

14th Sunday in Ordinary Time Year A

In his campaign for the presidency of the United States, the socialist reformer Norman Thomas had many distinguished supporters, but he lacked the popular backing essential for his election to office. Looking back at his record of failure, he commented: “While I’d rather be right than president, at any time I’m ready to be both.” But he never was. Like many people he failed to achieve his goal. But, unlike many people, he refused to allow his personal failure to destroy his sense of purpose.

Although Jesus never ran for office or sought to join any religious or political party, he had to face rejection and failure. From the Gospel we learn that Jesus’ ministry in his own province of Galilee has been largely unsuccessful; but this is something he comes to accept as the will of the Father. Jesus is able to face the failure of his work because his inner purpose is to do his Father’s will. He has something to fall back on.. To face failure with no inner resources is to face an empty self. But Jesus sees in his failure a particular wisdom: that his Father is making a positive choice to reveal his truth to the little ones, while hiding it from the legion of the self-important.

Perhaps Jesus thought that the Rabbis, who referred to themselves as “the disciples of the wise”, would be quick to see in his teaching the wisdom of God. Perhaps he expected that those who had been educated in the word of God would be the first to recognize that word when it bumped into them. But Jesus is frankly disappointed. There is, however, a teaching in his disappointment; he learns that the Father overlooks the learned and the clever to settle his favour on the simple, on those who have received no formal training in the Law. When it comes to revealing who he is the Father looks to those who exercise no power and enjoy no prestige in the community. He looks to people like the disciples.

Those who are regarded as experts in the word of God, the scribes and the Pharisees, often criticize Jesus and his disciples for openly flouting the Law. Jesus heals on the Sabbath and he refuses to check his disciples when they do what is considered work on the Sabbath. He knows that there are many people who regard the 613 commandments of the Law an insufferable burden to bear, and who are treated as religious outcasts because they are unable to bear the full yoke imposed by the lawyers.

Remember that in Jesus' time there are whole groups of people who are dismissed as sinners because they follow what are regarded as dishonourable callings – people who lead life styles that do not permit them to observe the small print of the Law. Among these groups are shepherds, donkey-drivers, peddlers, tanners, and tax collectors. All these people are deprived of civil rights, forbidden to act as a witness in court, and refused entry into the synagogue. They are at the bottom of the social heap. Ignored. But Jesus has a word for them and for all those who are bowed down by an interpretation of the Law that leaves them mugged into senselessness:

Come to me all you who labour and are overburdened, and I will give you rest. Shoulder my yoke and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. Yes, my yoke is easy and my burden light.

Jesus has no intention of doing away with the Law; but he refuses to support the lawyers who spend their time manufacturing new burdens for broken people. Jesus offers all these people an invitation: “*Come to me.... Learn from me.... And you will find rest for your souls.*” Jesus makes **himself** the center of his own teaching. He is the Wisdom of God, and personal fidelity to him will be the mark of the true disciple. God has chosen him to be the one who enshrines the fullness of revelation and who embodies the new Law of God.

It is interesting how this problem appears in the early Church when the first council is called in Jerusalem to decide if new converts have to obey the Law of Moses. It is Peter who settles the matter by arguing *against* those who insist that Gentile converts must fully obey the Law: “*It would only provoke God's anger by putting a yoke on the neck of the Gentiles which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear.*” (Acts 15:10) Peter admits honestly that the disciples of Jesus could not bear the yoke of the Law: ***why should they demand of others what they have never managed to do themselves?*** Peter concludes by focusing on the person of Jesus: “*Remember we believe that we are saved in the same way as they are: through the grace of the Lord Jesus.*”

Peter's argument, we read, "silences the entire assembly." That is the effect of his honesty on all present. Peter keeps the memory of Jesus at the center of his argument: like Jesus, he utterly refuses to be a party to imposing laws without taking into account people's capacity to keep them. Peter keeps the memory green of the disciples' own inability to live that Law. That is why all of Peter's preaching directs his hearers to the person of Jesus himself. Jesus did not say "Come to the Law, and you will find rest for your souls." He said "Come to me.... Learn from me... and you will find rest." And that is exactly what we do as we gather for this Eucharist

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