

Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time

October 25, 2020

Reflection by Sister Benita Coffey, OSB

Exodus 22:20 -26; Psalm 18; 1st Thessalonians 1: 5c-10; Matthew 22:34-40

In trying to get a sense of the context of today's Gospel, I started back in Matthew's narrative at the very beginning of Chapter 21 when Jesus and his close friends arrived in Jerusalem, and riding astride a donkey and her colt he is hailed with Hosannas. Proceeding next to the temple, he angrily disrupts the money changers, calls for respect for the house of prayer, and then performs many healings. All of this infuriates the chief priests and scribes, but he baffles them with quoting their own scriptures back at them, as justification... and he leaves then for Bethany where he spends the night.

Next morning Jesus again enters the temple and begins what seems to become a very full day of teaching. And, of course, he has his authority questioned over and over as he astonishes the religious officials by both his words and his deeds. Among the several parables used so effectively that day are ones that reveal to his followers deeper insights into the kingdom of God as well as his very person. At the same time the things he says are probing into the hearts of the chief priests, Pharisees, the various religious and civil authority figures, needling them and unsettling their long-held beliefs.

Now here we are, over twenty centuries later, sharing these inspired texts to see for ourselves what their lessons say to us, during this time of pandemic's threat of Covid 19 and within an era of political unrest and disunity in our nation. This last Sunday of October brings us something familiar, just as did the parables or encounters on each of the past several Sundays.

Today's gospel selection stands, I think, significantly...toward the end of a lot of nagging, confrontative dialogue.

What we find here in today's gospel passage is another time when devious efforts fail again to draw the admiring crowd's attention away from Jesus. Some Sadducees come to confront him. They argue about "resurrection" only to be thwarted when he reminds them of the reality found in their own sacred texts that the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is a God of the living. The Sadducees are silenced by that. So, the Pharisees, noticing this, decide then that they will test him, figuring they could trap him and convince the people that Jesus was not able to prove himself, or establish real confidence that he indeed had a true grasp of Mosaic law. A lawyer from their group

poses the question, calling him, perhaps with sarcasm 'Teacher'. "Which commandment in the law is the greatest?" We know the answer Jesus gave without a moment's hesitation. It is all about LOVE. Love God, and your neighbor, and indeed yourself.

We can't know for sure how those words were taken by either the religious authorities on that day or how they were understood by his loyal followers right there with him. They knew God as demanding but as loving, too, from the words of the prophets, the psalms, and all the scriptures. So, what was being asked? How to love? Hadn't they been loving? Wasn't their love good enough? Do some of those same questions come to mind for us today? Or has the familiarity of these words, this statement of simple but profound truth, dulled our ears from hearing any fresh challenge?

What about the phrase all your mind? It occurs to me the wisdom of taking some quiet time soon to think seriously about what I have in mind about God? I give thanks and praise, but how do I know--- and really don't I long to know --- more and more about God, who this is... that with my heart and soul, I acclaim as my creator, my redeemer, my sanctifier?

We have come together here to celebrate Eucharist. These scriptures have been offered for us to ponder. Like the temple authorities and the close disciples, we too know the truth that our passionate God whose love is intense, can also be enraged. Today's reading from Exodus is a stark reminder of our responsibility to others. If our actions are not behaviors of love, God's wrath will flare up. We are cautioned to be, just as God is, people who are attentive and loving. God truly hears the needs of others, and in the hearing acts, because God IS essentially compassionate. It is ours to do likewise.

The psalm assigned for today names God "our refuge, our rock, our strength", but then clearly cries out "the Lord lives". God's kindness has been evident and continues to be evident and is what guarantees the calmness of our lives that allows us to manage the pleasant and difficult experiences of daily life. You may notice Sr. Margaret Ann is still able to speak of kindness. Paul's letter to the Thessalonians speaks in gratitude to these people for their service to him and he pays recognition to them for their serving the living and true God.

These readings, coupled with the gospel passage where love of God and neighbor are explicitly declared to be the law to be followed, seem to invite us to deepen our love of God, to accept God's warm embrace, and in doing so take up the challenge of opening ourselves to what are surely to be at times, difficult tasks, maybe even

resulting in personal hurt at times. We remember however that when God lived here on this planet as a human being, Jesus gave his all by that excruciating death that marked his total self-giving for our redemption.

As people of today we cannot fool ourselves. God is addressing each of us in her own heart. We are challenged to face current situations and to do something. We need to face what is going on in our world, in our city, in our home. We must look into the eyes of those who need us, the victims of injustice, the homeless, the alien, yes, but also look into the eyes of any who feel they are unimportant or helpless or are lonely? Yes, there are world and national situations that may enrage us. Our God has been enraged. But there are also situations some abroad but also some very near where we are called to be compassionate.

In receiving the Bread of Life here today, we become one with that which we receive, with the One who IS LOVE, accepting the grace to be compassionate, the strength to stand firm when enraged at injustice, and the power to Love. May we be blessed to use these well.