

**30<sup>th</sup> Sunday - Year A**

**First Reading:** Exodus 22:20-26

**Responsorial Psalm:** 17 (18): 2-4,47,51

**Second Reading:** Thessalonians 1 1:5-10

**Gospel:** Matthew 22:34-40

On January 1<sup>st</sup> 1863 Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation which freed millions of slaves and this was followed in 1865 by the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment which abolished slavery in the United States. Many families were now truly free for the first time in generations, but this was only the beginning of a long and arduous road to equality that in many places in that country has yet to be fully attained. Because most former slaves lacked education and were born into poverty they still experienced much suffering through being deprived of the vote and many other forms of discrimination. History tells us that there can be a big gap between supposed freedom and equality where the individual is allowed to play a full role in society and enjoy all the benefits of that society. The effects of slavery can be long lasting and still impact on successive generations for many years. That could certainly be said about the United States and other countries where slavery was the norm for decades and maybe even centuries. Slaves were a commodity. Their lives were only valued on how useful they were. It was a case of survival of the fittest and even the fittest were seen as inferior. Some of those who were in positions of power after abolition still clung to this and felt threatened by anything that went against it.

When Moses brought the Israelites out of Egypt he knew that his work and problems were only just beginning. Inside Egypt they were looked on as a separate people and this is one of the reasons they were forced to be slaves. But when they won their liberation they had to take a whole new look at the world they now found themselves in. They now had to make decisions and accept responsibility for themselves and their actions. When they were in Egypt all they had to do was carry out orders. Every aspect of their lives was ordered by the laws and decrees of their masters and oppressors, the Egyptians. That oppression was to keep them under control and from thinking for themselves.

Moses knew that when he led these ex-slaves into the wilderness his main task would be to take them from being a marginalised people unused to controlling their own lives into a nation capable of building and sustaining a just, proper and ordered society.

Very soon after leaving their captivity the Israelites were complaining about the harshness of their lives and were wishing they were back in Egypt where they had plenty to eat and drink despite their slavery. They had discovered that their new found freedom was not going to be all plain sailing. It is no wonder that Moses spent forty days on Mount Sinai thinking and praying and asking for God's guidance. The result of his prayers and requests was the Ten Commandments. This was no law of the Survival of the Fittest but one of the Protection of the Weakest. When he returned to his people with this new code for living he quickly found out just how much they needed it. In the short time he had been away they had really gone astray, living lives that would surely lead to their destruction as a people.

In today's first reading we hear of how God gave Moses further instructions on how their society should be formed, and the focus is placed on the weakest members of the community, the widows, orphans and the strangers. These are the people who have no one to protect them from being cheated or oppressed. The only thing they can rely on is the society in which they are living and under whose laws they hope to receive full equality and fair treatment. It is when the weakest members of a society enjoy full protection that it can be said that that society is true and just and it is also fulfilling God's commandments. If this is not the case, then it is only a matter of time before the discrimination and oppression becomes more widespread and this leads to disintegration and chaos in the community. When we stray from God's law the inevitable result is disorder.

The Ten Commandments God gave to Moses are fairly basic but they can be summed up in the two which Christ gives us in today's Gospel, and they are love of God and love of one's neighbour. One goes hand-in-hand with the other and they seem pretty straightforward. However, we know that although they are easy to remember they are not so easy to carry out. In giving us these commandments Jesus has given us the responsibility to build a better world; to carry on his mission. Moses' law was the responsibility of the community but Jesus enforced it further by stressing it is also the responsibility of every individual.

The only trouble is that we tend to be selective when it comes to love of our neighbour, and if this is the case then our love of God must be brought into question too because both of these commandments are inseparable. The message is clear. We must love God and put that into action by treating others properly. We must treat them in the way we ourselves would like to be treated. It also means not treating them the way they treat us. Two wrongs don't make a right.

We haven't far to look to see the results of when people disregard God's law. In some areas, rape and violence are a real fear. Fear can manifest itself in many ways. People can be distrustful of each other and this can lead them to be discourteous and even aggressive in everyday situations. Within our own communities it is the weakest members who live in the most fear. Old people fear muggings, abuse and burglary. Children have to be warned about strangers and new laws have been introduced to ensure they are protected. Many ordinary people don't like to leave their homes at night for fear of attack and some even feel unsafe in their own homes. If they can move out they will but many are trapped.

These are symptoms of a disordered society but all is not lost because for God no situation is beyond hope. He can bring about a solution, but he asks for our cooperation. He wants us to give witness of our love for him by recognising that each and every person we meet is made in his image and so deserve our love and consideration too. Let us pray for the grace to take the words of Jesus into our hearts so we can live it out in our lives and then we will be doing our part to put our community on the right road;- The road to God.