

## Better than the letter of the law

**6<sup>th</sup> Sunday of the Year:** 16 February 2020

**Readings:** Sir 15:15-20; 1 Cor 2:6-10; Mt 5:17-37

*“You have heard that it was said……. But I say to you…….”* (Mt)

Note: The readings of today teach us that striving for imbibing the spirit of God’s law is far superior than slavish obedience to that law; for the former demands interior freedom that drives one to go far beyond what is expected of laws, rules and regulations. Ultimately, this entails doing ordinary things in an extraordinary way and helps one to be better than just abiding by the letter of the law.

### Three Signposts from Scripture:

1. The first reading from the book of Sirach, also called ‘Ecclesiasticus’, is one of the Wisdom Books of the OT. It was written in 180 BC in Hebrew by a devout Jew who called himself ‘Joshua ben Eleazar ben Sirach’. It was translated into Greek by his grandson in 132 BC to remind fellow-Jews—who had forgotten their original language, Hebrew, and were living in Egypt—about the dictates of Mosaic Law and the demand to fulfil it faithfully. The book contains simple legal instructions and practical wisdom for smooth functioning of society. Sirach stresses that human beings have God-given intelligence and free will, which enable them to choose what is right and good, and reject evil. The paired terms “fire and water” and “death and life” signify what is destructive and what is vivifying, respectively. God is all wise and all powerful, seen in is giving his people the law, which would guide their moral and spiritual life. Law, which is central to the covenantal relationship of God with the people of Israel, emphasizes four themes: (a) it comes from God; (b) intends to benefit human beings; (c) it is a reliable guide to living; and, (d) illuminates one’s mind and understanding. While one would appreciate faithful observance of the law, one must also realize that slavish obedience to law can lead to one’s faith being merely legalistic, ritualistic and condemnatory of those who fall short of the letter of the law.
2. The gospel reading is a continuation of Jesus’ ‘sermon on the mount’ from a Matthean perspective which sees Jesus as the fulfillment of the Mosaic Law. Just as God entrusted the Ten Commandments to Moses at Mount Sinai, who descended therefrom to instruct his people about God’s commands (see Exodus ch. 19), so does the New Moses, God’s Son, Jesus, deliver his new covenantal decrees from atop a mountain. While last Sunday’s gospel passage provided two images: ‘salt of the earth’ and ‘light of the world’, today’s passage—with three concrete injunctions—show how one must live in order to be salt and light, thereby fulfilling God law. These three commands must be seen in the light of what Jesus says a little earlier: “Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill” (Mt 5:17). Interestingly, Jesus’ interpretation and living of God’s law will directly clash with that of the Pharisees and the scribes. These latter two groups were known for their ‘holier-than-thou’ attitude seen not only in their strict observance of the Ten Commandments (Decalogue), but also in identifying holiness with mere observance of rules and regulations, do’s and don’ts. Jesus begins by saying: “Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven …”. He then proceeds to teach how one must go beyond the letter of the law to understand and imbibe its true spirit.

3. Jesus prefaces each of the three teachings with the sentence: “You have heard that it was said ..... But I say to you .....” (Mt 5:21-22, 27-28, 33-34) stressing that the ancient order has passed away and a new order is being ushered in—based not on the love of law, but on the law of love. Hence, Jesus deals with internals not just externals, the spirit of the law and not the letter. By Jesus’ standards, one can judge oneself as righteousness, godly and good not by merely stating that one has not broken some law or the other, but by what inner motive and prime purpose one has either done, or not done, some action or the other. So, condoning oneself of murder, adultery and false witness is not possible by merely saying that one has avoided these three sins, but by examining whether the seeds of anger, lust and swearing are present in seminal form, and by striving to weed them out totally. In sum, every action must be judged not in terms of ‘not doing’ but in terms of how one is ‘doing’ something to build up right relationship with God, with others, and with one’s deepest self.

### **Connecting the Second Reading and the Psalm to the Theme:**

The response to the psalm quite simply says: “They are happy who follow God’s law” Today’s psalm (119) expresses the greatness of God’s law with the psalmist praying: “Give me understanding, that I may keep your law, and observe it with my whole heart” (v.34). Indeed, ‘heart’ indicates the interiority required to keep the law. This is what Paul suggests in the second reading—from his First Letter to the Corinthians—that his followers imbibe and impart to others: “a secret and hidden wisdom of God .... Which God has revealed to us through the Spirit” It is God’s Spirit who guides us “even to the depths of God’—ever seeking wisdom and fidelity not simply to the letter of the law, but to its spirit, which basically is the ‘law of love’.

### **Three Contextual Concerns:**

India: An Angry Nation — India is boiling with rage: over government policies; unjust legal Acts; rising violence by Rightwing extremists; suppression and repression at various levels; lynching of minorities; road rage; scandalous inequality in incomes and lifestyles; shocking poverty, unemployment, illiteracy, etc. Seeds of anger often produce shoots of bloodshed.

The Crimes against Women: Indians often uphold women as sacred in the Sita-Savitri mould. But even godmen and gurus are guilty of crimes ranging from abuse of girls to rape of women. Lust and licentiousness have made India one of the most unsafe places for women—with a crime against women committed every 3 minutes, and, 65% of Indian men holding that women must bear violence to have peace in the family, and sometimes deserve to be beaten.

The Lure of Lies and Falsehood: With the spread of the InfoTech Revolution, the Internet is rife with lies, rumours and falsehood. Politicians and powerbrokers often curse and swear in God’s name or use scripture to peddle falsehood and lies. It’s hard to believe anyone at all.

**A Text from Tradition:** *St Augustine’s 7<sup>th</sup> Homily on 1 Jn 4:4-12* — “Once for all, then, a short precept is given thee: Love, and do what thou wilt: whether thou hold thy peace, through love hold thy peace; whether thou cry out, through love cry out; whether thou correct, through love correct; whether thou spare, through love do thou spare: let the root of love be within, of this root can nothing spring but what is good.” May love guide our lives.

*“Obedience keeps the rules; love knows when to break them”* (Anthony de Mello, SJ)

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