

OCTOBER 25TH, 2020: 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*” [German for “situation in life.” Ed.] 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?”

NOVEMBER 1ST, 2020: ALL SAINTS
Revelation 7:2-4, 9-14 I John 3:1-3 Matthew 5:1-12a

In order to properly understand our gospels, it's important to remember they were written two or three generations after the ministry of the historical Jesus. Contrary to popular opinion, they're not a compilation of notes taken by eyewitnesses to that ministry. The four evangelists and the communities for whom they wrote had the advantage of living and reflecting on the presence of the risen Jesus in their midst for 30 to 60 years. So when the gospel Jesus encourages his followers to do something, we presume his gospel followers already had been doing it for a long time before his words eventually appeared in written form. This is especially important to know when we hear passages like Matthew's beatitudes.

Instead of looking at these "blessings" as something Jesus' disciples could expect to experience in the future, this pericope is actually a reflection on what the gospel community has already experienced. When a person actually carried through on Jesus' command to "repent" - to turn one's value system upside down - he or she not only began to experience God (or the risen Jesus) working effectively in their daily lives, they also began to experience reality from a completely different perspective. What once brought sadness now brings joy; what once brought death now brings life. Poverty no longer just brings pain. It also makes us aware of God's presence in everyone we meet and everything we do. Making ourselves weak by showing mercy to others strengthens us by receiving parallel mercy from others. The only way to live a fulfilled, satisfied life is to hunger and thirst for those unique relations with others which God wishes us to develop. And when we end up being insulted and persecuted because of our "weird" behavior, we should always remember the future rewards which accompany such behavior.

But, why would anyone even start down such a difficult road? The author of I John provides a little hint about the motivation. Eventually, we all want to "be like God." We want to look at people and things as God looks at them; to create the special environment in which all God's people are intended to live. We simply long to go beyond the limits which this world imposes on us and our lives.

It's important to note, as the author of Revelation reminds us, that we're not "Lone Rangers:" we're not expected to develop this new lifestyle by ourselves. Lots of others have the same "seal of the living God on their foreheads." In our quest to experience God among us, we're joined by a "great multitude, which no one can count, from every nation, race, people, and tongue." That's why communities are an essential element in living the life the risen Jesus expects us to live. Left to our own "devices" we'd most probably turn tail and run the first time we encountered any serious problem.

The fact that the beatitudes, for instance, are found in two gospels is proof that by second and third generation Christianity they had become community - not just individual - experiences. Both Matthew and Luke's communities could reflect on what they'd all experienced when they tried to carry through on dying and rising with Jesus. Those experiences united them on the deepest levels of their lives. Though the two evangelists never seemed to have known one another, they and their churches could reflect on the same things: the common things which all other Christs encounter.

Perhaps our problem is that we're still looking for these "things" to take place in the future instead of living our lives of faith in such a way that we can experience and reflect on them right here and now.