingly. Consider these examples:

-        As a holy people, ancient Israelites would **give their best to God** in their *unblemished* animals. These sacrifices are explained in the first seven chapters of Leviticus (Lev 1‒7). As a holy people we must give our best to the Lord every day as committed *disciples* of Jesus (Matt 16:24‒26; Luke 9:23‒24).

-        As a holy people, ancient Israelites would give their *first* to God, in their first fruits. This offering is explained in Deuteronomy chapter seven and an ancient *creed* was proclaimed, which recognized the gracious work of the Lord’s salvation (see Deut 7:6‒15).

-        As a holy people Ancient Israelites were commanded to **love their neighbor** as themselves (Lev 19:17‒18). Jesus commands us to love our neighbor and He helps us see that every person is potentially our neighbor (Matt 25:31‒46).

Psalm 103 is a special psalm because the psalmist wants to bless the Lord from the depth of His soul and his prayer underlines the absolute gift of the Lord’s mercy and forgiveness.  Indeed, we should bless the Lord from the depth of our soul, we should contemplate the Lord’s graceless and consider the riches of His mercy, for He has separated our sins from us ‘as far as the **East** is from the **West’** (vv. 10‒12).  Without a doubt, our personal experience with the Lord’s mercy transforms the way that we see every situation, because those who understand the Lord’s mercy simply know that in Christ all is a gracious gift and that they could never repay the Lord for all that they have received and this is what makes very act of faith and every act of generosity a blessing because we are compelled to imitate all that we have received and with the psalmist we can say, ‘*bless the Lord O my soul*’ (Ps 103:1). For this reason, many people pray psalm 103 before or after receiving the sacrament of reconciliation.

In the second reading Paul tells the Corinthians that they are the Temple of God and that the Holy Spirit *dwells* in them (1 Cor 3:16). These words must have been startling because the Temple was the place where the Lord *dwelt* with His people (Exod 25:7‒8; 1 Kings 8:12‒13), a place that was separated by different divisions, respectively, for the High Priest, priests, men, women and gentiles.  The people could not approach the Temple courts if they were in a state of uncleanliness.  Hence, calling the Corinthian Church the *Temple* *of* *God* in whom the Holy Spirit *dwells*, indicated that the most extraordinary act of *grace* had taken place in Jesus Christ, because now God would live and move in His people, in His Church (Lev 26:12; 2 Cor 6:16‒17). The Corinthians knew very well that the first temple, which Solomon built, was destroyed (in 587BC) when Israel committed apostasy and violated their call to holiness.  This makes Paul’s words all the more important because he wants the Corinthians to understand that they must avoid every form of pride (vv. 18‒20), so that they can continue to serve the Lord, knowing that we must not boast in ourselves but recognize that we belong to the Lord (v. 20).

Our Gospel reading complements these reading and helps us to understand how these themes in the first reading reach fulfillment in Jesus Christ (Matt 5:17‒19). Most people would be surprised to learn that the command which begins with the words ‘*an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth*…’ actually established a law in which rich and poor would enjoy **equal retribution** for injustices that were suffered, something that was extraordinary in the ancient Near East.  However, one weakness with this concept of equal retribution is that a desire for perfect restitution could potentially place one in continually conflict with their neighbor because human disputes are seemingly endless in our world.  We see this in many places where some conflicts never seem to end. Hence, Jesus words about offering no resistance to evil establishes a new precedent so that all conflicts can be resolved peaceably in a manner so that one can understand the Lord’s mercy. The mercy and forgiveness that we show to others will help them understand the gratuitous gift of mercy and forgiveness in the Kingdom. Thus, Jesus commands His disciples:

-        Turn the other cheek

-        Hand over you cloak as well

-        Go the extra mile

-        Do not turn you back on the one who wants to borrow something

Again, Jesus instructs His disciples to love *more* than our neighbor:

-        **Love** you enemies

-        **Bless** those who curse you

-        **Pray** for those who persecute you

These responses to apparent acts of injustice might seem irrational, but such actions bring an end to ceaseless conflicts, and they help others to understand the abundant gift of the Lord’s mercy and forgiveness which is in Christ. One can see that such responses of generosity could only be possible if we allow the Lord to write His Law upon the tablets of our heart and if we honestly recognize the gift of His mercy and forgiveness.  In this light, the command to ‘be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect’ might seem even more overwhelming.  However, this takes us back to the basic principles of a holy people who belong exclusively to the Lord, to a people who are called the Temple of God, for Christ is known through His Church, which must seek to share the same type of mercy, forgiveness, and generosity.  Moreover, Jesus knows that we are not perfect, He reminds us that we are sinners who need forgiveness, but we must constantly strive for such perfection, because this is based on one simple principle, we want to be like Jesus so that others can understand the beauty of the faith and thereby *know* Christ and enter His Kingdom.