

Sixth Sunday Per Annum (A)
February 12, 2017.

If you choose, you can keep the commandments, and they will save you... [God] has not commanded anyone to be wicked, and He has not given anyone permission to sin (Sir. 15:15, 20).

In our reflections on the Gospel of St. Matthew we have noted that Our Lord is presented as the new Moses or lawgiver who explains the precepts of the Old Law in greater fullness and detail and who brings it to perfection. *Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill (Mt. 5:17).* Hence, Our Lord introduces the fuller meaning of the Law with this familiar phrase: *You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times... But I say to you.* Beyond any doubt Our Lord calls us to go beyond the minimal observance of the Law to an appreciation not only of the deeper meaning of a given precept but more importantly, to an appreciation of the mind of the lawgiver – the mind of God Himself. Observance of the law is not beyond our capacity or ability because God does not command the impossible. We are reminded in our first reading in very simple terms: *If you choose, you can keep the commandments, and they will save you... [God] has not commanded anyone to be wicked, and He has not given anyone permission to sin (Sir. 15:15, 20).*

Leo Cardinal Burke, one of the greatest churchmen of our day has rightly observed that our times may be rightly described as *antinomian*. This word is derived from a Greek word meaning *lawless*. In Christian theology *antinomian* implies that Christians are under no obligation to obey the laws of ethics or morality. This is not a new heresy or error. Even in the early Church there were those who said that all that matters is love; period. But that is not enough, because love can never be separated from truth. Sometimes, in an effort to explain the moral teaching of Our Lord, there are those who speak of the legalism of the Pharisees as an extreme to be avoided at all costs; so much so that the Law itself is derided and seen as something to be dismissed altogether. We may be familiar with the term *strawman*. This is a common form of argument when we exaggerate, misrepresent or just completely fabricate someone's argument so that it's much easier to present our own position as being reasonable. Most of us actually did quite a bit of this when we were young and were trying to get our way. So our negotiations with our parents began with phrases like: *You never, ever let me go out with my friends...* Not factually true, but a good try at getting our way. That's pretty innocent but nonetheless still wrong. A more subtle and dangerous line of argument at least as it concerns the moral law is the preaching of the morals of mercy irrespective of conversion and penance; or proposing the idea that the Commandments of God are oppressive and burdensome, or that we can contradict them and still claim to be faithful to Our Lord. This *antinomian* or lawless approach to the moral law and especially liturgical law, sadly, is nothing new; and obvious contradictions are brushed over or just plainly ignored. How can anything but chaos result from this? We must humbly heed the words of Sacred Scripture: *If you choose, you can keep the commandments, and they will save you... [God] has not commanded anyone to be wicked, and He has not given anyone permission to sin (Sir. 15:15, 20).*

To those who believed in Him, Our Lord said plainly: *If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free* (Jn. 8:32). Our Lord invites us to perceive the truth of the Law; and so we make our very own the words of the Psalmist: *Open my eyes, so that I may behold the wondrous things out of your law...Give me understanding, that I may keep your law and observe it with my whole heart* (Ps. 119). These are the sentiments of a son or a daughter who desires to understand, not to oppose; of children who are grateful for the concern of a loving Father, not resentful of His authority. This is the mature attitude that we must bring to our efforts to observe the demands of God's Law. I think it is fair to say that given the times there is hardly a family that has remained unaffected by the moral confusion of our times. In some cases we have received contradictory counsel and we are rightly confused. Therefore, we must be on our guard against those who *hold the form of religion but deny the power of it* (Cf. 2 Tim. 3:5); and we must endeavour to make our own, to appropriate God's wisdom, which is best understood as the coupling of truth and love. Hence, St. Paul exhorts us: *Among the mature we do speak wisdom, though it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age...But we speak God's wisdom...which God decreed before the ages for our glory* (1 Cor. 2:6-7).

To appropriate God's wisdom is not always an easy thing and sometimes we fail and fall, but *His eyes are on those who fear Him* (Sir. 15:19); and so we are confident in the help of His grace. We may be afflicted, but we are *not crushed; perplexed but not given to despair* (2 Cor. 4:8-9). Perhaps there was a time in our own lives when we rebelled against the demands of God's law or found them very burdensome; yet out of the experience of the desolation and misery that inevitably result from losing our way, we returned to the practice of our faith and made our very own the words of the St. Peter the Apostle: *'Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life* (Jn. 6:68). In the journey of faith, whether we were baptized as infants or as adults, a time comes, a moment of truth of sorts that engages us and we understand that our all our efforts must be directed to actually *being* who we are – disciples of Jesus Christ. And so we never tire of heeding the invitation of Our Lord: *'Take my yoke upon you and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light'* (Mt. 11:29-30). Only this way do we become even remotely capable of understanding the wisdom of God's law.

In what is effectively his autobiography, the great English Cardinal, Blessed John Henry Newman vividly describes his own moment of truth when he came to the realisation that the Roman Catholic Church is the true Church of God; and he observed that *the drama of religion, and the combat of truth and error were ever one and the same* (*Apologia Pro Vita Sua*, Image Books, p.217). Our times are in this sense, no different from other times. We are engaged in a spiritual combat of truth and error. Let us then ask Our Lord to give us the grace to accept and receive His *words of eternal life*; confident in the knowledge that *as we walk in the law of the Lord* (Ps. 119), *His eyes are on those who fear Him* (Sir. 15:19).