

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

The Book of Leviticus appears to be somewhat obscure when measured against other books of the Old Testament. We more easily identify with Genesis and Exodus or Isaiah and Jeremiah. Yet, Leviticus lays an important foundation for much of what governs the Christian life. Leviticus, which refers to the priesthood of the Levites, concerns itself with two main functions: the liturgical and ceremonial life of the priesthood (Old Testament reference) and, equally important, the holiness that the Jewish people were called to live. In one sense, Leviticus can be viewed as a “set of rules.” Another perspective offers that the call to a holy life creates an unbreakable harmony and synthesis with God. Such “rules” are guideposts which lead us to a deeper union with the Lord.

This is manifest so clearly in today’s first reading. This is a continuation of the colloquy or conversation between God and Moses on their sojourn to the Promised Land. While the admonition of the Lord to Moses is instructive (“Speak to the whole Israelite community and tell them...”) it also reflects the depths of God’s love for us and desire to reflect that love in our relationships with one another. The Lord’s call is very emphatic yet difficult to live out at times: don’t hate those who have wronged us; don’t seek revenge or retribution; don’t hold grudges and be magnanimous. We are challenged to holy and loving as God is perfect holiness and perfect love.

There is a parallel between the call to holiness expressed in Leviticus and Paul’s Letter to the Corinthians reminding them that as temples of the Lord one should live a life worthy of that truth. Given his own history of indifference to others’ suffering, often imposed on them by his own hand, Paul had an epiphany. His powerful experience of conversion turned his darkness into the shining light of God’s grace and the Holy Spirit. Paul understood at least that we are utterly dependent upon, in the final analysis, the things of God, of heaven, and not the fleeting and passing things of earth. His message is so deep and heartfelt because it came from someone who had failed to love for so long. It is folly to attach ourselves inordinately to people, whether in apostolic times to Paul, Apollos or Cephas, for ultimately, we belong to Jesus Christ.

Matthew’s Gospel offers a great challenge to us: to reject the conventional wisdom of how we are to address those who wrong us. When we are harmed, the natural inclination is to retaliate or exact revenge. Jesus calls us to love those who hurt us, to stretch the limits of our capacity to give. In this way, we learn to be open and free to loving, forgiving, and serving others as a reflection of how God so lavishes his love upon us. Jesus also challenges us to not simply love or hang around those who make it easy to love or to be around. As Jesus reminded his followers, even the tax collectors and the pagans do this. Christian love demands that we get out of our comfort zone and familiar surroundings to embrace and communicate with those people who cause of discomfort and unease. Worldly justice is so profoundly counter-intuitive to God’s justice: “...your heavenly Father makes the sun rise on the good and the bad...” This seems ridiculous and unfair. Remember, Jesus himself was ridiculed and was treated most unfairly. He led and leads by example. Come, let us follow him!

Fr. Tom