

31st Sunday in Ordinary Time, B – October 31, 2021 – Very Rev. Bryan W. Jerabek, J.C.L.
Cathedral of St. Paul, Birmingham – 5pm Vigil; 7:15, 8:30, & 11am Sunday Masses – 675 words

In the first Eucharistic Prayer, known as the venerable “Roman Canon”, the Church’s liturgy makes its own the honor the Jewish people gave to Abraham: we speak of him as our “father in faith”. This is not surprising, because Abraham’s faith was also celebrated from the earliest days of the Church – for example, in the Letter to the Hebrews, there is a beautiful passage that sings his praises. Faith is both an act of assent of the will, made possible by God’s grace, and is the thing to which we assent – in other words, it has a very specific content. We do not assent blindly to “an unknown God”, but specifically to a God who has revealed himself and told us many things about himself and about how we are to live.

So faith has a content, and throughout the Bible, that content is frequently expressed in terms of law. Moses was the great Old Testament lawgiver, and the Lord Jesus re-iterates all the commandments and other moral dictates that had come down to us since Moses’ time. Yes, the content of faith has often been framed in law – law that tells us how to act correctly in God’s sight, and otherwise, what is his due. In our time, we have a heavy focus on “rights”, but in secular society the rights of God are often the last to be recalled, if they are remembered at all. The laws that God has revealed express his right in our regard, and make clear for us how we can cooperate with his grace so as to please him and be saved by him.

Good law is written in a way that its meaning can be perceived clearly, and with an eye not only to the present but to the future. In this regard, the divine law is lapidary in its clarity and perennial applicability. The “Shema” – “Hear, O Israel” – of the first reading and gospel, first written thousands of years ago, still resounds clearly today: the love of God is to be paramount and all-consuming for us. And today, as then, it is just as challenging. But what differs for us who hear it now, versus for those who heard it then, is that we have the sacraments and the grace they offer to help us fulfill this command. Law, for many, is a cold concept that seems contrary to love. This sentiment has certainly marked the recent period of history.

But we indeed see, upon mature reflection, how the Lord throughout history has framed his divine law in love: acting aright and pleasing him are functions of loving him, our neighbor, and ourselves in an ordered way, not of completing a checklist or jumping through hoops. And if the Lord had already enflamed his law with love, Christ, as I mentioned, has further enlivened it with the help of divine grace. Therefore, the scribe in the gospel was “not far from the Kingdom of God”, inasmuch as he already knew what the right of God required of him. He had not fully arrived, because he would yet have many opportunities to cooperate with the Lord’s grace and so come to fulfill the law perfectly. It is only possible with his grace.

Yes, the content of our faith may well be full of law, but that law flows from God’s love for us and for his whole creation; and the fulfillment of it leads to true love of him, our neighbor, and ourselves. More than that, we have, in Jesus Christ, a living example of the law’s perfect consummation. It is impossible for us to imagine Christ ever wavering in the slightest in his keeping of the divine law; therefore, our keeping of it is imitation of him. And he is on our side, “[living] forever to make intercession for [us]”: he continually pleads for the graces we need, which flow to us through the sacraments and prayer, so that we, who also “are not far from the kingdom of God”, may finally arrive at its fullness.