

Fr James' homily for the Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time

First Reading: Exodus 22:20-26
Second Reading: First Letter to the Thessalonians 1:5-10
Gospel: Matthew 22:34-40



Compare the Gospel today to that of last Sunday. Notice that there is more “getting together” going on! Last week it was the Pharisees and the Herodian party; this week the Pharisees team up with arch rivals the Sadducees to see if they can “disconcert” Jesus. The stakes are somehow rising as Matthew’s Gospel plays out towards the telling of the Passion, Death and Resurrection of Jesus. (So too our liturgical year is playing out, with but four Sundays to go before a new year begins!) The enemies of Jesus will do more and more to bring him to an end.

So, having learned nothing from Jesus’ teaching about putting God first, and his exposing their attempts to show him to be inconsistent in his teaching, now they seek to back him into a corner over the meaning of the Law of Israel and by doing so label him to be as partisan and political as they themselves are. However, in the end all they achieve is to give Jesus a platform from which to teach. Effectively they ask him: “do you understand what the Law of Israel is all about and what it is for”? Well, “spoiler alert”, as the saying goes: Jesus is the one who made the Law and wrote it and gave it to Israel in the first place, so Yes!, we can safely assume he understands what it is for, and yes, you guessed it, those posing the question have but a partial understanding.

In the first reading today from the Book of the Exodus, we here a brief portion of part of the Law of Israel. In total this Law was a complex web of provisions some to do with the regulation of worship; then others about the regulation of daily rituals in everyday life like washing pots and which animals to eat; next specific moral laws. All of this together was a way for the people to become more and more the Holy People of God they are supposed to be. The key word there being HOLY - meaning the whole of our being. The Law, if you like, is a sort of web of habits, of good habits which together form a good person. One provision of the Law taken on its own is likely very often to make little sense. The big picture? Well, just as Jesus said in last week’s Gospel: the Law means putting God in first place, and then the value of everything else and our duties and obligations to others become clear.

What has happened to all of this Law?? Has it become redundant?? No! In Christ Jesus all the Law has been fulfilled and the meaning of it has passed uniquely into Catholic culture. It is the meaning of our faith. The life of habit is the life of cultivating virtue in all things - with love of God at the centre.

So, for example, Catholic worship has soaked up the Law on worship. God wants us to worship, not because he needs it, but because it shapes us. The point of that worship has been given fresh focus in the mysteries of Christ. So again, the ritual Law has been assumed in our attitudes. Rituals were to promote the common good, and so change with circumstances. We see this happening in the debates about acceptable foods in the New Testament. So today a good example might be the ritual “Hands - Face - Space”, a ritual designed to promote the common good over individual freedom.

Moral laws in place from ancient times are, I would claim, uniquely refined and expressed in the faith of Jesus Christ. They are given expression in the first reading today: compassion and empathy; care for the most vulnerable and promotion of the common good. Great things on their own, but in the end meaningful hand in hand with our worship.

Jesus tells his attackers that everything hangs first on worship of Almighty God and on realising the infinite ways this then flows into every corner of our lives. We can realise he is focusing the good of the People of Israel on himself, who is the embodiment of all he is talking about, the “real, living God” as St Paul says today. We must constantly review, in his love, what governs our hearts. For, it is said that it takes 21 days to form a new habit. What habits have we formed, say, over the period of lockdown, about worship, about our daily routines of life and about our moral decisions. Let us turn to the treasure of our Catholic faith to be renewed every day, and so become more and more the Holy People of God.

Amen.

Fr James and Fr Tom wish you a blessed Sunday. Keep safe and well, and never hesitate to pick up the telephone and be in touch. See you in church I hope! Keep in close contact with the website for news of how practical plans are developing.