

OCTOBER 29TH, 2017: THIRTIETH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Exodus 22:20-26 I Thessalonians 1:5c-10 Matthew 22:34-40

Rarely does a liturgical reading more apply to the “*Sitz im Leben*” we’re experiencing right here and now than today’s Exodus pericope. “Thus says Yahweh, ‘You shall not molest or oppress an alien, for you were once aliens yourselves in the land of Egypt.’”

The authors of our Hebrew Scriptures constantly single out three groups of people for special care: orphans, widows and resident aliens. Each has no one “significant” to plead their cause. The first two have no father or husband; the last are “strangers in the land.” That’s why, as we hear in II Samuel 14, any of the three can knock on the palace door 24/7 and demand an audience with the king. Though frequently overlooked, one of the main reasons 11th century BCE Israelites created the monarchy was to make certain the helpless in the land had a protector: the king. Those with no clout could always depend on him to supply that clout.

The biblical prophets and lawmakers presumed the king’s obligations also were the people’s obligations. Reminding them of their past helplessness, Yahweh expects all Israelites to care for the needs of those who find themselves in a similar predicament. Not only were orphans, widows and resident aliens to receive special care, the poor were also to get singular treatment: there could be no interest on any loan they were forced to take out, nor could a lender keep a cloak overnight that had been taken as collateral. The goal of these laws was to maintain the dignity of those, who through no fault of their own, were in danger of losing that dignity.

The gospel Jesus, as a good Jew, certainly agrees with such generous behavior, quoting the well-known Leviticus command, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Yet as a reformer of Judaism, he places such giving of oneself on the same level as loving Yahweh. Writing specifically for a Jewish/Christian audience, Matthew makes certain his readers get the point. His Jesus alone states, “The whole law and the prophets (the biblical term for the Hebrew Scriptures) depend on these two commandments.” In other words, if you’re not actively loving God and your neighbor, forget about reading the Bible.

It always bothers me, a priest, to hear Paul write about being a “model” for others to imitate, as he does at the beginning of I Thessalonians. Growing up hearing the term “other Christ” applied solely to priests, it really bothered me when I saw some of those special people physically discipline some of the boys in my grade school class. I couldn’t picture the historical Jesus engaging in such violent behavior. (At least I never saw a holy card depicting him “beating the tar out” of some hapless kid.)

Only later, when I learned the title other Christ (Christian) was originally given to all followers of Jesus, I began to understand that all of us should be careful of how we treat others, especially those over whom we have power. Someone’s always watching – for good or bad. And someone’s always affected – for good or bad. We have no idea how “far” our example reaches.

One of the highest compliments we can be paid is to hear that people are speaking well of us not just to us, but to “others.” Paul pays that compliment to his Thessalonians.

Like almost everyone, we often boast about our influential friends. Telling others that we know them seems to give us a higher stature in their eyes. Rarely do we boast about our friendship with the individuals in our midst who have no clout. Wouldn’t it be great if, at the pearly gates, the risen Jesus will one day greet us with, “Welcome! I’ve already heard all about the good things you’ve done for the helpless?”

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NOVEMBER 5TH, 2017: THIRTY-FIRST SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Malachi 1:14b-2:2b, 8-10 I Thessalonians 2:7b-9, 13 Matthew 23:1-12

We religious leaders might actually be embarrassed by today's liturgical readings. If so, we've fallen into the trap set for us by our sacred authors.

Back in 1966, the late John L. McKenzie published his controversial book *Authority in the Church*. In it, the highly respected Scripture scholar pointed out, among other things, that the authors of the Christian Scriptures say very little about our obligation to obey those who exercise authority over us. The vast majority of biblical passages dealing with the subject are almost always concerned with the abuse of such power. That's how the authority problem surfaced in the early Christian community.

Of course, as we hear in our Malachi passage, the same problem predated Christianity by at least four centuries. The prophet is forced to attack the priests of his day and age, not for offering ritual sacrifices incorrectly, but for failing to instruct people in their faith. "You have turned aside from the way, and have caused many to falter by your instruction . . ." These religious authority figures are cursed for especially not teaching people about their covenant with Yahweh. They seem to have gotten so taken up with the external trappings of the faith that they're neglecting the essentials of that faith.

The same poison seems to have infected some leaders in the biblical Christian community. Though Matthew's Jesus appears to be condemning Jewish leaders in this oft-quoted passage, scholars agree he's simply employing a gentle way to attack Christian leaders. If the evangelist's readers didn't have these problems, he'd never have written this passage.

They, like Malachi's accursed priests, have forgotten what's at the heart of their faith. For Christians, it's the dying and rising of Jesus, and the obligation laid on his followers to constantly imitate that dual event. The historical Jesus' disciples quickly discovered that the principal way of achieving that death was to become completely one with those around them, especially their fellow Christians. Yet for many in authority the temptation was simply too great to set themselves apart from the rest of the community.

As we hear in today's pericope, they accomplished this by demanding special places at gatherings, lording it over anyone not on their authority level, wearing distinctive clothes, and expecting to be greeted with honorific titles. (Sound familiar?)

McKenzie constantly pointed out that the gospel Jesus provides a unique definition of authority. "The greatest among you must be your servant. Those who exalt themselves will be humbled; but those who humble themselves will be exalted." The Christian community is forbidden to compare itself to any other institution. It only has one ideal to live up to: Jesus of Nazareth.

This is certainly how Paul evangelized Thessalonica. He was unlike any other religious functionary they'd ever encountered. "We were gentle among you, as a nursing mother cares for her children. . . . We were determined to share with you not only the gospel of God, but our very selves as well . . ." Unlike most modern Christian ministers, the Apostle held down a full-time job, simply so he wouldn't be a "burden" to anyone.

Probably Paul didn't have to say many words during the evangelization. His personal behavior played a major role in the gospel he proclaimed.

I grew up often hearing our church compared to General Motors or some other large corporation; our leaders put on the same level as business executives. About 20 years ago, in an anniversary article commenting on the history of his archdiocese, the editor of its diocesan paper actually stated, "Had our archbishop and the mayor of our city exchanged places on any given day, no one would have noticed."

We should read today's readings very carefully.