

30th SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME (Cycle A)

October 23, 2005 – Deacon Bill Nourse, Ed.D.

INTRODUCTION

Some of you may recall a book that was popular in the '60s called Stranger in a Strange Land. I remember that I found it mildly entertaining at the time. It was about a human being who was raised by Martians. He never met another human being until he came to Earth for the first time. As you might imagine, he experienced a certain cognitive dissonance as he tried to figure out what Earth culture was all about.

As a longtime resident of Memphis (and a longtime resident of Earth), I've often thought of myself as a stranger in a strange land. I can't figure it out, either.

The title of the book came from Scripture. In the Book of Exodus, Moses names his son Gershom. In Hebrew, "ger," means "alien," or "sojourner," or "refugee." Moses says he chose that name because "I have been a stranger in a strange land." (Exodus 2: 22. KJV).

MOVE

It is said that the Hebrew Scriptures set forth 613 laws which the chosen people were obliged to follow. Today's first reading sets forth a few of those individual laws, about how to treat others – specifically, the most vulnerable in ancient Israel: widows, orphans, foreigners, the poor. The Lord reminds His people that they themselves were once "strangers in a foreign land," and that they are therefore expected to show justice and compassion to the strangers – to widows, to orphans, to foreigners, to the poor. That only leaves about 600 more laws to go through.

But as usual, Jesus cuts through all the loopholes and goes straight to the point. The purpose of all the 613 specific provisions of the Old Law are summarized in the commandment to love God with all that we have, and above all else; and to love others in the same way.

One of the key tenets of the Christian faith is that we have a solemn duty to love others. We find this throughout the Gospel – the practical importance

of the Christian precept of love of one's neighbor, and the association Jesus makes with the poorest and humblest in society.

MOVE

It's worth mentioning the Catechism of the Catholic Church at this point. Some time, get out your Catechism and take a look at paragraphs 2196 through 2550. The Catechism points out that even the specific commandments – “Honor your father and your mother, You shall not commit adultery, You shall not kill, You shall not steal, You shall not covet,” are summed up in the commandment to love your neighbor as yourself.

This commandment summarizes all the duties we have to each other as human beings –students to teachers, teachers to students; employees to employers, employers to employees; subordinates to leaders, leaders to subordinates.

It also summarizes the duty husbands have to wives, wives to husbands; children to parents, parents to children. Love your neighbor as yourself.

Love of God is more than just “believing.” It's more than just accepting certain doctrines on an intellectual level. It's about a real, conscious, wholehearted response that makes God the chief motivation and reason in life.

But before we can love God, we have to know God. How can we love a God we do not know?

The Catechism says that daily prayer and reading of the Word of God will strengthen the family in charity. It says that the Christian family has an evangelizing and missionary task in the world. What we do in our family is probably what we will do in our society. You play like you practice.

The family is where we learn moral values and learn to honor God. We learn to care and take responsibility for the young, the old, the sick, the handicapped, and the poor.

MOVE

Gaudium et Spes (Joy and Hope) is one of the principal documents that came out of the Second Vatican Council. It spoke of the danger of what it called “a practical apostasy of the faith.” By that it meant mere nominal following of the Christian faith without its having any real consequences in our daily lives. I saw a news item the other day that said that although most people in Denmark are baptized, only about 5% actually go to church. More than half say that God has no real practical place in their lives.

Our Christian faith is not just a footnote to our lives. It’s not something we can turn on and off, not something we can subordinate to the “really important” concerns and interests of my life. We don’t want to let “just enough” religion into our lives to calm our consciences, but “not quite enough” to inspire us to actually do anything about it.

Blaise Pascal said: “If you do not take the trouble to know the truth, there is enough truth at hand so that you can live in peace. But if you crave it with all your heart, then it is not enough to know it.”

We need to take the time to open ourselves to the personal experience of God. One way to do this is personal prayer, and “listening” for God in the silence of our hearts. I’ve said it many times, and I always say how difficult it is – it can be really hard to cut through the distractions and clutter to become aware of the presence of God in our lives.

There is an ultimate meaning and purpose to all that we do. We dedicate our lives to our work, our family, and other commitments. We fall into a “routine” that may lack its fundamental Christian meaning and purpose.

We can’t escape routine, but our Christianity should identify a direction and destiny in and through what we do. We are called to cooperate if the process of salvation is to come to completion. In a sense, “who we are” never stops changing. We are always “becoming” as Jesus is, each in our own way. Jesus is our model of character and the pattern to which our lives are gradually to correspond.

We also need to ask ourselves if, as Christians, we experience within ourselves the love of our neighbor. We need to remember that this is a consequence of the Christian life of Baptism within us and we need to express in action this experience. We need to remember that in and above our daily contact with others we should experience the Christian intention to

love others. This does not necessarily mean more activity but a more complete, religious perception of what I ordinarily do.

Jesus' teaching is not easy (in fact, very challenging!) but it does simplify our service of God by keeping these two laws, we fulfill them all, as well as the teaching of the prophets.

CONCLUSION

Yes, I know. There are some people who make it hard to love them. Or maybe they just make it hard to like them.

The most vulnerable, the weakest.

In a way, I suppose we are all strangers in a strange land. We're all sort of paddling upstream in a society, a country, a world where the Christian faith seems to have less and less significance. If God is going to have a place in our lives, we're going to have to make it for Him.

READINGS

Reading I

Ex 22:20-26

Thus says the LORD:

"You shall not molest or oppress an alien,
for you were once aliens yourselves in the land of Egypt.
You shall not wrong any widow or orphan.
If ever you wrong them and they cry out to me,
I will surely hear their cry.
My wrath will flare up, and I will kill you with the sword;
then your own wives will be widows, and your children orphans.

"If you lend money to one of your poor neighbors among my people,
you shall not act like an extortioner toward him
by demanding interest from him.
If you take your neighbor's cloak as a pledge,
you shall return it to him before sunset;
for this cloak of his is the only covering he has for his body.
What else has he to sleep in?
If he cries out to me, I will hear him; for I am compassionate."

Responsorial Psalm

Ps 18:2-3, 3-4, 47, 51

R. (2) I love you, Lord, my strength.

I love you, O LORD, my strength,
O LORD, my rock, my fortress, my deliverer.

R. I love you, Lord, my strength.

My God, my rock of refuge,
my shield, the horn of my salvation, my stronghold!
Praised be the LORD, I exclaim,
and I am safe from my enemies.

R. I love you, Lord, my strength.

The LORD lives and blessed be my rock!
Extolled be God my savior.
You who gave great victories to your king
and showed kindness to your anointed.

R. I love you, Lord, my strength.

Reading II

1 Thes 1:5c-10

Brothers and sisters:

You know what sort of people we were among you for your sake.

And you became imitators of us and of the Lord,
receiving the word in great affliction, with joy from the Holy Spirit,
so that you became a model for all the believers
in Macedonia and in Achaia.

For from you the word of the Lord has sounded forth
not only in Macedonia and in Achaia,
but in every place your faith in God has gone forth,
so that we have no need to say anything.

For they themselves openly declare about us
what sort of reception we had among you,
and how you turned to God from idols
to serve the living and true God
and to await his Son from heaven,
whom he raised from the dead,
Jesus, who delivers us from the coming wrath.

Gospel

Mt 22:34-40

When the Pharisees heard that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees,
they gathered together, and one of them,
a scholar of the law tested him by asking,

"Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?"

He said to him,

"You shall love the Lord, your God,
with all your heart,
with all your soul,
and with all your mind.

This is the greatest and the first commandment.

The second is like it:

You shall love your neighbor as yourself.

The whole law and the prophets depend on these two commandments."