

SEVENTH SUNDAY IN
ORDINARY TIME

YEAR A



Prayer

Psalm 103:1-4, 8, 10, 12-13

Bless the LORD, O my soul,
and all that is within me,
bless his holy name.

Bless the LORD, O my soul,
and do not forget all his
benefits—who forgives all
your iniquity, who heals all
your diseases, who redeems
your life from the Pit,
who crowns you with
steadfast love and mercy,
The LORD is merciful and
gracious, slow to anger and
abounding in steadfast love.

He does not deal with us
according to our sins,
nor repay us according to
our iniquities. as far as the
east is from the west,
so far he removes our
transgressions from us.

As a father has compassion
for his children, so the LORD
has compassion for those
who fear him.

Reading the Word

Leviticus 19:1-2, 17-18

The LORD spoke to Moses,
saying: Speak to all the con-
gregation of the people of
Israel and say to them: You
shall be holy, for I the LORD
your God am holy.

You shall not hate in your
heart anyone of your kin; you

shall reprove your neighbor,
or you will incur guilt yourself.
You shall not take vengeance
or bear a grudge against any
of your people, but you shall
love your neighbor as yourself:
I am the LORD.

Second Reading:

1 Corinthians 3:16-23

Do you not know that you are
God's temple and that God's
Spirit dwells in you? If anyone
destroys God's temple, God
will destroy that person. For
God's temple is holy, and you
are that temple.

Do not deceive yourselves. If
you think that you are wise in
this age, you should become
fools so that you may become
wise. For the wisdom of this
world is foolishness with God.
For it is written,

"He catches the wise in their
craftiness," and again, "The
Lord knows the thoughts of
the wise, that they are futile."

So let no one boast about
human leaders. For all things
are yours, whether Paul or
Apollos or Cephas or the world
or life or death or the present
or the future—all belong to
you, and you belong to Christ,
and Christ belongs to God.

Gospel: Matthew 5:38-48

"You have heard that it was said,
'An eye for an eye and a tooth

FIRST READING

Leviticus 19:1-2, 17-18

PSALM

Psalm 103:1-4, 8, 10, 12-13

SECOND READING

1 Corinthians 3:16-23

GOSPEL

Matthew 5:38-48

for a tooth.' But I say to you,
Do not resist an evildoer. But if
anyone strikes you on the right
cheek, turn the other also; and
if anyone wants to sue you and
take your coat, give your cloak
as well; and if anyone forces
you to go one mile, go also the
second mile. Give to everyone
who begs from you, and do
not refuse anyone who wants
to borrow from you.

"You have heard that it was
said, 'You shall love your neigh-
bor and hate your enemy.' But
I say to you, Love your enemies
and pray for those who per-
secute you, so that you may
be children of your Father in
heaven; for he makes his sun
rise on the evil and on the
good, and sends rain on the
righteous and on the unright-
eous. For if you love those
who love you, what reward do
you have? Do not even the tax
collectors do the same? And
if you greet only your broth-
ers and sisters, what more are
you doing than others? Do
not even the Gentiles do the
same? Be perfect, therefore, as
your heavenly Father is perfect.

*Scripture quotations from
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Hearing the Word

“Be Perfect”

The concepts of holiness and perfection dominate today's liturgy of the word. Speaking about God we have no other choice but to use human words and ideas. In the Scripture, the word used most often to describe God is the word “holy”. Holiness expresses God's nature; who God is, and what God does. But what does holiness mean? On the one hand, it indicates that God is radically different from the rest of creation. It implies being “set apart”, or being different from all else that exists, including human beings. On the other hand, it describes God's goodness manifested to the Israelites. They understood that God's holiness meant that the people who belong to him must also resemble their Lord; they must share in God's holiness and be holy.

The first reading clearly reflects this understanding with God's powerful command, “You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy.” But how can a human being, or a human community, be holy? The way to holiness for the Israelites is outlined in the “Torah” or “the Law” contained in the first five books of the Bible, called in Greek “the Pentateuch”. For the Israelites, the Torah was a guide and instruction on what it means to be holy. It outlined the entire way of life, from guidelines on what to eat, to instructions on how to worship. A major part of Leviticus from which today's reading comes, is called the “Holiness Code” (chs 17–26), precisely because it focuses on that aspect of the

Israelite identity. As God's holy people, the Israelites were literally “set apart” from all other people on earth by the way they lived. Another aspect of their holiness which resembles God's own holiness was the way they were to relate to one another. According to the second part of the reading, holiness excludes any kind of hatred or conceited vengeance. Speaking positively, Israelites must resemble their God in the profound concern they show for others. This concern is described by one profound word, “love”. We have to note that, in the Torah, these demands extended only to the fellow members of the Israelite community.

Paul, writing to the Corinthians, compares their community to a temple. The word that Paul actually uses is “sanctuary”. In the Jerusalem Temple, sanctuary was the inner part of the Temple, also called the “holy of holies”, where God's presence was said to dwell. Using this beautiful image, the apostle compares the community to God's dwelling place. Paul purposefully employed this sacred image to reinforce his argument against divisions in the Corinthian community. Earlier in the letter, he argued against divisions based on allegiance to various baptisers. Today's passage concludes the argument with a very powerful warning. Since the community is God's sanctuary, it is also filled with God's presence. Divisions which destroy the community's unity amount to undermining God's sanctuary and obscuring God's presence in it. The reasons for divisions –

arguments about who is foolish and who is wise, and loyalties to various baptisers such as Paul, Apollos, or Cephas – are nothing more than petty and silly squabbles. These divisive distinctions have no meaning because through baptism Corinthians became members of one community; they became God's sanctuary filled with God's presence and, therefore, holy. Its members belong to Christ, and, through Christ, to God. Consequently, the Christian community embodies God's presence in the world, the presence of which must not be undermined in any way. The Gospel reading treats two distinctive issues. First, there is the issue of violence and abuse. In Jesus' day the response to these was outlined in the so-called *lex talionis* – the principle expressed through the phrase “and eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth”. It was a sound law that prevented the escalation of violence through the demand for direct correspondence between crime and punishment. Jesus does not deny the validity of such justice. However, using three captivating examples, he admonishes his disciples to go further: they are to put an end to violence and abuse. The three examples used by Jesus – turning the other cheek, resigning one's rights in court and going further than required – all illustrate one single attitude that can prevent violence from continuation and propagation: non-retaliation. For Jesus, replacing *lex talionis* with non-retaliation principle and with doing more than fairness

requires is necessary to change the society. Justice based on punishments does not end violence, it only prevents it from escalation at best, and merely propagates it at the worst. The only effective way to end violence and abuse is non-retaliation and forgiveness.

Second, Jesus focuses on the scope and extent of Christian love. In his time, the demand for neighbourly love was limited to the fellow members of the Israelite community. It seems, that in the popular understanding of the day, it was also combined with the command of hating one's enemy. However, this command is not found in the Torah itself. Jesus abolishes and changes these limits. Appealing to God as the supreme example, Jesus teaches that the disciples must extend their love to all, regardless of the response they receive, or the ethnic identity of the recipients. This is so because God makes his rain fall, and his light shine, upon all, regardless of how they relate to him, or of their moral standing. This all-inclusive attitude demanded of the disciples sets them apart from all other people, who follow the normal principle of reciprocity in dealing with others. Thus, those who wish to imitate God ought to love those who do not respond in kind, even to the point of responding with love to violence and persecution. Christian love is not dependent on whether or not it is returned. However, it must be emphasised that Christian love is not a matter of sentimental and fond feelings. The examples that Jesus used

demonstrate that Christian love manifests itself through a decision, and the action of seeking and sustaining the well-being of another human being. Revenge and violence are the opposites of love, because they seek to destroy, while love seeks to preserve and sustain. For Jesus, this is a new standard of behaviour for believers, a standard built on the imitation of God's actions. Those who follow it share in God's holiness. In Jesus words, they become "perfect".

Today's liturgy shows that holiness and perfection are within human reach. In the Old Testament holiness meant imitation of God, and being set apart from the rest of the world by living according to the Torah. Paul taught that by maintaining harmony and unity the Corinthian community becomes God's sanctuary and they become sharers in God's holiness. Jesus insisted on his followers becoming "perfect" by imitating God in his dealing with humanity. For Jesus, perfection means imitating God and transforming the human world by non-retaliation and all-inclusive love, putting an end to violence and fostering the well-being of all human beings. Doing this they "become perfect" like their God, who, according to the Psalmist, is "merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love".

Listening to the Word of God

In many cultures and traditional societies there are sets of values that attempt to make the people "holy". These values often take the form of

taboos, superstitions, totems and myths. It is believed that the more people adhere and observe these, the happier they become. When someone breaks any of these rules, they need to undergo cleansing rituals so that the favour of the gods who oversee those rules may return. Since each clan or ethnic group has their own set of such rules, they are unique to that group and set that group apart from others. These cultural guidelines make a clan or ethnic group true to their identity and distinct in the world. Irrespective of where the clan members are, they can easily identify themselves by the way they live out their traditions and culture. There is a general tendency in the contemporary world to abandon these traditional beliefs, particularly among the young. Yet, remembering the way that traditional societies operated and maintained their distinctiveness helps to appreciate and understand the message of this Sunday.

Today, the world presents us with such a great variety of options and choices that we are often unable to ground ourselves in one meaningful identity. This Sunday's liturgy suggests to us that a lifelong commitment to holiness provides us with a sense of identity. Holiness – a life based on the Gospel values and the Christian message – could really set us apart as unique people of God ready to fulfil the purpose of our calling. Everywhere in the world, young people are striving to make a difference in life, in their academic pursuits, family life or marriage, careers

and occupations. In Matt 6:31-33 we are encouraged to place our call to fulfil the will of God over and above all else in life – our careers, success, family life, or business. Jesus recommends seeking first the kingdom of God and its righteousness because when we live righteous lives all these things will follow.

Thus, the call to holiness is the core of our Christian identity. Discipleship means walking or following the footsteps of Christ, and Christ walked in holiness, and fulfilled every one of the Father's purposes for him. This means that we need to seek holiness in all the endeavours of our lives. In our school lives, marriage and family, careers and religious lives we are often very quick to measure our success against the returns we get in the form of high marks, feelings of happiness, affirmation by others, or material gains. Our search for holiness means that we need to measure our success and achievements against the will of God first, the basic question being whether our actions and values correspond to Jesus' teaching and values.

Such questions might bring us some anxiety or frustration if we realize that our lives are far from perfect and ideal. Yet Jesus only asks that we do not give up in seeking his kingdom in the midst of and despite our imperfections. Persistence and constancy in seeking holiness of life is the key to success. May the Lord help us so that we may be able to persistently seek God's righteousness, and pursue holiness, because that is what truly matters in our lives.

Proverb

“Even a gazelle can-not run away from a persistent hunter

Action

Self-examination

In what measure I am ready and willing to strive for the perfection as outlined in today's Gospel? Do I consider Jesus teaching on the love of enemies a utopian demand?

Is God's kingdom and holiness often on my mind? Do I make decisions considering which course of action would best reflect God's holiness in my life and to the world?

Response to God

I choose to give God the first place in all of my endeavours. I pray for forgiveness for the times when I have not done so and for strength to pursue holiness daily.

Response to your World

I identify a practice or an action which I could introduce into my daily routines so that God's holiness can shine through them.

In our group we reflect on Paul's view of the Christian community presented in the second reading. Are we God's sanctuary? If not, what can we do to come closer to that ideal.

Prayer

Lord God, you have chosen me even before my birth to be holy and blameless in your presence.

I thank you for making me your child and calling me to be like you.

You have sent me into the world to live a holy life and radiate that holiness to the world.

Give me strength, wisdom and perseverance that I might persistently seek you and walk your ways daily.

May your Spirit guide me in the ways of righteousness and into your everlasting kingdom. Amen.