

Homily, 28 October 2018
Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Jeremiah 31:7-9; Psalms 126:1-2,2-3,4-5,6; Hebrews 5:1-6; Mark 10:46-52

When I begin to prepare a homily, I try to read the scriptures about two weeks in advance, so that I can mull them over a while. My habit is to begin by reading the Old Testament passage, then the Psalm, and then the Gospel, putting off the New Testament Letter until the end.

I do this because on Sundays, the Old Testament readings and the Gospel are always related. That's how the lectionary is designed. The New Testament Letter is always independent of them, especially during Ordinary Time.

There is an old adage that says: "*the New Testament lies hidden in the Old and the Old Testament is unveiled in the New,*" and it's well illustrated by the lectionary.



So, a week ago Thursday, I was at RCIA when the discussion turned to the question of Jesus and his relationship to the Jewish law and ritual practices.

Jesus was often accused by the Pharisee's of violating the Sabbath prohibitions against work and sometimes for violating purity laws – *why do your disciples eat with unclean hands?* – so it's not unreasonable to question the Jewishness of Jesus, especially if one has but a passing familiarity with scripture.

Thinking about this discussion after class, I realized that this is probably a question for many people, not just for those in RCIA.



Part of difficulty of understanding the conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees is that we aren't familiar enough with the Old Testament to know exactly what is said and what isn't.

For example, in Exodus and Deuteronomy there is an absolute prohibition about doing any kind of work on the Sabbath. But these passages don't include a detailed exploration of what does and doesn't constitute work. It certainly doesn't say that you can't heal a sick person. So, the Jewish scholars had to develop the rules that defined work.

When Jesus is arguing with Pharisees, it's often in this context that the debate takes place. It's also important to remember that within the Judaism of Jesus day, there wasn't always agreement about how to interpret things in light of the Law.

Remember the passage when a scholar of the Law asked Jesus "*what must I do to inherit eternal life?*" And Jesus replied, "*what is written in the Law, **how do you read it?***"

There were, in fact, so many Laws that by their own admission, the Jews were never able to observe the Law in its entirety without violating at least one of its precepts.

It's why there is an annual Day of Atonement. It's also why offerings – the ritual sacrifice of animals or the offering of grain – were so central to Jewish life.

To understand how prevalent these sacrifices were in Jewish life, consider that the first seven chapters of the book of Leviticus concern ritual offerings. At the end of chapter seven, it is summed up by the following passage:

This is the ritual for the burnt offering, the grain offering, the purification offering, the reparation offering, the ordination offering, and the communion sacrifice.

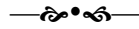
There were so many laws to violate, so many ways of becoming ritually unclean, that the list of sacrifices for purification had to be extensive as well.



The ancient Jewish purity laws and the sacrificial system gave them a visible, tangible expression of their identity as the *People of God*. For a culture that was constantly overrun, conquered, and sometimes enslaved, their traditions provided them with a vital social cohesion.

But the Law was never intended as end in itself. It was intended to give the Jews their identity as the People of God, that is, a people who would be a shining light to the nations, drawing all of them to the worship of the one, true God.

How did ritual purity come to trump some of the other parts of the Law, such as the one in Leviticus chapter 19, verse 18: "*You shall love your neighbor as yourself?*" If you failed to serve your neighbor as you ought, was it really sufficient simply to offer a ritual sacrifice instead?



Jesus was called *Emmanuel*, which means "God with us," and that made him the greatest prophet of all. Yet he was still a prophet in the line of the Old Testament prophets. How could he be otherwise? Remember: *The New Testament lies hidden in the Old.*

It was a recurring message of the Prophets that cultic practices were meaningless, even hypocritical, unless they were accompanied by an attentiveness to God's will.

Listen to the prophet Isaiah:

What do I care for the multitude of your sacrifices? says the LORD. In the blood of calves, lambs, and goats I find no pleasure. To bring offerings is useless; incense is an abomination to me.

When you spread out your hands, I will close my eyes to you; Though you pray the more, I will not listen. Your hands are full of blood!

Wash yourselves clean! Put away your misdeeds from before my eyes; cease doing evil; learn to do good. Make justice your aim: redress the wronged, hear the orphan's plea, defend the widow.

or listen to Psalm 51:

For you, O God, do not desire sacrifice or I would give it; a burnt offering you would not accept. My sacrifice, O God, is a contrite spirit; a contrite, humbled heart, O God, you will not scorn.

In this case, I don't think that *the New Testament is hidden in the Old.*
It's right there ... plain to see.



If we sometimes fail to see the continuity between the Old and New Testaments, I think we also miss that the Old Testament isn't simply *revealed* in the New, but that it is *fulfilled* in Jesus Christ. By offering himself as the one, true and perfect sacrifice, he brought the sacrificial system to completion ... and created a New Covenant with his people.

It is no surprise then, that in the Prophet Jeremiah we read:

"See, days are coming," says the Lord, "when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. I will place my law within them, and write it upon their hearts; I will be their God, and they shall be my people."



I didn't preach today about the readings, because after reflecting on the discussions in RCIA, I wanted to encourage you to listen more closely to the Old Testament readings in the weeks and years to come.

My hope is that as you do, you will come to appreciate that the "*the New Testament lies hidden in the Old and the Old Testament is unveiled in the New.*"

And maybe, unlike me, you won't have to work so hard to explain it.