

Commentary on the Gospel for Sun, Oct 26th 2014

We can sometimes be led to think of Jesus in a way that sets him apart from the Jewish tradition in which he was raised. There is no doubt that Jesus taught that one could transcend ceremonial and Sabbath laws of the Hebrew scriptures when human need called for immediate response. (Recall his readiness to heal on the Sabbath, which his critics considered a violation of the “no work on the Sabbath” law.) But the moral laws of his people was quite another question. Jesus rarely took exception to did not lighten the moral mandates of the Law and the Prophets. Lived that Law and sometimes deepened it. This Sunday’s readings offer a great opportunity to appreciate Jesus’ commitment to the moral vision of the Hebrew Bible.

When the teacher of the Torah tests him by asking him to pick greatest commandment from among the 613 laws of the biblical Torah, Jesus simply recites the beginning of the daily prayer of his people (Deuteronomy 6:5), which is called the Shema, after the first word of the prayer, “Listen!” or “Hear!”: “Hear O Israel. You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.” And then he proceeds add what he considers the second most important law by quoting from another part of the Old Testament, Leviticus 19:18b—“You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” The immediate context of this law in Leviticus appears to limit the meaning of ‘neighbor’ to fellow countryman, for Leviticus 19:18a reads, “Take no revenge and cherish no grudge against your fellow countrymen.” But two things should be noticed about this saying. First, for those who think that the Old Testament laws are only concerned with external action and not internal attitudes, notice that this mandate does indeed address one’s interior life (holding grudges!). Second, another part of this same chapter in Leviticus says, “When an alien resides with you in your land, do not molest him. You shall treat the alien who resides with you no differently than the natives born among you; have the same love for him as for yourself; for you too were once aliens in the land of Egypt” (Lev 19:33-34). It is true that Jesus stretches “neighbor” to include anyone in need, even enemies, but it is important that the law of Leviticus was already ready to include immigrants among those one is called to love as oneself. Today’s first reading, from Exodus 22, repeats and elaborates on this law to explicitly include the widow, the orphan, and the poor.

We would do well to take the moral teaching of the Old Testament as seriously as Jesus did. It might even affect our attitudes toward the immigrants in our midst.

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