

**6th Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)**  
**(Ecclesiasticus 15:16-20 / Matthew 5:17-37)**  
**16.02.2014**

Today's first reading leads us to think of a fundamental choice with which God confronted His people in the Book of Deuteronomy when He gave them the gift of the Law: the choice of life! *See I set before you a choice: life or death. Choose life!*

A point made over and over again in the Sacred Scriptures is that, properly understood, the Law is well and truly a life-giving gift and not, as we may be inclined to think of it, a set of life-restricting ordinances.

It is because the Law's whole purpose is to promote, serve and safeguard life that it is unthinkable that the Law be set aside and/or abolished. Jesus is clear on this. He states that He did *not come to abolish the Law but to fulfil it*.

To set the Law aside, to abolish it, would be to threaten, damage and endanger life.

In the gospel passage we read this morning are contained important insights around a proper Christian understanding and observance of the Law.

What Jesus says in His *Sermon on the Mount* would have us look fairly and squarely at our observance of the Law, reminding us once again of the Law's promised outcome: life!

Our reading of the gospel suggests to us that if we are devoid of true life-giving energy, then this is most probably an indicator that our rapport with the Law has become perverted; we have deviated from the Law's true meaning and end.

Once again, I stress, the Law's true meaning and end is life!

Unfortunately, it happens that every so often we lose this end from sight.

Our observance of the Law, even as Christians saved by grace, can become overly legalistic and quite sterile: an adherence to exterior precepts whose inner sense and spirit escape us.

Observance of the Law can be lived in such a way that it even becomes unjust. We can adhere to the Law scrupulously to the letter to such an extent that our observance of it stands in complete contradiction with what the Law is all about. We can strangle and choke the Law by going into overdrive around rules and regulations, developing an obsessive observance of secondary ordinances and precepts.

When this happens, our supposed observance of the Law can in the extreme become unlawful.

It becomes unlawful when it stands in contradiction with saving life and when it holds us back from offering the freedom the gospel announces for all who are oppressed.

Yes, if our observance of the Law is devoid of love and has us sacrifice truth then it becomes unlawful!

We have seen in recent times how observance of Canon Law in some cases when it was placed over and above gospel precepts of justice and love resulted in injustice for innocent victims of clerical abuse. We also know how much harm this has done to the credibility of the Church whose reputation some sought to safeguard over and above the well-being (the life) of suffering victims.

Living according to the Law is about living in love and truth. It is about having proper respect for others and showing this to them. It is about truly honouring others; it is about seeing and honouring God's presence in every person encountered. It is about recognising that we ourselves carry God within.

To really live according to the Law means really living to love and loving to live.

It is about safeguarding our own good and well-being along with the good and well-being of others.

To really live the Law is to live in love and to act out of love.

Real, total, observance of the Law is about living in integrity; it is about respecting our own and other people's integrity. It is about safeguarding others' and our own wholeness.

This explains what Jesus has to teach in this morning's gospel passage around the two key emotions He mentions: anger and lust.

Jesus could, of course, have mentioned other emotions – and so could we, but we will confine ourselves to these two emotions this morning.

In regard to these emotions Jesus shows us that integrity is before all else an interior thing; it lies in and is confirmed by the attitude of our heart ever before we act out in any way.

It is in the heart that our intentions and desires are conceived and from our hearts that they come forth.

And so it is that Jesus can say that we can commit murder in our heart. We can do that while comporting ourselves exteriorly as someone placid. Shakespeare tells us that *a man can be a villain and wear a smile*.

Or again, we can commit adultery in our heart and yet not act out sexually. St Thomas Aquinas says at one point that *we can be perfectly continent and yet be lacking in chastity*.

Jesus invites us to look deep within ourselves; He invites to go deeper in our observance of the Law than just outward conformity to its regulations.

Our inner self, our interior being, must be shaped and fashioned by the Law of love.

Given what Jesus says to us this morning we are led to see that the Law itself really does go deep and our observance of it really should go much deeper than just words engraved upon stone.

The prophets remind us that the Law must be *written on our hearts* (in our hearts); it should be inscribed within us.

Jesus' point is that we can control exterior behaviours and not for as much have truly/integrally observed the Law.

Allow me to use a very simple image to reinforce what Jesus says when He says that things may look well with us on the surface and yet below what is seen not be good. I think of an iceberg. We only see the tip of it. Like an iceberg, our acts may look fine on the surface, above water, but it is only the tip of the iceberg that appears there. The danger is below the water. The real issue for us is in and around the hidden attitudes of our hearts.

Elsewhere Jesus makes the point that if our interior attitudes do not correspond to our exterior behaviour, we may look impeccable to others and yet be living in the grip of sinful, destructive attitudes of mind and heart.

When we are disconnected from our heart, our inner being, even though things might look well on the surface, we can be far removed from living a life pleasing to God.

So easily we can fall into living a lie, we can act with deception and give in to self-deceit. Often we will rationalise and justify our wrong actions when this is what is going on. Rationalisation of wrong is a form of self-deceit ... and deceit is always detrimental.

We can and sometimes we do fall prey to an ill against which Jesus reacts so vehemently over and over again in the gospels: the ill of hypocrisy. Let's face it, we all can and sometimes do behave hypocritically. We can and we sometimes do play-act ... to the point of even fooling ourselves.

I am sure that it is significant that the words Jesus speaks in today's gospel He addressed to religious people: supposed observers of the Law.

What Jesus advocates in today's gospel passage, addressing religious people, is a more honest, candid and truly spiritual observance of the Law.

Again and again Jesus makes the point that true religion is a life lived according to the Law of love. True religion, of course, will always foster communion. This will be the touchstone whereby we measure whether or not we are living according to the Law. Are we in communion with others or are we excommunicating ourselves from them?

For Jesus the essence of the Law is love.

The whole of the Torah can be summed up in the one great commandment: love!

We must ask ourselves: is that really what we live?

Are our lives, lives of love?

Each one of us must ask him or her self: am I in-touch with the one I carry within the depths of my own being, God, who is love?

Do I well and truly live the great commandment to love God and others as myself?

What I am talking about is not just observance, being well-behaved. No, what I am talking about is actually fulfilling in the concrete realities of our lives what the Law is all about. I am talking about living in love ... and well and truly loving what we live.

If we are to discern just where we are in our lives today – whether or not we are at the right place, on the right path; whether or not we are at the specific place where we can best contribute to the life of the world and be fulfilled within ourselves, then we must ask ourselves just what it is that is life-giving for us. We must ask what it is that gives us life and permits us to give our lives to God and for others!

Maybe what I have said there would be better formulated this way: *who* is it that is life-giving for us and permits us to give our lives?

In other words: is Christ at the centre of our lives – indeed, does Christ figure in our lives at all?

Or is our sole (at least our major) preoccupation our self?

If love is not at the centre of our lives – in other words, if God is not at the core of our being – then we will fall prey to and remain entrapped by that most destructive of all ills: obsessive self-infatuation, unhealthy narcissism. There is nothing worse than obsessive self-infatuation and unhealthy narcissism robed in religiosity!

The question I suggest each one of us takes away from this celebration today and reflects upon amounts is this: *Who* is it that gives me life and leads me to be life-giving in my turn?

*Who* is it that lives within me: is it just I myself or is it (as St Paul puts it) *Christ living in me*?

If it is the Lord who is at the centre of my being then I will live in love and love will live in me, for *God is love*.

Someone has rightly said: *love is for life*.

That catch phrase was the title given to a Letter of the Irish Bishops away back in the 1980's (a letter redacted by the then Bishop of Down and Connor, Cahal Daly).

Echoing the phrase *love is for life* I am not thinking only of *for life* in terms of time duration. I am only too aware that there is an attitude of mind and heart among religious people that does great disservice to what marriage is really about by making it sound like a *life sentence* in prison.

When I say this morning that *love is for life* I am thinking in terms of the very purpose of the Law, *so that we may live!*

**Love and life** were my first words.  
Let them also be my last.