

FIRST WEEK OF LENT

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Ezekiel 18:21-28

Matthew 5:20-26

The Church presents us with challenging readings today. In the first reading, let us imagine ourselves as ordinary people in Babylonian captivity. We have been pushed there by the armies of Nebuchadnezzar who conquered Jerusalem in 586 BCE and destroyed the First Temple. Ezekiel had been a *priest* at the Temple and now in exile, he was called to be a *prophet* in mysterious visions described in the earlier chapters of this book, including an invitation to *eat* a scroll which contained “lamentations and wailing and woe.” Ezekiel *did* eat it and declared it to be “sweet as honey.” (2: 9-3:15) He had a very unusual call – to be a *priest* whose mission was to *uphold* the Law and a *prophet* whose mission was to *challenge* the Law.

The exiled Jews are grumbling and they cite a proverb from the Law: “Our fathers have eaten green grapes; thus, their children’s teeth are on edge.” They use this proverb to say that *they* are being punished because their fathers ate on the mountains in the pagan rituals of their captives, collaborating, in other words, with them. But they say, “We didn’t do this!” They are tired of exiled life, and they want relief!

Ezekiel responds with a parable – from the Greek word, *paraballein*, which means *to throw together opposites or extremes*. He explains that people do not inherit the sins of their ancestors, but rather they are their own individual selves who can choose the good and live forever in fullness. Verse 30, not a part of today’s reading, caps off this proclamation:

Therefore, I will judge you, House of Israel, each one according to your ways, says the Lord GOD. Turn and be converted from all your crimes, that there may be no cause of guilt for you ... and make for yourselves a new heart and a new spirit. Why should you die, O House of Israel? For I have no pleasure in the death of any one who dies, says the Lord God. Return and live!

Here the priest and prophet come together in Ezekiel. There is the Law and *also* a deeper way to keep it!

Our Gospel reading today is from Matthew written after the destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem by the Romans in 70 CE. At that time, Jews who followed Jesus continued to worship in the synagogues, but gradually a certain conflict broke out. The stricter Jews saw those who followed Jesus as transgressing the Law, and eventually they were banned from synagogue prayer by some of the Scribes and Pharisees.

Matthew’s Chapter 5 starts out with Jesus going up a mountain and proclaiming the Beatitudes to his followers and the crowds. So, now let us imagine ourselves sitting on a hill and hearing Jesus say: *Blessed are the poor, the sorrowing, the lowly, the single-hearted, the peacemakers, and us* when we are insulted and slandered because of our attachment to Jesus. Then, he unfolds the deepest meaning of these truths.

Jesus says that he has not come to *abolish* the Law and the Prophets, but rather to *fulfill* them. Then, beginning with verse 21, Matthew creates a narrative that lines up a series of six fearless assertions on how the Law must be fulfilled by proclaiming a deeper way of living it. Only *one* is mentioned in today's proclamation. If you are curious about the other five, pick up your Bible and read the next chapters sometime this Lent to see how Jesus stretches us to live out the Law fully. (See: Mt 5: 27-48)

The one for today tells us that being angry by calling someone "empty-headed" - the Greek word for abusive and bullying language - surpasses even *murder*! Now common sense tells us that of course murder is by far more serious than being angry at someone. But both come from the same root: *violence*. Matthew extends the metaphor to shock us, to incite us to insight!

In 1987, I made a thirty-day retreat at Our Lady of Peace Retreat Center in Narragansett, Rhode Island. I was guided by Kieran Flynn, a Sister of Mercy, who had been trained in the Ignatian way of spiritual direction. At the end of the third week, she offered me some compelling words: To quote her:

The way I see it, there are two ways to live life: either violently or contemplatively. By violence, I don't mean necessarily only actual physical or psychic violence. Living violently also means being in a state of mind where we are not yet choosing to live fully from all the gifts that inhabit us. We can even be productive, but not yet really engaged in co-creating our whole being in God. Contemplation is the latter, that is, being engaged in co-creating our whole selves, more and more into Godlikeness, birthing continuously the God-image in us.

These wisdom words I have never forgotten. I will also say that they are very challenging to live out in my life, but they always call me forth in hope.

And now, let us picture ourselves in front of our television sets where we see videos showing us that *our* world is marked by *murder* and *anger* and *violence* and *lies* and *hunger and thirst* and *abusive, bullying, "empty-headed" language*. To move more into God-likeness in this horror, we IHM's contribute from our budgets to *Catholic Relief Services* and we pray unceasingly to the Ukrainian Icon of Mary that she will give strength to her people in *exile* and *under siege*. Can we pray too for Vladimir Putin - that he will repent and change his ways to make way "for a new heart and a new spirit," that he will "return and live!" This is, after all, the message of today's proclamation. Like Ezechiel, these are words we should eat! *Change us all, O loving God; give strength to all in exile and under siege and lead the oppressor to choose life!*