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Study of Ancient Scripture: A Modern Teaching Tool

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Study of Ancient Scripture: A Modern Teaching Tool

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Twenty-Ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Sunday Readings for October 17, 2010 for Cycle C:

Ex 17:8-13, Ps 121, 2 Tim 3:14-4:2, Lk 18:1-8

STUDY OF ANCIENT SCRIPTURE: A MODERN TEACHING TOOL

Lawrence E. Frizzell

The selection from the second letter to Timothy includes an important statement about the Jewish Scripture or "Old Testament" as a vehicle for instruction. "All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching – for reproof, correction, and training in righteousness so that the one who belongs to God may be competent and equipped for every good work" (3:16-17). Among the reasons for encouraging the faithful to prepare for the Sunday liturgy is the need to place each reading in context. Because of its brevity, the homily often leaves many questions unanswered. The faithful are encouraged to make a prayerful reflection on the passages to be read, along with an attempt to grapple with the obscurities and challenges of a given passage.

This Sunday's lesson from early in the history of Israel's wandering in the wilderness is a case in point. Who is Amalek and why did his forces attack the Israelites? In the Book of Deuteronomy we read: "Bear in mind what Amalek did to you on the journey after you left Egypt, how without fear of any god he harassed you along the way, weak and weary as you were, and cut off at the rear all who lagged behind" (25:18). This terroristic oppression of the weak culminated in an attack to which the Israelites responded militarily. However, the battle was won, not primarily by the tactics of Joshua but by the intercession of Moses. The figure of Amalek came to symbolize the hatred and oppression suffered by Israel over the millennia. The people were assured that "The LORD will war against Amalek through the centuries" (Ex 17:16), yet they should never forget that such a danger may overwhelm the defenseless among them (see Dt 25:19). As the example of Moses indicates, prayer is essential in the situations that might result in persecution, especially in order to find the possibility not only of victory but also of lasting peace.

The prophet Moses and all his successors were not only teachers guiding the people to fidelity in God's service; they were also intercessors whose prayer warded off dangers from outside or within the community (see Ex 17:8-13; 32:7-14). The support of collaborators is essential for the success of this aspect of the prophetic call. From the Pope to parish priest and parents, all leaders in the Christian community must recognize the centrality of prayer in the exercise of their mission. Only then will the daunting tasks become manageable.

Although Jesus showed that adoration and thanksgiving are more important than petition, he did emphasize that we must turn to God with confidence in all our needs (Mt 6:5-14). What is his advice when our prayers don't seem to be answered? A parable describes what, humanly speaking, would be a totally hopeless situation.

In ancient society the widow should be protected by her sons, because she could not even be a witness, let alone bring a case to court herself. Jesus depicted a widow without a protector and a local judge "who neither feared (revered) God nor respected any human being" (Lk 18:2). No one would expect him to render justice for an impecunious widow, yet her persistence finally wore down his apathy. Those without recourse to the normal ways of arriving at justice were protected by God. The Law of Moses reads: "If ever you wrong the widow and the orphan and they cry out to me, I will surely hear their cry" (Ex 22:22). The commandment of Moses was intended to admonish the judges and the powerful in Israelite society that God watched over their conduct and would demand a reckoning. Indeed, "measure for measure" was declared to be the norm for judgment. "My wrath will flare up and I will kill you with the sword; then your own wives will be widows, and your children orphans" (Ex 22:23). Jesus not only assured his listeners that God will bring justice to the elect who pray with perseverance, but also linked their vindication with his own coming for final judgment. This point is couched in a question: "But when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?" Persistent prayer flows from a deep faith. In the midst of life's tragedies, often caused by human injustice and violence, people must cultivate a profound belief in God and trust in divine providence. Faith is also the best foundation for building the practice of justice and love that should characterize the lives of all people. A prayerful study of the Scriptures nourishes that faith and provides insights into ways of God and the promises of Christ.