

SIXTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME: February 16, 2020

The other day the Glastonbury Institute had a cinema afternoon showing the film "Saint Vincent" with Bill Murray. One of the lines from this movie that I liked was this, "Catholicism must be the best religion because it has the most rules."

Many Catholics have grown up with the conviction that their Catholic training was all dogmas and rules. They haven't learned the Buddhist belief enunciated by the Dalai Lama, "Learn the rules well so you know how to break them." So many Catholics, even when they reach adulthood, still have a rules mentality proper for children.

In our second reading today Saint Paul writes: "Among the mature we do speak wisdom, though it is not a wisdom of this age ... But we speak God's wisdom, secret and hidden, which God decreed before the ages for our glory."

Just what is this wisdom? From our Jewish ancestors we learn their devotion to the "Torah." The word Torah is often translated the Law but is more a trajectory, a direction program to find life. In today's reading from the book of Sirach, we hear that a faithful living of the commandments is a choice between fire and water, life and death. In the gospel Jesus struggles with some scribes and Pharisees who extend the Torah to all sorts of rules to keep, over 600 of them in fact. But Jesus is not opposed to the Torah, just the turning it into burdensome obligations. "Do you think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets?" he asks, "No, I have come not to abolish but to fulfill."

Jesus wants his followers to embrace the interior, heart-felt, meaning of the commandments and laws. It is the Sermon on the Mount in chapters five through seven of Matthew's gospel, that we have an over-all look at what it means to keep the law of God. Today's gospel is the third of six sections of the Sermon. It began with the Beatitudes, the consummate image of what it means to be a disciple of Christ. Blessed are the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the merciful, the pure of heart, the peacemakers, those who are persecuted for righteousness sake.

The Beatitudes are attitudes, habits of the heart. The moral teaching of Jesus is concerned with the mind and the heart. When he calls on people to repent, to

change, he is not talking about giving up some big sin like murder. He is challenging his listeners to change the way they think and feel. Violence, for instance, begins, in the way we think before we speak or act.

Today's excerpt from the Sermon on the Mount embraces what are called the six antitheses. Each one begins with "You have heard it said..." which implies a legalistic look at what is wrong before God and humanity. Then Jesus says, "But what I tell us is this..." and Jesus brings things to our heart. One by one, Jesus takes the various laws, in all their externality, and drew out their inner roots.

Like this:

- One external injunction had been against killing. The inside of the law is, do not even act out of anger for your brother or sister. Not even the word raqa, fool, or idiot, should be spoken. Unspoken anger, violent language, quiet contempt of another. An unwillingness to forgive. "If you bring your gift to the altar and there recall that your brother or sister has anything against you, leave your gift at the altar, go first to be reconciled and then come and offer your gift."
- You shall not commit adultery. The inside of that law is: be pure enough to not even glance lustfully at another person.
- Divorce. The interior law is, stay faithful and loving within your marriage relationship, not simply to not separate. And do not treat a woman as a thing.
- Finally, oaths, using God's name to back one's statement. Jesus implies that you are trying to make up for your weakness by putting almighty power behind your words, "O, My God!", "By God I will never allow..." Jesus tells them there is a better way. Just say yes or no, and mean it. No ifs or buts.

Jesus did speak to children but here it is to us adults. He is offering us the Spirit and as Saint Paul says, the Spirit scrutinizes everything, even the depths of God.

Now, none of this is intended to make us despair and give up. Jesus knows we all fall short. And therefore we all must not judge. We are all called to holiness, and therefore we must not exempt ourselves. The Sermon on the Mount is not there to cast us down into helpless and hopeless guilt. No, it is an invitation to that

holiness and depth of our humanity that we have hitherto not seen or heard about. It is an excavation into your deepest loves, so that seeing what we love most, we will finally be given our heart's desire. But it is a harrowing trip down into the mines of our motivation.

Jesus challenges us to grow up in our thoughts, in our words, in our actions. He is showing us the way to a fullness of our humanity. We have a choice to choose fire or water, life or death. We can either accept the challenge of the Sermon on the Mount or we can continue to complain about all the rules we were taught as children.

May I suggest that you spend some time on the Sermon on the Mount during Lent. Mahatma Gandhi fell in love with the Sermon on the Mount and it was an impelling force in his activity. He once said that if he saw that Christians took the Sermon more seriously, he would be forced to become a Christian himself.

Timothy J. Joyce, OSB, STL