

Commentary on the Gospel for Sat, Jul 2nd 2016

The Old Way and the New (Mt 9:14-17)

In today's Gospel, Matthew narrates a wonderful episode in which Jesus targets Pharisaical legalism with three sharp metaphors. The disciples of John the Baptist had come to ask Jesus, "How come we and the Pharisees fast a lot, but your disciples don't fast at all?"

Jesus responds with His first metaphor: "Wedding guests can't fast as long as the bridegroom is with them, can they? But sooner or later the bridegroom will be taken away from them. They will fast then, all right!" He is the bridegroom and His guests make up His Kingdom on earth, the People of God. He's telling them that this "wedding" is a time for joy and celebration, not fasting! He is also saying that He, His teaching, and the "Way" He is proposing cannot be judged by the old, traditional standards rigidly adhered to by the one's asking, "Why don't your followers fast?"

Jesus continues with the two other metaphors. No one uses a piece of newly made cloth to patch an old garment. At the first sign of stress, the new patch will pull away and tear the old and well worn cloth. Likewise, no one puts new wine in old, used wineskins. When the wine ferments it expands the old skins and they will burst because they have no more stretch – and so not only are the old skins ruined, but also the good new wine is lost. New skins are best for new wine! Although Our Lord is not suggesting with these two images that the old law should be discarded (He came to fulfill it!), He is saying that the new law He brings will tear those apart who will not accept it and burst the bubble of the prideful ones who are so attached to the old law that they think it is all they need.

In all three metaphors Jesus announces a radical shift in the ways we are called to relate to God and to each other. In the traditional ways identified with the Pharisees and with John the Baptist, loyalty to God was expressed through strict observation of the letter of the law and external practices like fasting. The Way of Jesus is quite different. His Way follows the interior law of love, not just an exterior adherence to the disciplines of the written law.

Some of us today are like the portrait of the Pharisees in Matthew's gospel. They insist that others be perfectly 'orthodox' like they brag themselves to be. Or they judge the others to have gone astray for not sticking to details of Church discipline which circumstances and conscience tell them do not apply – or no longer apply because the new law of love transcends it. At the same time, there are those who live with little love except for themselves, ignoring the Lord's preferential option for the poor and eschewing the practice of the corporal and spiritual works of mercy. These show very little concern for others in need, and they balk at how Church doctrine and practice are developing as she looks more mercifully and attentively at our world as the Second Vatican Council tried to do. This is the kind of Pharisaism which it seems to me in many ways is still alive and well.

"A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another."
(John 13:34)

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