

HEARERS OF THE WORD

Sirach 15:15-21; Psalm 119 (118); 1 Cor 2:6-10; Matthew 5:17-37

Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfil

Matt. 5:17 [Jesus said:] “Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfil. 18 For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. 19 Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. 20 For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

21 “You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder’; and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’ 22 But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, ‘You fool,’ you will be liable to the hell of fire. 23 So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, 24 leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. 25 Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court with him, or your accuser may hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you will be thrown into prison. 26 Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.

27 “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ 28 But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. 29 If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you



to lose one of your members than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. 30 And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to go into hell.

31 “It was also said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’ 32 But I say to you that anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

33 “Again, you have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not swear falsely, but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord.’ 34 But I say to you, Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, 35 or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. 36 And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. 37 Let your word be ‘Yes, Yes’ or ‘No, No’; anything more than this comes from the evil one.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

This is a very long reading, which includes the very important introduction in vv. 17-20. The lectionary divides the subsequent antitheses into two groups (four today and the remaining two from vv.38-48 the following Sunday). Much

Thought for the day

It is clear already in the Old Testament that it is not our misdeeds which accuse us before God, but our hearts, fractured and divided as they are. Consistent with Israelite teaching, Jesus insists that we go deeper than our external deeds. The important question is what is going on in our hearts, the source of inner thoughts and motivations? The teaching is presented using various examples, presented sometimes with great simplicity, other times with irony and wit.

Prayer

O God, you read our hearts and you know us even better than we know ourselves. Let us trust your knowledge of us and your call to true conversion of heart, for you desire only our good that we may be both whole and holy.

scholarly ink has been spilt on the first four verses because they seem to put the Law, the Torah, firmly back at the centre of Christian existence. A great deal depends on the interpretation of “fulfil”. It looks as if the Matthean community has made significant adjustments to its observance of the Law and is open to the accusation of having abandoned key elements. Matthew stresses continuity with the first covenant while at the same time holding that fulfilling the Law might include transcending it. The Biblical prophecies have been fulfilled. Because of the Christ event, the ethical requirements have been transcended and deepened. A key interpretative verse is found later in the Gospel: Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. (Matthew 24:34-35) In the ethical commandments, Jesus first reaffirms and then radicalises.

KIND OF WRITING

Vv. 17-20 constitute a kind of statement of principle for interpreting the Law, the Torah. The antitheses which follow all imply an a fortiori (“all the more so”)

argument. Sometimes an extended amplification accompanies the teaching. Two things are noticeable. Firstly, there is a claim to authority higher than the Torah in the words “but I say to you”. This helps us, at least in part, to understanding the statement of principle: the Christian reception of Jewish moral practice is towards the interior attitude rather than the external observance. Of course, Judaism also knows this but Matthew no doubt is writing in a context of antagonism between Rabbinic Judaism and what we may call Messianic or Christian Judaism. Hence, the very sharp tone and contrasts. The following antitheses are in two triads (ignored in the lectionary): the first three are amplified with more sayings; the second three are presented on their own.

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

You must neither add anything to what I command you nor take away anything from it, but keep the commandments of the Lord your God with which I am charging you. (Deuteronomy 4:2) Circumcise, then, the foreskin of your heart, and do not be stubborn any longer. (Deuteronomy 10:16) Moreover, the Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, so that you will love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, in order that you may live. (Deuteronomy 30:6) For I hate divorce, says the Lord, the God of Israel, and covering one’s garment with violence, says the Lord of hosts. So take heed to yourselves and do not be faithless. (Malachi 2:16)

NEW TESTAMENT FOREGROUND

In Matthew’s Gospel, there is a complex three-fold attitude to the Torah, summarised in these verses.

Abuse of the Law: “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe the mint, dill, and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. It is these you ought to have practiced without neglecting the others.” (Matthew 23:23)

Heart of the Law: “In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets. (Matthew 7:12) [Jesus] 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 neighbour as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the

prophets.” (Matthew 22:37–40)

The “time” of the Law: For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John came; and if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come (Matthew 11:13–15) NB also the start of today’s first reading (see comment).

ST PAUL

So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and just and good. (Romans 7:12)

Rather, a person is a Jew who is one inwardly, and real circumcision is a matter of the heart—it is spiritual and not literal. Such a person receives praise not from others but from God. (Romans 2:29)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verses 17-20 The fulfilment of the prophecies in Jesus is noted regularly in this Gospel (Matt 1:22; 2:15, 23; 3:15; 4:14; 5:17; 8:17; 12:17; 13:35; 21:4; 26:54, 56; 27:9), usually in the past tense. All has been accomplished and this relativizes the apparently absolute “heaven and earth”.

Verses 21-26 See Ex 20:13; Dt 5:17. Disparate sayings are appended to insist on the interior attitude as the heart of the matter. The link between worship and ethics is firmly made. As often in Matthew, ever the teacher, the final argument is in the form of a threat.

Verses 27-30 See Ex 20:14; Dt 5:18. The NRSV doesn’t quite capture the force of the original Greek, expressed better in the NET version: *But I say to you that whoever looks at a woman to desire her* (Matthew 5:28). Involuntary attraction is precisely involuntary; the problem is the movement to desire her. In the subsequent teaching, expressed with typical Jewish hyperbole, self-mutilation is not what is at stake but rather going beyond the symptoms to the root cause. The root cause is always the human heart, which it would be tricky to “tear out and throw away”!!!

Verses 31-32 See Dt 24:1-4 (NB also Mal 2:14-15). See also Mt 19:3-9, where the same exception arises. It seems clear that the historical Jesus simply forbade divorce. The early church, however, allowed it in some circumstances. The meaning of “unchastity” is disputed. A standard dictionary offers these interpretations: 1. unlawful sexual intercourse, prostitution, unchastity, fornication, 2. participation in prohibited degrees of

marriage, fornication 3. immorality of a transcendent nature, fornication. In any case, Matthew’s church “adjusted” the blanket prohibition to deal with reality. Forbidden degrees of consanguinity may well be the best contextualised hypothesis, because Matthew does say “unchastity” here.

Verses 33-34 See Ex 20:7; Lev 19:12; Num 30:3; Dt 23:31. Cf. Above all, my beloved, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or by any other oath, but let your “Yes” be yes and your “No” be no, so that you may not fall under condemnation. (James 5:12)

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. In this section of the Sermon on the Mount Jesus proposes standards that go beyond external ways of behaviour but challenge how we feel in our hearts. When have you found that living out of inner conviction is more life-giving than keeping up appearances?

2. Jesus applies his teaching to feelings of anger and sexual desire. He suggests that if we do not keep an eye on our feelings and thoughts we will not be able to control our actions. Perhaps you have experienced the truth of this. What has helped you to integrate your feelings so that you were able to live in right relationship with yourself and others?

3. For Jesus, persons with genuine authenticity do not need to swear an oath to be convincing. Their ‘yes’ or ‘no’ suffices. Recall people who had this kind of credibility for you. When have you found that your simple, direct and honest communication had a positive persuasive force?

PRAYER

All-seeing God, you alone judge rightly our inmost thoughts. Teach us to observe your law from the heart even as we keep it outwardly.

Purify our desires, calm every anger, and reconcile us to one another. Then will our worship at your altar render you perfect praise.

We make our prayer through our Lord Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God, for ever and ever. Amen.

The things God has prepared for those who love him

1 Cor 2:6 Now we do speak wisdom among the mature, but not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are perishing. 7 Instead we speak the wisdom of God, hidden in a mystery, that God determined before the ages for our glory. 8 None of the rulers of this age understood it. If they had known it, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. 9 But just as it is written, “Things that no eye has seen, or ear heard, or mind imagined, are the things God has prepared for those who love him.” 10 God has revealed these to us by the Spirit. For the Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

Paul has argued in the preceding paragraphs that the human construct of “wisdom” is radically contradicted by the evident foolishness of the cross. The weakness of the Corinthians themselves and, not least, of Paul served to illustrate and confirm the Christian paradox, baffling to both Jews and Greeks. Having set aside both wisdom and the Corinthians’ attraction to its conventional forms, Paul nevertheless affirms that there is indeed a wisdom to be had, but one very different from the culturally approved understanding of spiritual progress.

KIND OF WRITING

Our reading, extended to v. 16, has a place in the overall sequence of thought, as follows:

- 1:10-17 Comparing apostles negatively
- 1:18-25 Christ crucified—God’s wisdom
- 1:26-31 The weakness of believers
- 2:1-5 The weakness of Paul himself
- 2:6-16 Wisdom of mature believers

Thus, 2:6-16 is a significant point of arrival and affirmation. The full passage is in two steps: vv. 6-9, vv. 10-16 with 16b as resounding close, *But we have the mind of Christ.* (1 Cor 2:16b)

Notice again that the language has shifted to “we.” Is this just Paul himself or Paul and Sosthenes or, perhaps, the whole church of God? Probably a combination of Paul’s authority (2:16b and 3:1!) and the wider tradition, articulated appropriately in the first person plural.

CONTEXT IN THE COMMUNITY

The language world changes somewhat

in this passage, probably reflecting terms and teachings current among some Corinthians. The mature are the *teleoi*, that is the *perfect*, a fraught term. “Spirit” was in use among the Stoics, one of the genuinely popular philosophies. For them Spirit meant the underlying material (!) substance which governs all things and the principle of rationality which enables the human mind and spirit to function at a higher level.

In harmony with his binary teaching of oppositions, Paul introduces apocalyptic terminology, such as *mystery*, the *Lord of glory* and the *rulers of this age*. Who these latter might be is ambiguous. They could be the rulers of the empire or those who put Jesus to death or the evil powers behind these actions. In all likelihood, Paul means both the evil principle behind such actions and the real people who front them.

Two groups are implicitly contrasted as follows:

“We”	“They”
Our glorification (2:7)	Rulers of this age (2:6, 8)
Those who love him (2:9)	Those who crucified the lord of glory (2:8)
The Spirit of God (2:12)	The spirit of the world (2:12)
The spiritual person (2:15)	The unspiritual person (2:14)

RELATED PASSAGES

The attractive citation in v. 9 is problematic because the text as such does not exist in the Bible. It might be a quotation from an apocryphal work, before the canon was established Or, more probably, it could be a combination of remembered references, a style not unknown in apocalyptic writing. The possible underlying texts are all from the Greek Old Testament, the Septuagint.

So shall many nations be astonished at him, and kings shall shut their mouth, because *those who were not informed about him shall see and those who did not hear shall understand.* (Isa 52:15 LXX)

From ages past *we have not heard, nor have our eyes seen* any God besides you, and your works, which you will do to those

who wait for mercy. (Isa 64:4 LXX)

O how much is the abundance of your kindness, *which you hid for those who fear you; you accomplished it for those who hope in you, before the sons of men!* (Ps 30:20 LXX)

Jesus says: “I will give you what *no eye has seen, and what no ear has heard, and what no hand has touched, and what has not occurred to the human mind.*” (Gospel of Thomas 17:1; written long after Paul)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 6 In Paul’s mind, “mature” does not mean élitist. Some Corinthians did think themselves spiritual superior—only because they were still “of this age.”

Verse 7 The true mystery from God is hidden in two senses: (i) veiled until unveiled in the paradox of the cross and (ii) understood only by those who have received the Spirit of God. This Spirit is not individualistic or esoteric but rather corporate, part of our being in the body of Christ. Thus the unveiling of the mystery is for everyone and not for a “superior,” self-defined spiritual élite.

Verse 8 This is an abbreviated syllogism. The implied next step is, “they did crucify him, therefore they did not understand God’s plans.” The worldview of this world could never grasp God’s bewildering, unfathomable ways.

Verse 9 This very lovely “citation” is some kind of amalgam of remembered texts (see above). The message is clear: it is all beyond us! The things God has prepared is for those, that is *all*, who love him.

Verse 10 NB this is the gift of God, not some human attainment. Cf. Romans 5:1-5. See Romans 8 for a fuller account. Vv. 11ff make the comparison between the human and divine spirits.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. What is my own experience of the “beyond”, the otherness of God?
2. What is my experience of the nearness, our intimacy with the Spirit?

PRAYER

God, ever beyond our minds and hearts, and yet nearer to us than we are to ourselves, in whom we live and move and have our being: keep us always attuned to your presence that we may know you and rejoice in your love. through Christ our Lord. Amen.

You can keep the commandments and to act faithfully is a matter of your own choice!

15:11 *Do not say, "It was the Lord's doing that I fell away";
for he does not do what he hates.*
12 *Do not say, "It was he who led me astray";
for he has no need of the sinful.*
13 *The Lord hates all abominations;
such things are not loved by those who fear him.*
14 *It was he who created humankind in the beginning,
and he left them in the power of their own free choice.*
15 If you choose, you can keep the commandments,
and to act faithfully is a matter of your own choice.
16 He has placed before you fire and water;
stretch out your hand for whichever you choose.
17 Before each person are life and death,
and whichever one chooses will be given.
18 For great is the wisdom of the Lord;
he is mighty in power and sees everything;
19 his eyes are on those who fear him,
and he knows every human action.
20 He has not commanded anyone to be wicked,
and he has not given anyone permission to sin.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

Even though it may not seem so at first glance, the topic is theodicy, the old question of evil, goodness and creation. It can be used today to deny the existence of God and, apparently, it already arose in ancient times as a way of shifting responsibility away from humans towards God himself.

KIND OF WRITING

This is wisdom reflection of an unusually confident kind. It is part of a longer discussion in Sirach of the consequences of sin and the doctrine of retribution. Such teaching depends, in part, on a robust assessment of human freedom, which is exactly what we have here.

The passage is part of a longer reflection, 15:11-20, which is itself part of an even longer section, 14:20-16:23. From a literary point of view, this is *diatribe*—but not in the modern sense. Diatribe was a technique of writing by which one enters into dialogue with a fictional hearer or reader, imputing opinions etc., to lend liveliness to the presentation.

ORIGIN OF THE READING

The book of Sirach / Ecclesiasticus is a late wisdom writing, which manages to be old-fashioned (on retribution and women) and innovative (on creation, God and panentheism). Sirach came

down to us in Greek and Latin; about two thirds of the Hebrew original have been recovered.

RELATED READINGS

See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. If you obey the commandments of the LORD your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the LORD your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess. (Deuteronomy 30:15–16)

Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or take the path that sinners tread, or sit in the seat of scoffers; but their delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law they meditate day and night. (Psalms 1:1–2)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 15 In Greek, the word translated “free choice” is *eudokia*, which has a range of meanings: 1. state or condition of being kindly disposed, good will of humans; 2. state or condition of being favoured, favour, good pleasure; 3. desire, usually directed toward something that causes satisfaction or favour, wish, desire. So it really does mean something that you yourself desire.

Verse 16 That is, life or death. The inevitability of choice anticipates Sartre (“L’homme est condamné à être libre”) and echoes Deuteronomy in the passage above.

Verse 17 This reflects the teaching of the two ways, familiar in Judaism and Christianity. *Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or take the path that sinners tread, or sit in the seat of scoffers; but their delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law they meditate day and night.* (Psalms 1:1–2) *The teaching of the Lord to the Gentiles by the twelve apostles. There are two ways, one of life and one of death, and there is a great difference between these two ways.* (Didache 1:0–1)

Verses 18-19 God is all-seeing in Sirach’s theology: *His fear is confined to human eyes and he does not realise that the eyes of the Lord are ten thousand times brighter than the sun; they look upon every aspect of human behaviour and see into hidden corners. Before the universe was created, it was known to him, and so it is since its completion. This man will be punished in the streets of the city, and where he least suspects it, he will be seized.* (Sirach 23:19–21; cf. also 16:17–23; 17:15–19; 34:19–20; 39:19–20; 42:16–20.)

Verse 20 This verse is an *inclusio*, a frame, echoing the first verse: *Do not say, "It was the Lord's doing that I fell away"; for he does not do what he hates.* (Sirach 15:11)

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. Moving the blame elsewhere is a common reaction / technique. It may help to recognise my own tendency in that direction and also to notice how I counter it myself.

2. Free will, as described here, seems almost an absolute. We know this isn’t quite the case and that our actions and choices are, as often as not, motored by the irrational. In that sense, freedom is not so much a given as a project. We could even ask ourselves what is freedom and whether or not I am truly free?

PRAYER

Saviour God, in Christ you have set us free. We always need your grace that we may continue on this journey towards perfect freedom of heart that we may love as you love. May we live from this liberating gift all our days. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

THE LITURGY

Sirach 15:15-21; Psalm 119 (118); 1 Cor 2:6-10; Matthew 5:17-37

READINGS 1 AND 3

It may be said that there is a tension between the claims of Sirach and Jesus' intensification of the commandments. Going inwards calls for ever greater integrity.

THE RESPONSORIAL PSALM

The selection from Psalm 119 (118) is ideal in the context. The response captures the tenor of it all: *They are happy who follow God's law!*

SUNDAY INTRODUCTIONS

First reading

Sirach 15:15-21

Life is a matter of having to choose and in the words of a twentieth century writer, we are "condemned" to be free. Freedom here is not wilful choosing but real interior freedom of heart.

Second reading

1 Cor 2:6-10

As believers, we stand before the great mystery of God, greater than our minds, greater than our hearts. And yet, somehow, as St Paul teaches, we share in this mystery and God lives in us through the Spirit poured into our hearts.

Gospel

Matthew 5:17-37

The Sermon on the Mount has entered world literature as a great synthesis of the teaching of Jesus. In today's reading from the Sermon, Jesus teaches a *morality of the heart*, that goes well beyond our external actions to the heart, the inner "sanctum" from which our actions spring. It is very searching and, as we know, very true.

WEEKDAY INTRODUCTIONS

Monday 16 February

James 1:1-11

Our first reading from James (over two weeks) delights in paradoxes and directness. Are you experiencing trials? Do you need wisdom? Listen carefully!

Mark 8:11-13

Though not explicitly observed, we see in this reading the frustration, not to say the anger of Jesus. The Pharisees are looking for some kind of guaranteed evidence—this could be true of us today.

Tuesday 17 February

*The Seven Holy Founders of the Servite Order
St Fintan, abbot*

James 1:12-18

The gestation of sin is narrated—graphically and frighteningly. There is hope, however, in the next verse.

Mark 8:14-21

On its own, this passage is hard to read. The Gospel writer wants us to think again about the meanings (plural) of the two multiplications. Jesus is bread of life for both Jews and Gentiles — all are welcome!



Ash Wednesday 18 February

Joel 2:12-18

The passage which opens the journey of Lent is an invitation, an invitation to come back to the Lord with all our heart. The whole community—all of us without distinction—is called to change of heart and life.

2 Corinthians 5:20-6:2

Paul's message insists on today, now, as the moment of conversion. The past is over and the future is not yet. All we have is the present moment: let us take hold of it with all our energy.

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18

There was a traditional triad in Judaism: almsgiving, prayer and fasting—all really good and necessary. That inherent good can be compromised by the desire for notice and approval. It is enough and more than enough that the Father who sees in secret sees our good deed done in secret.

Thursday 19 February

Deuteronomy 30:15-20

Life is full of choices, minor and major. Today, we hear a major choice: life and prosperity or death and disaster. Such sharp alternatives are found also in the wisdom writings of the people, such as today's Psalm 1. We know, of course, that things are often not quite so stark and clear. But even in the minor choices, we are implying greater choices and even a fundamental direction of life.

Luke 9:22-25

As usual, a prediction of the passion is joined to a teaching on discipleship. In this Gospel, the death of Jesus casts a long shadow, starting with the words of Simeon to Mary. The immediate context is the question to Peter: who do you say I am? Once we say who Jesus is, we find ourselves also saying who we are.

Friday 20 February

Isaiah 58:1-9

What is true fasting? What does God require of us? Isaiah does not mince his words. Sure fasting means to live your ordinary life with integrity and justice.

Matthew 9:14-15

It looks as if Jesus did not practice fasting (apart from the forty, symbolic days). Naturally, people wondered why not. In the later tradition, disciples did take up fasting and in our Gospel Jesus gives "permission" for that to happen.

Saturday 21 February

St Peter Damian, bishop and doctor

Isaiah 58:9-14

Continuing from yesterday, we are reminded that righteousness—right living from the inside out—is what God hopes for from us. If you listen carefully, this prophecy is strongly against violence of any kind.

Luke 5:27-32

Eating was always regarded as a kind of sacred fellowship, a kind of holy communion. Hence the shock of onlookers who saw Jesus eating with tax collectors and sinner; in effect, establishing communion with them.