

THIRTIETH  
SUNDAY IN  
ORDINARY TIME

YEAR A



FIRST READING

Exodus 22:20–26

PSALM

Psalms 18:2–4, 47, 51

SECOND READING

1 Thessalonians 1:5–10

GOSPEL

Matthew 22:34–40

**Prayer**

*Psalms 18:2–4, 47, 51*

I love you, O LORD, my strength.

The LORD is my rock, my fortress, and my deliverer, my God, my rock in whom I take refuge, my shield, and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold.

I call upon the LORD, who is worthy to be praised, so I shall be saved from my enemies.

The LORD lives! Blessed be my rock, and exalted be the God of my salvation,

Great triumphs he gives to his king, and shows steadfast love to his anointed, to David and his descendants forever.

**Reading the Word**

*Exodus 22:20–26*

You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt. You shall not abuse any widow or orphan. If you do abuse them, when they cry out to me, I will surely heed their cry; my wrath will burn, and I will kill you with

the sword, and your wives shall become widows and your children orphans.

If you lend money to my people, to the poor among you, you shall not deal with them as a creditor; you shall not exact interest from them. If you take your neighbor's cloak in pawn, you shall restore it before the sun goes down; for it may be your neighbor's only clothing to use as cover; in what else shall that person sleep? And if your neighbor cries out to me, I will listen, for I am compassionate.

*1 Thessalonians 1:5–10*

Our message of the gospel came to you not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction; just as you know what kind of persons we proved to be among you for your sake. And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for in spite of persecution you received the word with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia.

For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you not only in Macedo-

nia and Achaia, but in every place your faith in God has become known, so that we have no need to speak about it. For the people of those regions report about us what kind of welcome we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath that is coming.

*Matthew 22:34–40*

When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" He said to him, " 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

*Scripture quotations from  
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## Hearing the Word

### “Imitating God”

The readings of the thirtieth Sunday of Ordinary time cite several well-known and important commandments. However, the readings focus not on making the commandments known, but on providing solid motivation for people to obey them. This motivation takes the form of the call to imitation.

The passage from the book of Exodus is a part of so the so-called “Covenant Code” contained in Exodus 20:22–23:19. This code contains God’s laws delivered through Moses when the Sinai covenant was made. These laws provide key guidelines for the religious and civil life of Israel, which the nation needed to follow, in order to live as God’s people. One of key areas of life these laws regulate, is the treatment of the socially disadvantaged: resident aliens (foreigners), widows and orphans, and the poor.

The foreigners residing within the Israelite community did not have same rights and status as the Israelites, which made them vulnerable to various forms of exploitation and abuse, which the covenant code forbade. The reason and motivation given for the law forbidding oppression was the memory of Israel’s time as “aliens in the land of Egypt”. When there, they were protected by God. Now, it is their turn to be protectors of the foreigners among them, and imitate God by doing so.

The second group to be protected were “widows and orphans”. These were very vulnerable in this ancient patriarchal society, because they could not rely on the necessary protection of male guardians – husbands and fathers. The covenant code, therefore, entrusted the entire community with the task of caring for them. The motivating factor was that God pays special attention to their pleas and will avenge any harm done to them. As God heard the cry of Israel in Egypt, and acted for their protection, so God will hear the cry of widows and orphans. Israelites were thus advised to act as protectors of widows and orphans or suffer God’s wrath, wrath similar to that which God directed against their one-time oppressors – the Egyptians.

The third group to be protected were “the poor among you”. These were to be afforded protection through the rigorous upholding of their economic rights. The first of these rights was the ban on usury – lending on interest. God stated that with “my people” – the Israelites – “you shall not deal as a creditor; you shall not exact interest from them”. The Israelites were not allowed to lend money on interest to their fellow Israelites, thus preventing them from falling into debt that would lead to the loss of freedom. Also forbidden were the practices that undermined the dignity and safety of the impoverished community members. This is illustrated by a single

example of the coat taken from a poor neighbor “in pawn”. Such basic necessities as garments were to be restored to debtors every night in order not to endanger their health and safety. The passage concludes with a forceful affirmation that God pays special attention to the needy, and that they must be shown compassion in imitation of God, who himself is compassionate.

The second reading comes from the introduction to Paul’s first letter to the Thessalonians. After praising the virtues of his addressees and their receptiveness to the Gospel, the apostle adds some significant statements regarding the foundation of the community and the manner in which his message of the gospel came to them. Paul first recalls the essential activity of the Holy Spirit involved in the proclamation and reception of the Good News as the message came to them “in the power and in the Holy Spirit”, and they “received the word with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit”.

Next, the apostle pinpoints the main effect of this evangelization stating that, “you became imitators of us and of the Lord”, and thus “an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia”. This is an important statement because Paul considered himself an imitator of Christ (cf. 1 Cor 11:1). Since making someone into a follower and imitator of Christ is the purpose of evangelization, and the Thessalonians became imitators of Christ,

then Paul's mission was thoroughly successful. That those former gentiles turned "from idols" and now "serve a living and true God" provides a very clear evidence of that success. Their new allegiance to God would guide them in this earthly life, and preserve them also at the final judgment to which Paul refers as the "wrath that is coming".

The Gospel reading contains the third dispute between Jesus and his opponents recorded in Matthew ch. 22. Just as during the two earlier confrontations, the intention of Jesus' opponents was "to test him". The challenge came from a group of the Pharisees challenging Jesus to identify "the greatest of the commandments in the law". Jewish scholars and teachers of that time intensely debated the hierarchy among the numerous commandments and prescriptions of the Jewish law, arguing about their relative importance (cf. Matt 5:19; 23:23). Jesus accepted the challenge and gave his characteristically concise and definitive answer.

First, Jesus quoted the famous "Shema" (Deut 6:5), which was a daily recited by every Jew, and containing a command to "love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind". These words confirm the absolute centrality of God in the life of his people and in all their affairs. No Jew would ever argue against this being the first and the most important commandment. The second part of Jesus' answer draws on Levit-

icus 19:18, which demands of each Israelite to "love your neighbor as yourself". Most significant in Jesus' answer is his choice to pair the love of God with love of the neighbor. This pairing implies that love for the neighbor ought to mirror one's love for God (cf. 1 John 4:20-21). In effect, Jesus demands that a person's relationship with God should be reflected in and imitated by the relationship to a fellow woman or man. The love for God and for one's neighbor thus become the basic rule to guide the life of the faithful, with the latter as a reflection of the former.

The liturgy of today resounds with the theme of imitation. The Israelites were to imitate God in his care for the most vulnerable. Since these commands were given in the context of the Sinai covenant, it could be said that imitation of God in this manner belongs to the very essence of the Israelite identity defined through that covenant. For Paul, imitation of Christ was the way of his life, and the purpose of his mission. Making his Christians "imitators of the Lord" was his chief goal and ambition for he knew that this would guarantee the authenticity of their Christian faith. Jesus taught that human life and attitudes should be guided by a single principle of love and devotion to God, which is then reflected and imitated in love and concern for the other. He himself followed this principle faithfully. In the end, today's liturgy of the Word teaches that the life of

a Christian is the life of imitation of God and Jesus in their love and concern for humanity. And God is, according to the Psalmist, "my God, my rock in whom I take refuge, my shield, and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold."

### **Listening to the Word of God**

Coming out of the mother's womb, a child enters an unknown world filled with uncertainties. In that moment, every baby is an alien in a new and unknown land. The child does not know whether he or she would be welcomed with a smile or a frown, and is left completely at the mercy of those around. Whether the child lives or dies depends on the decision and actions of other human beings. That experience is the first taste of vulnerability that accompanies all human beings ever since birth.

Like every newborn baby, we all need somebody in order to become somebody. From this perspective, we can much appreciate Jesus' words, "you shall love your neighbor as yourself". To love one's neighbor is, in fact, loving oneself because in preserving the life of someone we preserve our own. We have no idea who will turn out to be a brother or sister in our moment of need. An alien today may turn out to be a savior tomorrow. Love of neighbor is not an empty expression. It has a practical dimension as expounded in the first reading.

At the heart of the call to love one's neighbor is an invi-

tation to imitate God. In the last phrase of the first reading, God speaks of himself, saying: "I am compassionate". Yes, God is always present to take care of us in our weakest moment. Created in the image and likeness of God, we are called upon to reflect this character of God in our dealings with one another. We cannot claim to imitate God when we turn a deaf ear to the cry of those that he brings into our lives.

There is an African proverb which says, "he who throws stones at night may end up killing his own brother." Humanity is intimately connected. The ripple effect of whatever happens in a small town on one continent, can be felt in another town on another. We are indeed each other's keepers. However, love of one's neighbor takes on a deeper Christian character when it is extended even to one's enemies. There is another African proverb which says, "feed your enemies so well that when they are satisfied, they will forget their assignment and sleep."

Hatred has escalated to unimaginable depths in many parts of our world, leading to war and bloodshed. An unpleasant consequence of war is the upsurge in the numbers of migrants and refugees worldwide. Indeed, how true is the saying that "love gathers but hatred scatters". Interestingly, many of these wars are fueled by people who claim to be devotees of God. Even in communities that have the adjective, "Christian" to qualify them,

there are reported cases of ethnocentrism, xenophobic attacks, racism and other forms of human abuse. In this context, today's readings bring a powerful reminder that a true believer imitates God, which translates into love and care for others.

Love is like fire. It may appear to be a tiny spark in the heart, but it can set a world ablaze if it is shown through actions. A sure sign that we love God with all our heart, and with all our soul and with all our mind is how we lovingly treat one another. In and through us the love of God must become experiential. Let us, therefore, choose to love and thereby imitate the God of love.

### Proverb

**"Feed your enemies so well that when they are satisfied, they will forget their assignment and sleep."**

### Action

#### Self-examination

Can someone, looking at my way of life, get a fairly good idea of who God is? How?

Which of my words and actions portray the God who so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son?

## Response to God

I choose to deepen my understanding of what it means to say that God is compassionate. I reflect deeply on this attribute of God and passionately seek to imbibe it.

## Response to your World

Responding to unhealthy divisions and disregard for others which afflict our world, I decide on an action that would demonstrate my love for all people, irrespective of their race, gender, educational status or cultural values.

In our group, we resolve to pay particular attention to issues that pertain to justice and peace and to seek effective ways of bringing the concerns of those in the margins of society to the fore.

### Prayer

Eternal Father, you showed your love for humanity when you offered your Son to a vulnerable world so that he might consecrate and offer back to you all those who had been alienated from you. By that singular act of grace, you have taught us to reach out to those who are perishing in one way or the other and to show your face of love to them.

Through your Son Jesus Christ, may our way of life draw people to you. Amen