

Historical Commentary



(The Fifth Sunday of Trinitytide - Year C)

The Liturgy Letter

Commentary on Luke 10:25-37: Selections from Church Fathers and John Calvin

Cyril of Alexandria: Anyone who thoroughly understands the mystery of the incarnation may say to the lawyer, “If you were skillful in the law and in the meaning of its hidden teaching, you would not forget who he is you try to tempt. You thought that he was a mere man, only man, and not God who appeared in human likeness, knows what is secret, and can look into the hearts of those who approach him. In many ways Emmanuel is depicted to you by the shadowing of Moses. You saw him there sacrificed as a lamb, yet conquering the destroyer and abolishing death by his blood. You saw him in the arrangement of the ark, in which the divine law was deposited. In his holy flesh he was as in an ark, being the Word of the Father, the Son that was begotten of him by nature. You saw him as the mercy seat in the holy tabernacle, around which stood the seraphim.” He is our mercy seat for pardon of our sins. Yes, and even as man he is glorified by the seraphim, who are the intelligent and holy powers above. They stand around his divine and exalted throne.

Ephrem the Syrian: What is the greatest and first commandment of the law? He said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God, and your neighbor as yourself.” ... All this teaching is held high through the two commandments, as though by means of two wings, that is, through the love of God and of humanity.

Ambrose: Both the Father and the Son proclaimed and announced the sacrament of the divine incarnation, saying, “You shall love the Lord your God” and “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” The Lord said to the lawyer, “Do this, and you shall live.” He who did not know his neighbor, because he did not believe in Christ, answered, “Who is my neighbor?” Whoever does not know Christ does not know the law either. How can he know the law when he is ignorant of the Truth, since the law proclaims the Truth?

Jerome: Some think that their neighbor is their brother, family, relative or their kinsman. Our Lord teaches who our neighbor is in the Gospel parable of a certain man going down from Jerusalem to Jericho.... Everyone is our neighbor, and we should not harm anyone. If, on the contrary, we understand our fellow human beings to be only our brother and relatives, is it then permissible to do evil to strangers? God forbid such a belief! We are neighbors, all people to all people, for we have one Father.

Augustine: Robbers left you half-dead on the road, but you have been found lying there by the passing and kindly Samaritan. Wine and oil have been poured on you. You have received the sacrament of the only-begotten Son. You have been lifted onto his mule. You have believed that Christ became flesh. You have been brought to the inn, and you are being cured in the church.

That is where and why I am speaking. This is what I too, what all of us are doing. We are performing the duties of the innkeeper. He was told, "If you spend any more, I will pay you when I return." If only we spent at least as much as we have received! However much we spend, brothers and sisters, it is the Lord's money.

Ambrose: Blessed is that innkeeper who can care for another's wounds. Blessed is he to whom Jesus says, "Whatever you shall spend over and above, I will repay you." A good steward is one who also spends over and above.

Augustine: God our Lord wished to be called our neighbor. The Lord Jesus Christ meant that he was the one who gave help to the man lying half-dead on the road, beaten and left by the robbers. The prophet said in prayer, "As a neighbor and as one's own brother, so did I please." Since the divine nature is far superior and above our human nature, the command by which we are to love God is distinct from our love of our neighbor. He shows mercy to us because of his own goodness, while we show mercy to one another because of God's goodness. He has compassion on us so that we may enjoy him completely, while we have compassion on another that we may completely enjoy him.

Ambrose: Since no one is closer than he who tended to our wounds, let us love him as our Lord, and let us love him as our neighbor. Nothing is so close as the head to the members. Let us also love him who is the follower of Christ, let us love him who in unity of body has compassion on another's need.

John Calvin: He receives from Christ a reply different from what he had expected. And, indeed, no other rule of a holy and righteous life was prescribed by Christ than what had been laid down by the Law of Moses; for the perfect love of God and of our neighbors comprehends the utmost perfection of righteousness. Yet it must be observed, that Christ speaks here about obtaining salvation, in agreement with the question which had been put to him; for he does not teach absolutely, as in other passages, how men may arrive at eternal life, but how they ought to live, in order to be accounted righteous in the sight of God.

Now it is certain that in the Law there is prescribed to men a rule by which they ought to regulate their life, so as to obtain salvation in the sight of God. That the Law can do nothing else than condemn, and is therefore called the doctrine of death, and is said by Paul to increase transgressions, ([Romans 7:13](#),) arises not from any fault of its doctrine, but because it is impossible for us to perform what it enjoins. Therefore, though no man is justified by the Law yet the Law itself contains the highest righteousness, because it does not falsely hold out salvation to its followers, if any one fully observed all that it commands. Nor ought we to look upon this as a strange manner of teaching, that God first

demands the righteousness of works, and next offers a gratuitous righteousness without works; for it is necessary that men should be convinced of their righteous condemnation, that they may betake themselves to the mercy of God. Accordingly, Paul ([Romans 10:5, 6](#)) compares both kinds of righteousness, in order to inform us that the reason why we are freely justified by God is, that we have no righteousness of our own. Now Christ in this reply accommodated himself to the lawyer, and attended to the nature of his question; for he had inquired not how salvation must be sought, but by what works it must be obtained.

What follows is an abridgment of the Law, which is also found in the writings of Moses, ([Deuteronomy 6:5](#).) For, though it is divided into two tables, the first of which relates to the worship of God, and the second to charity, Moses properly and wisely draws up this summary, that the Jews may perceive what is the will of God in each of the commandments. And although we ought to love God far more than men, yet most properly does God, instead of worship or honor, require love from us, because in this way he declares that no other worship is pleasing to Him than what is voluntary; for no man will actually obey God but he who loves Him. But as the wicked and sinful inclinations of the flesh draw us aside from what is right, Moses shows that our life will not be regulated aright till the love of God fill all our senses. Let us therefore learn, that the commencement of godliness is the love of God, because God disdains the forced services of men, and chooses to be worshipped freely and willingly; and let us also learn, that under the love of God is included the reverence due to him.

He assigns the second place to mutual kindness among men, for the worship of God is first in order. The commandment to love our neighbors, he tells us, is like the first, because it depends upon it. For, since every man is devoted to himself, there will never be true charity towards neighbors, unless where the love of God reigns; for it is a mercenary love which the children of the world entertain for each other, because every one of them has regard to his own advantage. On the other hand, it is impossible for the love of God to reign without producing brotherly kindness among men.

Christ might have stated simply, that the word neighbor extends indiscriminately to every man, because the whole human race is united by a sacred bond of fellowship. And, indeed, the Lord employed this word in the Law, for no other reason than to draw us sweetly to mutual kindness. The commandment would have run more clearly thus: Love every man as thyself. But as men are blinded by their pride, so that every man is satisfied with himself, scarcely deigns to admit others to an equal rank, and withholds from them the duties he owes them, the Lord purposely declares that all are neighbors that the very relationship may produce mutual love. To make any person our neighbor, therefore, it is enough that he be, a man; for it is not in our power to blot out our common nature.

Whether this scribe made any farther progress is uncertain; but as he had shown himself to be teachable, Christ stretches out the hand to him, and teaches us, by his example, that we ought to assist those in whom there is any beginning either of docility or of right understanding.