

Commentary on the Gospel for Wed, Mar 22nd 2017

We are half-way through Lent – Ash Wednesday was three weeks ago! So as we review these readings we see that they are providing us with teaching to ready our hearts for the extraordinary events related to Easter.

Throughout the readings for this Sunday are the themes of wisdom and commandments & laws. In the first reading from Genesis, Moses advises the Israelites (and us!) to follow the statutes and laws – that is the wise thing to do. He emphasizes the wisdom and intelligence of this but, of course, it always comes down to our choice. The decisions are always ours – we have been granted free will. Of course, we don't always reflect wisdom with our choices. Too often we allow the daily temptations to influence us clouding the wisdom of better decisions.

The concept of free will has always fascinated me – why are we allowed to make such poor decisions? Wouldn't it be easier if we were “programed” to just make the right decisions? Then . . . I thought of my children – grown adults now – but my desire is still that they make “right” decisions. I've always wanted them to be guided toward those decisions but to come to them on their own. I can give rules, share wisdom and experiences, but in the end the choice is theirs. I would not want them to be robotic without the ability to think, to reason, to want to make the right decisions. So when I consider all of us as children of God, the same thoughts hold true. It is much more meaningful to make the “right” decisions on my own just as it is to freely embrace God, to accept Jesus as my Lord and Savior on my own volition than to be forced or coerced into those beliefs. It is left to us to decide, knowing the consequences and rewards.

Our gospel is one that we heard on a Sunday a couple of weeks before Lent started. It continues the themes of following laws/commandments. Jesus points out that He did not come to abolish the laws. Rather He is here to fulfill the prophets. He reviews our obligation to follow the commandments. Jesus warns us that those who break the commandments are called least in the kingdom of heaven as are those who cause others to do so. Conversely, those who follow the commandments will be called greatest in the kingdom of heaven. In the next few verses, Jesus explains this further. The challenging part for us now is that as Jesus explains the following of these, He takes it beyond the literal meaning. Few of us will be guilty of killing another, however, who among us can say they have never been angry with another or treated them in a way that was harmful either physically or emotionally.

Jesus really ups the stakes in His discussion of the commandments as He provides guidance in directing us as to the handling of such situations. Clearly, we are to atone by making amends to others. I think about the angels' proclamation of Peace on Earth – we frequently forget that it was concluded with toward people of Good Will. So that is how we are to live: as men and women of good will – not being drawn into the myriad of temptations that await us every day. He advises us to control our bodies and to not allow some of our senses or actions to lead us to a sinful path. His last admonition is to be truthful – Let your 'Yes' mean 'Yes,' and your 'No' mean 'No.' Anything more is from the evil one. This is in accord with what Moses said in the first reading to follow the statutes and directives While this reading is earlier in Matthew, it certainly lays the groundwork for when Jesus discusses the most important commandments – all of these rules and laws summarized in one phrase: Love your neighbor as yourself. Such a simple phrase and one that challenges all of us and has since the beginning of time. Even as we think of Jesus' first statement in this reading about not coming to abolish the

commandments, we can see that in the early writings and rules as found in Leviticus, we were commanded to . . . not seek revenge or bear a grudge against anyone among your people, but love your neighbor as yourself.

Bottom-line . . . it hasn't changed; that is still our directive!! Lent and our preparation for Easter is a perfect time to reflect upon this and give it a try!!

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