**SIXTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR A**

**12th February 2023**

**First Reading from Ecclesiasticus 15:15-20**

Jesus ben Sirach, wrote Ecclesiasticus to teach piety and morality to a Jewish colony in Alexandria about 180 B.C. His book is an important witness to the thinking of Judaism shortly before the Maccabean dynasty.

It also provided support for a Welsh heretical monk, Pelagius (c. 355 – c. 420 AD), who taught that we are born sinless and can please God through our own will-power. Pelagianism is said to be the besetting sin of the British.

At the head of the section from which our reading is taken, Sirach had declared: 'whoever holds to the law will obtain wisdom' (15:1). He is convinced that there is no true wisdom, no life as God would have us live it, without obedience to God's commandments.

And since it is God's will that we obey his commands, it follows (so Sirach argues) that we can keep them if we so choose and avoid sin. In the manner of Deuteronomy and of the wisdom writers, he presents obedience to God's law as the road that leads to life, and rejection of that law as the path to death. The choice is before us: we can opt for one or the other and we are responsible for our own fate if we reject his commandments.

God is omniscient and sees every human action; he is all-holy and does not and cannot condone sin or wrongdoing, much less command it. The author's main intention is to exonerate God from all responsibility for the evil in the world. This is incidentally, the main intention of the author of the story of Adam and Eve with the snake in the Garden of Eden.

Truth cannot be simply defined, but contains many conflicting ideas. Jesus ben Sirach is the truth, but not the whole truth. We have also to consider Paul in such passages as Romans 7:15-25.

**Second Reading from 1 Corinthians 2:6-10**

Corinth was also a ‘colony’ i.e. a retirement village for pensioned soldiers, who had been recruited from all parts of the Empire. We can imagine that residents would therefore be active with cosmopolitan ideas and initiative.

Some among the Christians there treated Christianity as a Gnostic sect like Mithraism. They accepted the spiritual elements of Christianity but rejected difficult ideas, such as the victory implicit in the Crucifixion of Jesus.

For the Corinthians the cross was an unfortunate episode of history. The less said about it, the better. All that mattered now was that Christ had risen. He was now spirit and, as such, had conveyed to them the cryptic gnosis through which they had access to eternity.

They thought they were mature, but in fact, by displaying their ignorance of the cross, they were showing their immaturity.

Gnosticism included a number of sects who taught that escape from this world depended on accepting the correct understanding of spiritual truth. This knowledge was carefully husbanded for one’s own benefit and not to be shared without discrimination. Paul ironically agrees that the Corinthians have 'wisdom' - but it is 'the wisdom of this age' (v. 6)

True wisdom comes from God and brings an understanding of God's plan to save humanity through the crucifixion of Jesus (vv. 7-8). This plan cannot be discovered by human reason but must be revealed by God (vv. 9-10).

At the end of the first paragraph in the Missal reading, Paul quotes from Isaiah 52;15 and 64;3. He uses an Old Testament phrase, 'what God has prepared for those who love him' Paul's adversaries with their Greek intellectual tradition, would have expected 'those who know him.'

For the Christian, salvation is for those who love God; it is an affair of the heart, of willing choice and action, not of the intellect.

Wisdom for Paul, then, is a deep insight into the mystery of Christ, into his person and teaching, an insight into their bearing on Christian life. And for him this insight comes through revelation, through enlightenment from the Holy Spirit, who alone can teach the true meaning of Christianity.

**Gospel Matthew 5:17-37 or 5:20-22a, 27-28, 33-34a, 37**

In the Sermon on the Mountain, Jesus outlines the new law of the kingdom of God, or, more accurately, a new interpretation of the old law. This new interpretation is illustrated by a series of antitheses, as they are commonly called. These antitheses follow a common pattern.

First comes the formula "You have heard that it was said ……..” This formula then quotes one of the commandments of the old law. Then comes Jesus’ interpretation introduced by the formula ‘But I say unto you ………..”

The prohibition of murder is thereby expanded to include anger. The prohibition of adultery is also expanded to cover lustful glances, and the prohibition of false oaths to include all promises, since a simple yes or no should be just as binding as a more elaborate expression.

The longer version of the Gospel includes further examples. Divorce has been stretched from a decree nisi to adultery. (The ‘except for fornication’ exclusion seems to have been added after Matthew’s original work because Jesus’ stringent standards were too hard for his disciples to bear.) The rest of chapter 5, which we have next week, gives two more antitheses, one on revenge and the other on love of the enemy.

The higher righteousness that the kingdom of God requires covers not only overt behaviour but also inner motives. God's demand for obedience is absolute and total, claiming the whole person. To keep the Law of Moses was difficult but possible and many Jews proudly boasted that they had done so. To keep the Law of Jesus is more difficult and correspondingly impossible.

We have the same impossibility that we had in the Beatitudes, that is to say, standards way out of human reach. (Matthew 5-1-12 4th Sunday 29th January 2023) And we have the same reason. We are thrown back on the need of grace and the generosity of our Father. In his kingdom, sufficient grace is given not to embrace perfection, but to advance towards it.