a Kendall Hunt Company

Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A, Catechist - RCLB Lectionary

Sirach 15:15–20
Psalm 119:1–2, 4–5, 17–18, 33–34
1 Corinthians 2:6–10
Matthew 5:17–37 [or (short form) 5:20–22, 27–28, 33–34, 37]

The Book of Sirach is part of the Wisdom literature, a corpus of writings dedicated to show how the wise person can live in harmony with God's plan for the world and thus fulfill the prescriptions of the Law. Sirach was written in Hebrew at the start of the second century before Christ, but the work as we know it was translated into Greek some years later following the Maccabean revolt. The translation reflects the concern of pious Judaism to counter the attractions of Hellenistic culture, both in Palestine and in the diaspora, by reasserting the superiority of a wisdom based on Yahweh's Covenant with Israel. Sirach was not accepted into the Jewish canon of scripture and Protestantism considers it an apocryphal work, but Catholics regard it among the deuterocanonical, inspired books of sacred scripture. Early Christianity used Sirach extensively in the instruction of catechumens. Today's excerpt stresses human freedom and our ability to choose between good and evil. The context is an exhortation to choose wisely by following God's commandments, which connects the reading to today's gospel.

Psalm 119 is the longest and most complex of the three major psalms that celebrate the place of the Torah in the life of Israel (see also Psalms 1 and 19). After the reading from Sirach has urged us to choose rightly, Psalm 119 highlights the blessings that come upon us when we do so ("Happy are they . . ."). The verses selected show how the Torah was considered to be a precious gift of the Lord, a sure guide pointing the way to happiness by living in accord with God's plan.

The scribes and Pharisees of Jesus' time were renowned for their study of the Torah and for their scrupulous observance of its 613 prescriptions. Jesus' insistence that his disciples' holiness must surpass that of the scribes and Pharisees in order for them to enter the kingdom of God was deliberately shocking. So, too, Matthew's careful structure of six antitheses (four this week and two next) highlights what surely seemed like an unattainable ideal. First, he juxtaposes the Torah and Jesus' demands; then, he offers a practical illustration of what is being asked; and, finally, he gives Jesus' command. In every case, what Jesus asks of his followers requires an extraordinary interior conversion of heart. Mere external compliance seems impossible; only love as the basis for action could render possible the ethic proposed here by Jesus. Exegetes point out that the use of hyperbole here is integral to understanding the rhetoric of Jesus' message, and we must be careful not to become entangled in a literalistic interpretation of any of his injunctions. What is most important is the overall thrust of Jesus' teaching, how he deliberately pushes his hearers

beyond mere observance of the Law to a way of following the commandments that springs from a radical love of God and neighbor (cf. Matt. 22:34–40).

Today's reading from 1 Corinthians picks up where last week's left off. Paul has been contrasting the folly (i.e., the wisdom) of the cross with worldly wisdom, and admitting that what he preaches has none of the persuasive force of the polished Greek rhetoricians of his day. Rather, the power of Paul's wisdom rests solely on its origin: the Spirit, through whom "God has revealed this wisdom to us" (v. 10). Paul is not hesitant to point out that the wisdom which the Christian receives from the Spirit surpasses that of "the rulers of this age" who are "headed for destruction" (v. 6). He is here

cleverly laying the groundwork for his attempt to correct the errors of certain members of the Corinthian church. They were caught up in self-importance over their gnostic fascination with the hidden mysteries to which they believed themselves privy and had forgotten the basic law of Christian love.

Catholic Doctrine

Human Freedom and Christ's Law of Love

Human freedom is the ability we possess from God to choose how we wish to act or not act, to decide for or against something or to engage in specific actions wholly according to one's own responsibility. In traditional Catholic moral theology, this is described as exercising one's free will. Free will is the mechanism by which we grow and mature in truth and goodness, for when free will is focused on and disciplined for the kingdom of God (as opposed to being totally spontaneous and absolutely self-centered) it achieves a blessedness of life and holiness (CCC 1731).

This general analysis, however, must take into account the record of salvation history. For, without a doubt, we were created by God with freedom to do as we wished. And we failed. Adam and Eve are the scriptural symbols expressive of our failure to attune our free will to the design of God. Human history is replete with examples of individuals and groups who chose evil and evil-doing again and again, which has led to all sorts of diabolical and wretched situations and outcomes. This is why the Second Vatican Council began its discussion of human freedom saying, "The people of our time prize freedom very highly and strive eagerly for it. In this they are right. Yet they often cherish it improperly, as if it gave them leave to do anything they like, even when it is evil. But that which is truly freedom is an exceptional sign of the image of God in [humanity]" (GS 17).

Jesus Christ is that most exceptional sign. He has exercised his own freedom in complete obedience to the will of his heavenly Father. Jesus reveals the mystery of God's love for us and how we might respond to that loving kindness of the Most High (CCC 1701). The Savior is

the summation of the law of Moses. Indeed, he proposes a new, more perfect law, the law of love as found in the gospels and in the very person of Jesus—whose promised Spirit guides and animates the Church as it interprets and hands on that law of love to every generation. This gospel law of love is therefore not so much codified in a series of prescriptions as it is brought to life by the action of the Holy Spirit in the life of the Church. The law of love proclaimed by Christ cannot only be spoken of, but must be preached in detail. By baptism and incorporation into the people of God, and throughout a lifetime of religious formation, the new commandment of love is etched upon our hearts as believers partake of the living tradition of discipleship.

There are two ways in which believers can fail to live up to God's Law. The first is legalism, whereby the letter of the Law is emphasized to the detriment of the Spirit of the Law. The second is antinomianism, which overemphasizes the Spirit to the exclusion of the letter of the Law. The Catholic Church teaches, however, that faith and good works go hand in hand. It is not enough to talk about the particulars of the law of love or the commandments of Christ as given in the gospels. Nor is it enough to claim that one possesses the Spirit. In freedom, the believer chooses actions (or nonactions) in the concrete situations of life which live up to and embody the law of love given to us by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

In fulfilling the law of love, the central focus becomes the person: in Old Testament times, God the Father, and in New Testament times (including our own), Jesus, the only Son of God. And in our own persons we participate, then, in this central focus—which is precisely the communion toward which Catholics strive as they internalize and manifest the law of love by "fostering integrity, justice, community, and transcendence," as they "bring human beings through authentic self-appropriation to that union which is the restoration of all things in Christ" (NDictTheol 569).