

Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle A
Sirach 15: 15-20
Psalm 119: 1-2, 4-5, 17-18, 33-34
1 Corinthians 2: 6-10
Matthew 5: 17-37
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“Set before you are fire and water; stretch forth your hand to whichever you choose. Before you are life and death. Whichever you choose shall be given to you.” Sirach makes it sound so simple. Anyone with a shred of common sense would choose life. But in practice, even with the best will in the world, it’s not so easy, because we have to figure out, and then live out the implications of our choice. And when we try to do that, we come face to face with a mystery.

Sirach says, if you choose life, keep the commandments. The psalm says “Happy are they who follow the law of the Lord!” That’s fine as far as it goes, but again, there must be more to it -- something more than obeying the rules. After all, the Pharisees were masters of rule-making and rule-keeping. They may have been the greatest law-abiders of all time. Yet our Lord found them wanting. Here again, we encounter the mystery.

St. Paul tells the Corinthians about the mystery -- about a certain wisdom which is not the wisdom of this age. It is God’s wisdom: a mysterious, a hidden wisdom. . . the wisdom of Christ crucified. In the crucified Christ we confront a mystery of which no human mind could have conceived.

G. K. Chesterton wrote that when he encountered, in the Christian tradition, something unreasonable, something that made no sense in

human terms, it was then that he stood in awe, because it was then that he was closest to the divine -- closest to the mystery. For there he faced something that could only be from God -- something that two millennia of human reflection could not tame -- two thousand years of rationalization, could not explain away.

In our Gospel, Jesus goes to the heart of the mystery. He begins with the commandments. He denies that he has come to abolish the law: “until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter of the law, not the smallest part of a letter, shall be done away with until it all comes true.” So much is clear. But Jesus does not stop there. He proceeds to uncover the mystery.

He probes beneath the surface of the commandments, to what might be called the depth dimension of our life of faith. He takes the commandments in turn, and as he discusses each commandment, he ups the ante: You have heard that if you divorce your wife you must give her a decree of divorce. I tell you you may not divorce at all. You have heard you must not make a false oath. I say you may not swear. You have heard that you must not commit adultery. I tell you you must not even feel lust. You have heard you must not murder. I tell you you must not so much as get angry.

At this point we can imagine that his audience has been shaken out of its complacency and has begun to panic. They knew that in order to be saved they needed to obey the law. That wasn't easy, but at least it seemed to be within the realm of human possibility. Suddenly it's not so simple. If the commandments are to be interpreted like this, nobody could possibly keep them all. Then nobody could be assured of salvation by obeying the law. . . Exactly. That is precisely the point. Here we draw

close to the mystery.

If any rabbi of Jesus' time was asked, "What must I do to be saved," he would have answered, "You must love." Jesus would give the same answer. If the rabbi was asked, "How can I be sure that I am loving," he would have answered "You may be sure that you are loving if you keep the law." Here is where Jesus would answer differently. Jesus taught that while the law is precious, the only way you can tell if you are loving properly is to examine the quality of your love. It's not enough to refrain from murdering your enemy. You've got to love that person you'd like to throttle. It's not enough to bring gifts to the altar. You must first forgive the person who has injured you.

And Jesus didn't just tell us what to do. He showed us. Look at a crucifix. That is how it's done: the mystery of Christ crucified. And we are to pick up our crosses and follow him.

If we would choose life, we must choose love. That may sound like the inscription in a Valentine's Day card, but we have seen the mystery beneath the sentiment. And so, by the way, did St. Valentine, priest and martyr. Perhaps it is no coincidence that St. Valentine, whose name is forever associated with love, lived. . . and died, for Christ.