

30<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time, 29 October 2023

Scriptures: Exodus 22:20-26; Thess. 1:5c-10; Matthew 22:34-40

In the first reading from the Book of Exodus, Moses reminds the people of their responsibility to welcome strangers and to take care of those in need. He encourages them to learn from their own experience in Egypt.

In the second reading from St. Paul's First Letter to the Thessalonians, Paul rejoices in the fact that the disciples he helped form in Thessalonica have now become missionaries themselves.

Then we have the Gospel. By way of introduction, we recall that throughout Matthew's Gospel, one of the subplots is the relationship between Jesus and the Pharisees who were the influential teachers of the tradition of Moses. But as we know, the Pharisees' behavior did not match their rhetoric, and they saw Jesus as a serious threat to their authority. Once again, in the Gospel here, the Pharisees are revealed as attempting to trap Jesus, but Jesus is far more than their equal.

One New Testament scholar uses a sports reference to summarize the Gospel passage calling it "game, set, and match". Jesus sees the catch and so he offers his questioners an expansive view of their own history: the commandments handed them by Moses all hang on the two fundamental commandments of the law of love. They cannot dispute this, but Jesus has undoubtedly touched a nerve, pointing to something that in their heart of hearts they know to be true: namely that they are not living lives of love.

The Pharisees were not being faithful to the teaching of the prophets, so powerfully outlined in Moses' call to look after the strangers, the widows, and the orphans. They were acting like dictators over the people, and making demands, which left poor

people where they were, helpless and often hopeless. Jesus never simply answers the questions put to him, he always uses the questions as an opportunity to invite us to reflect on our own experience and discover the truth.

The response of Jesus to the Pharisees can challenge us in our own time and place. For every community of people there is always a temptation to maintain order and control by laying down the law: this is the human way of keeping order. It is a perennial temptation even within the Church to misuses power in this way and believe that maintaining the structures is all that really matters. But Jesus shows us a wholly different way, one in which those who are powerful do not act in an authoritarian way over those who are weak, but rather place themselves at the service of all. There is only one criterion by which we can judge ourselves and that is the law of love. And to be able to love, we have to be free.

Jesus came to bear witness to the truth, and said that the truth will make us free. And, Paul latches on to this theme in his letters, constantly reminding his early converts that the Law in itself cannot save them, but only Jesus. Paul is clearly excited by the way the Thessalonians have grasped this message and are proving to be living examples for those around them.

Two thousand years later we might ask ourselves, what kind of example do we give one another and those around us? The world is shrinking as modern technology provides us with means of communicating that would have been unimaginable decades ago. Yet still there are millions of "strangers, widows, and orphans", the hungry and the homeless, refugees and immigrants, who cry out for our love and for our care. How, then, do each one of us, in prayer and in daily life, reach out to those in need?