

Comments**Sixth Sunday after Epiphany****February 12, 2023**

These comments present one interpretation of today's readings; other interpretations may be possible. Comments are best read with the readings.

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Deuteronomy 30:15-20

NRSV

The setting is the plains of Moab, as the Israelites prepare to cross the Jordan into the Promised Land. The book states that Moses is the speaker, but the laws given in Chapters 12-28 are updated versions of those in earlier books. Times have changed since Sinai: the people were semi-nomads then; now they are farmers and shepherds. It is a time of religious revival, of new commitment to God. V. 6 puts the Law in a new light: God will “circumcise your heart” – he will work changes within the people so love becomes the driving force. Note also v. 20: “loving the Lord your God ...”. They will keep the Law because they love God.

Our reading summarizes Chapters 27-28, which tell of: (1) the ways in which the Israelites will be blessed if they keep this expanded and updated covenant; and (2) the consequences of failing to keep many of the laws, i.e. being excluded from the community. Then it offers a choice: keep the laws in love and obedience, or suffer the consequences of following other paths. Keeping the Law because you love God will have many benefits, including long life (“length of days”, v. 20).

Psalms 119:1-8

NRSV

This is the first stanza (of 22, one for each successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet) of the longest psalm. Each of the verses of this stanza begins with *aleph*, the first letter. The whole psalm is in praise of the Law (the expression of God's covenant with humankind in the Old Testament) and of keeping it. The emphasis is on the love and desire for the word of God in Israel's law, rather than being burdened with it. The psalm begins with a prayer for help in observing the Law. To be “happy” (vv. 1-2) is to be blessed by God. As in other stanzas, various words are used for “law”; here they are “precepts”, “statutes” “commandments”, and “ordinances”. The psalmist seeks to avoid sin, and to live in God's ways.

1 Corinthians 3:1-9

NRSV

In Chapter 1, Paul says that he has learnt that there are divisions in the church at Corinth, that some adhere to particular leaders of the community rather than to Christ. The faith only makes sense to those who understand it spiritually, so he addresses them not as “spiritual people” (v. 1) but as neophytes (“infants”). He has been criticized for oversimplifying the good news, but their “jealousy and quarrelling” (v. 3) demonstrate that they are still only earthly minded, are still behaving according to human standards (“inclinations”).

It is natural to be attached to the person who welcomed you into the church, but you need to recognize that they are all “servants” (v. 5) of Christ. Each has a distinct function in bringing you to faith. Paul founded the church at Corinth (“planted”, v. 6); Apollos nurtured faith (“watered”) in the community; but it is

God who causes spirituality and faith to grow. He and Apollos have the same objective (v. 8). Perhaps the rewards (“wages”) are in seeing the church grow; perhaps they are in heaven. Paul and Apollos are co-workers. In the following verses, Paul expands on the church as “God's building” (v. 9).

Matthew 5:21-37

NRSV

Jesus has made clear that his mission is not to do away with (“abolish”) the Old Testament; rather he fleshes out its meaning fully (“fulfill”, v. 17). He speaks particularly about Mosaic law; it will remain in force until he comes again at the end of the era (v. 18). In v. 19, he seems to soften his tone: whether or not one keeps and teaches every one of the 613 laws, one will be admitted to the Kingdom. The scribes and Pharisees kept all the laws scrupulously. Now he explains how their adherence to the Law is insufficient.

Each of Jesus' expansions of the Law begins with “[You have heard that] it was said” (vv. 21, 27, 31, 33, 38, 43). He then quotes a law. “Ancient times” refers to the days of Moses. The Ten Commandments forbid the act of murder (v. 21). Jesus extends this law to include propensities to kill: nursing anger, calling someone good for nothing (as the Greek says) or a “fool” (v. 22). Vv. 23-24 say that reconciliation take priority even over worship, to a Jew the most sacred act. Vv. 25-26 may be a parable: the Kingdom of God is at hand; seek reconciliation “quickly” lest God, the judge, finds against you. Jesus offers forgiveness.

Vv. 27-28, give another example. Avoiding adultery is not enough; even for a man to “look at a woman with a lustful eye” (Revised English Bible) is unacceptable. God expects purity of thought and desire as well as of action. Vv. 29-30 look extreme; they are meant figuratively, not literally. Jesus advises that one discard, promptly and decisively, anything in one's life that tempts one to turn away from God.

Divorcing a wife was easy for a man in Palestine: in some circles, he could simply write her a “certificate of divorce” (v. 31) without cause. Jesus' point here is that marriage is indissoluble, lifelong. He probably thinks of Genesis 2:24: in marriage, God makes man and wife “one flesh”. He makes one exception: “on the ground of unchastity” (v. 32). The Greek word means unlawful sexual behaviour, including adultery. He forbids remarriage because the first marriage still exists. This extension of the Law was not onerous for first-century Christians, for they expected the world to end soon, and they could live separately from their spouses. One swore an oath (vv. 33-37) to guarantee that what one said on a particular occasion was the truth. We still do it in court appearances today. Isaiah 66:1 refers to “earth” (v. 35) as God's “footstool”; “Jerusalem” is God's city (“... of the great King”). They are part of his realm. To “swear by your head” (v. 36) is to swear by oneself. Jesus says one should always tell only the truth. When one does, there is no need for swearing[-in]. A truthful person is consistent in what he says. Inconsistency is a sign that one has turned against God (v. 37). Perhaps Jesus actually said something like James 5:12: “let your ‘Yes’ be yes and your ‘No’ be no”.