

26th Sunday in Ordinary Time - A

Note: Where a Scripture text is underlined in the body of this discussion, it is recommended that the reader look up and read that passage.

1st Reading - Ezekiel 18:25-28

The name “Ezekiel” means “may El (God) strengthen.” He grew up in a priestly family, in Jerusalem. He was familiar with the Temple, and must have known Jeremiah.

During the second deportation to Babylon in 597 B.C., he was taken with others to Tel-Abib (near Nippur). He was married and had his own house, but his wife died about 587, some five years after the beginning of his prophetic mission. His ministry covered the period of 592 to 571 B.C. He never returned to Jerusalem except in visions.

The book of Ezekiel falls into three sections: Chapters 1 through 24 contain his call and prophecies of doom against Judah and Jerusalem. These were given prior to 586 when the Temple was destroyed. Chapters 25 through 32 are oracles against foreign nations, arranged, with the exception of Egypt, in geographical and chronological order. Chapters 33 through 48 contain prophecies of restoration.

In our reading today, which predates the destruction of the Temple, Ezekiel while lamenting Judah’s abandonment of the covenant as a nation, points out that each person is responsible for himself and his actions.

²⁵ You say, "The LORD'S way is not fair!" Hear now, house of Israel: Is it my way that is unfair, or rather, are not your ways unfair?

To be a follower of God and to do what He wants you to do instead of what you want to do, means giving up things of self-pleasure. It is not fair that I should give up all sorts of creature comforts – those things that draw my thoughts away from God.

²⁶ When a virtuous man turns away from virtue to commit iniquity, and dies, it is because of the iniquity he committed that he must die. ²⁷ But if a wicked man, turning from the wickedness he has committed, does what is right and just, he shall preserve his life; ²⁸ since he has turned away from all the sins which he committed, he shall surely live, he shall not die.

This is an early reference to a life after death. It is also a clear example of individual responsibility rather than a corporate responsibility (see Exodus 20:5).

2nd Reading - Philippians 2:1-11

Last week we began our study of Saint Paul's letter to the Philippians. In that reading, we heard Saint Paul describe his own situation. After this reflection on his situation, we now hear Paul exhort the Philippians to steadfastness, harmony, humility, and obedient selflessness. In their witness to Christ they should strive to conform themselves to Him.

2:1 If there is any encouragement in Christ, any solace in love,

Paul affectionately appeals to the Philippians by what they should prize most – if union with Christ means anything, it should be an encouragement, an incentive of life, to which he can appeal.

any participation in the Spirit, any compassion and mercy,

Fellowship between Christians rests on a common participation (Greek: *kiononein*); as he says in 1:5, a “partnership in the gospel.” Here, the common participation is in the Spirit, compassion, and mercy.

2 complete my joy by being of the same mind, with the same love, united in heart, thinking one thing.

Their mind set results in a determined pattern of behavior. There is only one Christ, one gospel message, and one Church to deliver that message. “I, then, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to live in a manner worthy of the call you have received, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another through love, striving to preserve the unity of the spirit through the bond of peace: one body and one Spirit, as you were also called to the one hope of your call; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all” (Ephesians 4:1-6).

“Remember that God is one, His Son is one and His Holy Spirit is one, and all three are one. If so, then we too ought to be one in our thoughts, so as to be ‘of the same mind’ with the one God. Then it follows that we are to have ‘the same love.’ To be of the same mind pertains to knowledge, while to have the same love pertains to discipline, to the conduct of life.” [Marius Victorinus (ca. A.D. 355), *Epistle to the Philippians* 2,2-5]

3 Do nothing out of selfishness or out of vainglory; rather, humbly regard others as more important than yourselves,

The humility which denotes a despised and abject condition; in the Old Testament, an appropriate human stance before God. Here, the lowly, unassertive stance before each other – a distinctive virtue established and demonstrated by Jesus.

4 each looking out not for his own interests, but (also) everyone for those of others.

For Paul, Christian love flows from the free disposition to forego concern for self as the driving force of life and replacing it with a practical concern for others.

⁵ Have among yourselves the same attitude that is also yours in Christ Jesus,

His historic example of humility and selfless love which is recounted in the Christ hymn which follows.

⁶ Who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God something to be grasped.

Christ's original status and attitude.

"If Christ were only a man, He would have been said to have been 'in the image of God,' not 'in the form of God.' We know that humanity was made in the image, not the form, of God." [Novatian (Anti-pope) (ca. A.D. 235), *The Trinity* 22,2]

⁷ Rather, he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave,

The first way Christ humiliated himself – unredeemed human existence is a slavery, a bondage to spiritual powers, ending in death.

coming in human likeness; and found human in appearance, ⁸ he humbled himself, becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross.

The second way Christ humiliated himself – He not only resembled man, He was an identical copy (he was fully human) even to the point of death. As God, He was immortal but as man, He suffered death – the inevitable consequence of being both fully human and totally obedient in a world alienated from God. He died as a slave; one who had no human rights.

⁹ Because of this, God greatly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name,

Jesus' self-denying act is matched by the active response of God – He is exalted above all of the just – He is given lordship over the whole universe.

¹⁰ that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, of those in heaven and on earth and under the earth,

The homage to be paid by all to Jesus – homage previously given to God alone.

¹¹ and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Jesus is God. This is the early Christian baptismal confession. Giving glory to Jesus gives glory to God the Father as well.

“Every tongue’ stands for every people. But if the confession of Christ as Lord is a glorification of the Father, it is clear that those who call Him a creature and a slave deface the glory of the Father also. In these few words, however, the divine apostle has subdued every heresy, among those who blaspheme the divinity of the Only-Begotten, and those who deny His humanity and those who misconstrue the hypostatic union of the two natures.” [Theodoret of Cyr (ca. A.D. 425), *Interpretation of the Fourteen Epistles of Paul* Philippians 2:11]

Gospel - Matthew 21:28-32

Last week we heard the parable of the workmen and the vineyard: a story of discipleship and the Jewish people. Jesus has taught that His followers will be first in the kingdom and that God’s first possession, Israel, will be the last. Jesus is now about one week away from His passion, death, and resurrection. As we join Him today, He has made His triumphal entry into Jerusalem accompanied by shouts of “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!” “Hosanna in the highest!”.

He continues His teaching of the disciples, now in the Temple courts. While He is teaching, He has been approached by the chief priests and the elders (representatives of the Sanhedrin) who question where He gets His authority. He has replied that His authority comes from John’s baptism; then asks them if this authority is from heaven (in which case, why didn’t they believe Him) or from man (in which case, they will offend the many followers of John)? Those questioning Him refuse to answer so Jesus illustrates His point with a parable.

[Jesus said to the chief priests and elders of the people:]²⁸ "What is your opinion? A man had two sons.

The distinction here is not between Jews and Gentiles, but between two kinds of Jews: faithless leaders and faithful outcasts.

He came to the first and said, 'Son, go out and work in the vineyard today.'

Recall from last week’s parable that the vineyard is symbolic of God’s chosen people, His kingdom on earth.

²⁹ He said in reply, 'I will not,' but afterwards he changed his mind and went.

He did the will of the Father (see [Matthew 7:21](#)).

³⁰ The man came to the other son and gave the same order. He said in reply, 'Yes, sir,' but did not go. ³¹ Which of the two did his father's will?"

Which one was obedient? Obedient faith is always the final test for Matthew.

They answered, "The first." Jesus said to them, "Amen, I say to you, tax collectors and

prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God before you.

These people are, as a class, considered ignorant and unclean sinners – they were public sinners. This is a very harsh teaching, that public sinners will enter God’s heavenly kingdom before those who consider themselves righteous.

³² When John came to you in the way of righteousness, you did not believe him; but tax collectors and prostitutes did.

They saw the need to repent of their evil ways and did so.

Yet even when you saw that, you did not later change your minds and believe him.

The leaders, by contrast, thought themselves righteous and did not see the need to repent and be reconciled with the Father. This parable has a counterpart in the gospel of Luke called “The Parable of the Prodigal Son.

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