

SPIRITUALITY

GOSPEL ACCLAMATION

cf. Matt 11:25

R. Alleluia, alleluia.

Blessed are you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth;

you have revealed to little ones the mysteries of the kingdom.

R. Alleluia, alleluia.

Gospel Matt 5:17-37; L76A

Jesus said to his disciples:

"Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets.

I have come not to abolish but to fulfill.

Amen, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away,

not the smallest letter or the smallest part of a letter

will pass from the law, until all things have taken place.

Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do so will be called least in the kingdom of heaven.

But whoever obeys and teaches these commandments will be called greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

I tell you, unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven.

"You have heard that it was said to your ancestors, *You shall not kill; and whoever kills will be liable to judgment.*

But I say to you, whoever is angry with brother will be liable to judgment; and whoever says to brother, 'Raca,' will be answerable to the Sanhedrin; and whoever says, 'You fool,' will be liable to fiery Gehenna.



Reflecting on the Gospel

We are more like the scribes and Pharisees of Jesus' time than we sometimes like to admit; that is, we fulfill the law perfectly but have little regard for what the law calls us to. One easy example: many cities today have erected speed and red light cameras at critical intersections that have caused serious accidents in the past. The law gives us a speed limit and asks us to stop when the light is yellow or red. *The reason for this law is to save injury and lives. Yet, so many of us disregard the law.* We step on the gas when the light turns yellow and regularly exceed speed limits. However, when we know these cameras are at intersections, we slow down and stop when we might stomp on the gas at another intersection. Yes, we keep the law. But our heart is not in it. Our wallet is.

In this gospel selection, a continuation of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, which is a blueprint for faithful Christian living, Jesus is speaking about laws and human behavior. He does not make his hearers' lives easier by easing the law; he does give a better reason for keeping it than the consequences of breaking laws: deepening right relationships with those around us. He has not come to abolish the law; he has come to show us what its fulfillment looks like.

What does it mean for Jesus to fulfill the law? Jesus sees in the law the means to the fulfillment of time ("until all things have taken place"), when the law will be replaced by righteous relationships within the kingdom of heaven. The fundamental law is gift of self to others. When self-giving is lacking in any act of keeping the law, the law in fact is not kept. We are to keep the law as the way to enter a manner of caring for and relating to others that leads to fullness of Life. Our model for so doing is Jesus.

Living the Paschal Mystery

Each example given in the longer form of this Sunday's gospel points to typical human behaviors that every one of us experience at one time or another in our lives: anger with those close to us, need for reconciliation, repayment of just debts, fidelity in relationships, temptation, doing what we mean to do. As humans we can expect to have difficulties with each other. Jesus is not asking us to be perfect; he is asking us to pay attention to how we deal with one another and strive for a "righteousness" (that is, right relationships) that surpasses what we need to do minimally to get along with each other.

Practically, this means that we don't say a perfunctory "I'm sorry" when we've hurt another, but mean it from our heart and strive to do whatever we can to restore the rupture in the relationship. It means that we look at the root of our anger with others and perhaps there discover what needs to change in us. It means that when we are unfaithful in relationships we question whether we are demanding too much of others, whether our own selfishness is getting in the way of growing in our love for others. It means that we follow through on our commitments.

The "righteousness" that Jesus asks of us is not concerned with minimums—even of keeping the law—but is concerned with caring for others as he did. It means loving as he did. Jesus lives the supreme act of love: giving self totally. To follow Jesus faithfully, we must also develop a daily habit of giving self to others—for their good and for our own. For a life habit of self-giving love is the only way we "enter the kingdom of heaven."

*Continued in Appendix A, p. 267.
or Matt 5:20-22a, 27-28, 33-34a, 37 in Appendix A, p. 267.*

Focusing the Gospel

Key words and phrases: law . . . fulfill, until all things have taken place, kingdom of heaven, righteousness surpasses

To the point: What does it mean for Jesus to fulfill the law? Jesus sees in the law the means to the fulfillment of time (“until all things have taken place”), when the law will be replaced by righteous relationships within the kingdom of heaven. The fundamental law is gift of self to others. When self-giving is lacking in any act of keeping the law, the law in fact is not kept. We are to keep the law as the way to enter a manner of caring for and relating to others that leads to fullness of Life. Our model for so doing is Jesus.

Connecting the Gospel

to the first reading: Keeping the law as an act of love (gospel) is a matter of “life and death” (first reading). We have only to make the choice.

to our experience: We don’t choose to fall in love, it just happens. But staying in love requires constant choosing, that what just happened by chance and grace becomes pattern and commitment. The same is true for the fundamental law of self-giving, which is really a fundamental law of love.

Connecting the Responsorial Psalm

to the readings: Psalm 119 is the longest psalm in the psalter and includes within its carefully planned framework many types of psalm genres all woven together in praise of God’s law. The relationship between the verses of Psalm 119 selected for this responsorial psalm and the first reading and gospel are readily evident. Those who keep the commandments of God are choosing life over death, good over evil (first reading). Those who understand the deepest intent of the law see it not as a list of external rubrics, but as an invitation to more just and loving relationships (gospel). In the psalm we ask God to give us the kind of discernment Jesus brings to the law. We pray also for the kind of obedience to the law Jesus exemplifies: obedience flowing from a heart tempered by compassion, forgiveness, truth, and mercy.

to psalmist preparation: Wholehearted obedience to God’s law leads not to a rigid heart but to a warm one. How have you grown over the years in your understanding of God’s law? How has God’s law made you more compassionate, more merciful, more truthful, more just? Where do you need to continue growing?

ASSEMBLY & FAITH-SHARING GROUPS

- Those who have taught me the real meaning of keeping the law are . . . I realize I have failed to keep the meaning of the law when . . .
- My actions reveal that the fundamental law is gift of self to others when . . .
- Jesus fulfilled the law; I fulfill the law when I . . .

PRESIDERS

My preaching has led others to understand and keep more perfectly the fundamental law of love in these ways . . .

DEACONS

My serving those in need is a keeping of the fundamental law of gift of self to others when I . . .

HOSPITALITY MINISTERS

My manner of giving self to those gathering for liturgy draws them also to give themselves to others when I . . .

MUSIC MINISTERS

Singing is by nature a giving of self, and I am most aware of Christ’s Presence in my sung self-gift when . . .

ALTAR MINISTERS

My self-giving is more an act of love than a perfunctory duty when I . . .

LECTORS

Keeping the fundamental law of gift of self helps my proclamation lead others to Jesus when I . . .

EXTRAORDINARY MINISTERS OF HOLY COMMUNION

The manner of my distributing Holy Communion hastens the fulfillment of time when I . . .

CELEBRATION

Model Penitential Act

Presider: In this gospel Jesus calls us to grasp that the fundamental meaning of keeping God's law is to strive for righteous relationships with each other and God. As we prepare to celebrate this liturgy, let us consider when we have fallen short of loving others and seek God's mercy . . . [pause]

Lord Jesus, you are God's gift of salvation for us: Lord . . .

Christ Jesus, you are the fulfillment of all law: Christ . . .

Lord Jesus, you are the way to fullness of Life: Lord . . .

Homily Points

- A cartoon that once appeared in *The New Yorker* depicted Moses standing in front of a mountain holding the two tablets of the Law. One of the many people present remarked that these commandments don't leave us much wiggle room. In fact, they leave us a lot of wiggle room. The law does not bind our behavior with legalistic chains, but opens our hearts to the expanse of self-giving love.
- Jesus does not abolish the law but shows us the way to its fulfillment. Merely keeping the law holds us time-bound. Moving beyond keeping the law to embracing the fundamental law of love breaks us out of time and leads us toward the fullness of time when the kingdom of heaven will be definitively established. Moreover, the inbreaking of God's kingdom takes place even now, when the law of overflowing love completes the law of right conduct.
- Simply keeping the law is not enough, for while the law of God is there to make us warm-hearted, the way we sometimes keep it makes us coldhearted. We are coldhearted law keepers, for example, when we use rigid obedience to law as justification for negative judgments of others or when we use the law as protection from responding to the needs of others. All God's laws are a matter of choice. Beyond merely keeping the law, the choice concerns what is fundamental: gift of self and care for others. Keeping the law must open our hearts to the expanse of self-giving love. In this expanse lies the kingdom of heaven.

Model Universal Prayer (Prayer of the Faithful)

Presider: Our loving God always opens the divine heart in care for us. So we are encouraged to make our needs known.

Response:



Lord, ——— hear our prayer.

Cantor:



we pray to the Lord,

That all members of the church embrace more faithfully the fundamental law of self-giving love . . . [pause]

That all peoples strengthen right relationships with each other, building a world of justice and peace . . . [pause]

That the law of love leads communities to respond more fully to the needs of the poor, the sick, the lonely, the homeless, and the disheartened . . . [pause]

That all of us gathered here may hasten through our manner of right living the fullness of God's kingdom . . . [pause]

Presider: Loving God, you give us the law to guide us on our life's journey: keep us faithful and loving that one day we might live the fullness of Life with you forever. We ask this through Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

COLLECT

Let us pray

Pause for silent prayer

O God, who teach us that you abide in hearts that are just and true, grant that we may be so fashioned by your grace as to become a dwelling pleasing to you. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. **Amen.**

FIRST READING

Sir 15:15-20

If you choose you can keep the commandments, they will save you; if you trust in God, you too shall live; he has set before you fire and water; to whichever you choose, stretch forth your hand. Before man are life and death, good and evil, whichever he chooses shall be given him. Immense is the wisdom of the Lord; he is mighty in power, and all-seeing. The eyes of God are on those who fear him; he understands man's every deed. No one does he command to act unjustly, to none does he give license to sin.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM

Ps 119:1-2, 4-5, 17-18, 33-34

R¹. (1b) Blessed are they who follow the law of the Lord!

Blessed are they whose way is blameless, who walk in the law of the LORD. Blessed are they who observe his decrees, who seek him with all their heart.

R². Blessed are they who follow the law of the Lord!

You have commanded that your precepts be diligently kept. Oh, that I might be firm in the ways of keeping your statutes!

R³. Blessed are they who follow the law of the Lord!

Be good to your servant, that I may live and keep your words. Open my eyes, that I may consider the wonders of your law.

R⁴. Blessed are they who follow the law of the Lord!

CATECHESIS

Instruct me, O LORD, in the way of your statutes,
that I may exactly observe them.
Give me discernment, that I may observe your law
and keep it with all my heart.

R. Blessed are they who follow the law of the Lord!

SECOND READING

1 Cor 2:6-10

Brothers and sisters:

We speak a wisdom to those who are mature,
not a wisdom of this age,
nor of the rulers of this age who are passing away.
Rather, we speak God's wisdom,
mysterious, hidden,
which God predetermined before the ages for our glory,
and which none of the rulers of this age knew;
for, if they had known it,
they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.

But as it is written:

*What eye has not seen, and ear has not heard,
and what has not entered the human heart,
what God has prepared for those who love him,
this God has revealed to us through the Spirit.*

For the Spirit scrutinizes everything, even the depths of God.

About Liturgy

Letter or spirit of the liturgy: It has been a little over two years since we began implementing the new translation of the third edition of *The Roman Missal*. By now most parishes or liturgical communities have learned the new Mass settings, have relearned responses, and have probably taken most of this for granted. But this raises a question in the light of this Sunday's gospel: have we implemented the new translation as a rote response to a liturgical "law," or have we truly said yes to what the church has asked of us and made concrete attempts to pray the Mass better?

The spirit of the liturgy is truly about "righteousness"—about right relationships with God and each other. It is not nearly enough in our liturgical celebrations to simply follow liturgical law. The liturgical laws and guidelines are there to help us give ourselves over to a common prayer, one that is much larger than our personal likes or needs. Simply saying yes to a law is not enough. We are called by our gospel values and habit of living right relationships to commit ourselves to growing in our liturgical prayer, to making a concerted effort to understand what we are doing during liturgy, and to surrender ourselves to a celebration of what is most important in our lives: the very life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

About Liturgical Music

Music suggestions: "Your Ways Are Not Our Own" (W4) would be an excellent choice for the entrance procession. Verse 1 reads, "Your ways are not our own, O gracious God most high, Yet we would follow in your paths And on your love rely," and verse 5 states, "Forgiveness is our joy, Receiving, giving, too. Keep us from judgments hard and cruel, That we may dwell with you." In verse 2 of "Christ Before Us" (BB) we sing, "May we be for one another all that you would have us be. May we live your law of kindness, love, compassion, charity." This hymn would be suitable for the preparation of the gifts. Another good choice for the preparation of the gifts would be "My People, What Do I Require?" (SS). Verse 4 challenges us to "Walk humbly: test your ways by mine and live by my clear Word." "Choose Life" (WC) is an attractive verse-refrain setting of the text of the first reading. This song could be used during the Communion procession with cantor or choir singing the verses and assembly the refrain. A choral octavo is available from WLP. A fitting song for the recessional would be "What Does the Lord Require" (W4). This hymn calls us to "fulfill God's law so hard and high" by acting in ways that lead us to "Do justly; Love mercy; Walk humbly with your God."