

SIXTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME — A

READING I Sir 15:15-20

READING II 1 Cor 2:6-10

GOSPEL Mt 5:17-37

The Hebrew Scripture

In this section Ben Sira, the sage who wrote around the beginning of the second century B.C. offers a brief tract on free will. In vv. 11-12, he categorically rejects the notion that God is the cause of human sin. While emphasizing human responsibility, however, he does not attempt to reconcile it with God's involvement in all human activities. If the Jew resolves to observe God's will, he is capable of doing so. The word loyalty suggests a close bond between the individual and Yahweh; it is not the mechanical execution of an unknown will. Ben Sira presents the two alternatives as fire/water and life/death. To opt for life is to maintain community with God; to choose death is to excommunicate oneself from this community. (v. 17 is reminiscent of Dt 30:15, which shows that the context is covenantal.) Although God is both omnipotent and omniscient, still he does not force anyone to sin. Human sin is not the divine will.

The Christian Scripture

Paul's opponents in Corinth believed that they lived at a higher level of existence ("wisdom," "maturity") than those who merely catered to their lower appetites. Consequently, their thoughts turned to speculating about Christ as the Lord of Glory and the implications of heavenly, not earthly, realities. The historical reality of Jesus' crucifixion did not suit such speculation. In reply, Paul notes that true wisdom comes from God, and such wisdom does include the crucifixion of Jesus. The source of such knowledge, Paul adds, is not human observation or speculation. It is God's revelation through the Spirit. Only this Spirit, not the esoteric, philosophizing spirit of the Corinthians, can fathom God's mind.

The Gospel

Mt 5:17-20 establishes the relationship of the Mosaic Law to Jesus. For Matthew, Jesus stands at the very center of religion. The question: What is the Law's relationship to that center of religion? The justice ("holiness"), that is, the moral living out of God's will, demands that the disciple go beyond the legalistic attitude of the Pharisees. It is not to be a question of a better type of Pharisaism. It is a question, rather, of the disciple's total self-giving to God and neighbor.

Mt 5:21-48 is a series of six antitheses which exemplify the principle put forth in v. 20. The section contrasts what God once said with what Jesus now says. The first antithesis (vv. 21-26) radicalizes the Mosaic prohibition against murder. Anger towards one's neighbor is as detestable as murder since the neighbor's dignity must be respected. Reconciliation with one's brother is the only way to be reconciled with one's God. The second antithesis (vv. 27-30) enlarges the Mosaic prohibition against adultery to include lustful looks and thoughts. The woman is not a sex object — she is a person to be accorded her rightful dignity. Vv. 29-30 are metaphorical language: The saving of the entire person at the final judgment deserves any and every demand now. The third antithesis (vv. 31-32) revokes the Mosaic

permission regarding divorce. "Lewd conduct" probably refers to incestuous marriages already forbidden by the Law (see Lv 18:6-18), hence not a departure from Jesus' strong stand. The fourth antithesis (vv. 33-37) deals with oaths and vows. Here Matthew totally rejects such Mosaic practices. To call God as a witness is to violate God's majesty. Matthew thereby rejects all human efforts to control or manipulate God. Instead of swearing at all, one should limit oneself to saying either yes or no.

The Thought

The self-giving Jesus is the center of gravity. We are tempted to "live" on the level of self-gratification and hence do not relate to others. We are encouraged to produce the minimum and thereby not advert to the needs of others. We are educated to obey laws mechanically and consequently do not see God and our neighbor in our legal observances. All such practices reject the truth that the self-giving Jesus is the center of gravity.

Paul had to deal with Christians who were caught up in the speculation of Hellenistic Judaism. Such Christians considered themselves an elite, and they espoused a form of wisdom which would not tolerate the crucifixion of Christ. The result in Corinth was factions and rivalries. Paul's reply was to have them shift their center of gravity. The norm of human existence was not the esoteric wisdom of their philosophical system. It was the self-giving of Jesus as dramatized in the crucifixion. For Paul, only the self-giving Jesus was the center of gravity.

Matthew did not promote a bigger and better form of Pharisaism. He proposed to the Christian disciple a radical way of thinking and acting which uncovered the self-giving Jesus, and hence one's neighbor, at the core of reality. It was not enough to refrain from murder — one had to refrain from anger too. It was not sufficient to avoid adultery — one had to refrain from lustful thoughts as well. In both instances, the core of reality was Jesus as represented by one's neighbor. To execute the demands of the Law perfunctorily meant to miss the whole dimension of law, that is, radical existence in Jesus. For Matthew, the self-giving Jesus was the center of gravity.

To control one's temper is basically to acknowledge the dignity of others and thus the presence of Christ. To disavow the view of woman as a sex object is to discover her inherent dignity as person in Christ. To reject abortion is to affirm the uniqueness of all human life and to uncover the presence of the creator. To obey traffic laws because of concern for one's neighbor, and not the threat of penalties, is to experience radical existence in Christ. Only the self-giving Jesus is the center of gravity.

Eucharist centers on the manner of Jesus' self-giving. Eucharist asserts that the manner of his dying is to be the manner of our living. Eucharist compels us, therefore, to adopt a lifestyle which expresses such self-giving. In the context of community, Eucharist teaches that the self-giving Jesus must be our center of gravity.