

This Sunday's Readings – 10th Sunday in Ordinary Time – Today's readings stress the fact that it takes more than external rituals (sacrifices) to do the will of God.

Today's first reading is from the book of the prophet Hosea, which means "salvation". Hosea began his mission in the Northern Kingdom during the last years of King Jeroboam II (786 – 746 BC). These were perilous times for the Northern Kingdom as Assyria was expanding westward and made the Northern Kingdom a vassal state in 732 BC. The Northern Kingdom and its capital Samaria were eventually destroyed in 722 BC. The kings of the Northern Kingdom were more interested in developing relationships with pagan kings than with the welfare of their own people. The priests also neglected their duties and failed to instruct the people. As a result the people included pagan gods in their religious ceremonies. The most notorious was the worship of Baal and Astarte, which included temple prostitution. Hosea spoke out against these abominations. He was also the first to describe God's love of the Israelites with the love of a husband for his wife. This reading is in two parts. In the first part Hosea is speaking to the people and in the second part God is speaking to the people. Hosea preached that it was faith and love in God that really mattered, not the elaborate sacrifices. However, sacrifices were important but sacrifice without obedience to the Law was meaningless. Reginald H. Fuller in his *Preaching the Lectionary: The Word of God for the Church Today* further explains – "The prophets denounced the practice of sacrifice unaccompanied by obedience, but they did not denounce sacrifice as such. "I desire A and not B" is the Hebraic way of saying what the priorities should be: "I desire love more than sacrifice." It is noteworthy that despite the prophetic protest, sacrifices still went on—in fact, they were actually elaborated after the Exile. Both the prophetic protest and the sacrifices were necessary, and the continuance of both side by side witnessed to important elements of the truth. What God really wants is obvious—the total commitment of a person's life to him. But it is less obvious that a person cannot achieve this by himself or herself".

In today's Gospel from Matthew, we read of the calling of Matthew, a hated tax collector, to be Jesus' 5th disciple. But why were tax collectors so hated? Fr. Roger Karban in his 2005 syndicate column for *The Evangelist* explains – "Tax collectors were looked upon as sinners both because of the way they collected taxes — by force, blackmail and intimidation — and because of those for whom they collected taxes — the hated Roman occupiers of Israel". Matthew used Mark's Gospel as a primary reference. It is interesting to note that in Mark's Gospel, the tax collector's name is Levi, and not Matthew and that it is the only time that the name Levi is referenced in any of the Gospels. In the other Gospels, the disciple's name is always Matthew. As can be expected, the Pharisees take exception to the fact that Jesus dines with "tax collectors and sinners". Again, they totally miss the point. Jesus came to save all people, not just the righteous. Does a healthy person need a physician? No. Jesus tended to those who were in need. Note Jesus reference to the first reading from Hosea (6:6) – "I desire mercy, not sacrifice". It is mercy and love that is more important than the temple sacrifices. It is what is in the heart and not the externals that really matters. Matthew added this reference to Hosea to Mark's Gospel story of the calling of Matthew and this is what primarily connects these readings. Fr. Francis X. Cleary, SJ, in his 2002 article in the *St.*

Louis Reviewonline adds these comments on this Gospel reading – “Today's Gospel addresses an issue of contemporary concern: our attitude toward sinners, especially notorious ones. Wisely, it neither advocates wholesale rejection nor naive, uncritical acceptance, but challenges our basic attitudes toward those who are not what we want them to be. Moreover, it's a revelation about what the hidden God is really like, and how he relates to us sinners. In challenging us to imitation, the story exposes our judgmental attitudes and behavior. But warning! We may find Jesus' teaching not only new but painful to accept. ... Today's story, which originally elicited shock from "good people," challenges us to re-examine our attitude not only toward sinners, but to Jesus, and therefore to God. They don't behave as we expect, or perhaps as we have been taught. When Matthew's equally low-life friends arrived for a meal, Jesus doubtlessly greeted them warmly and fitted in around the table. Meal-sharing, then as now, can serve as a quasi-sacramental gesture uniting participants in fellowship. Even today we need to share meals with family and friends, for eating together and the social environment builds fellowship. Jesus thus revealed his unusual messianic "specialty" - in sinners, the kind of people we tend to avoid. Jesus found and elicited good in them, all in the service of calling sinners back into favor with God. Are we similarly large-hearted, at least at times to accept, without approving, the behavior of others?”

John J. Pilch in his *The Cultural World of Jesus, Sunday by Sunday, Cycle A* adds these cultural comments on today's Gospel reading – “The account of the call of Matthew is situated in a cluster of ten healing stories which the evangelist has gathered in chapters 8 and 9. Though it is not one of these ten stories, healing is one of its motifs.

TOLLS

The scene is Capernaum, Jesus' own town (9:1). Capernaum was located on the northwest corner of the Sea of Galilee along the major road of international trade between Damascus and Egypt. Domestic trade among the towns and villages on the shores of the Sea of Galilee also had to pass through Capernaum. Capernaum was well situated for collecting tolls which were levied on all goods in transit whether entering, leaving, or simply being transported across a district. Toll collectors also had to be paid for goods crossing over bridges or gates, or landings. Matthew was a toll collector who worked in the Capernaum custom house. In Jesus' time, a toll collector was a native who contracted with Rome to collect the allotted tolls but paid them personally to Rome in advance and hoped to collect enough to make a profit. Historical evidence indicates that the gamble rarely paid off. The rich and the educated, a minuscule minority in Jesus' day, routinely criticized toll collectors. The poor rarely had anything on which duties could be levied and would likely sympathize with rather than criticize those who, like themselves, were trying to eke out a subsistence.

SICKNESS AND HEALING

Jesus draws an analogy between his association with toll collectors and sinners and the association of healers with sick people. Knowledge of the history of medicine helps a modern reader appreciate the analogy. In antiquity, healers preferred not to treat sick people because if the sick person died the healer might be put to death as well. Jesus' activity contrasts with this cultural view because he touched the untouchables and

associated with the outcasts in a way that good healers should have done but didn't. Moreover sickness in ancient Israel nearly always entailed separation from the community until health returned. This was part of the understanding of purity and wholeness. In a group-oriented culture, separation from the community is a fate worse than death. Jesus' healing ministry in general always includes a restoration of the person to community, whether someone with repulsive scaly skin conditions (called "leprosy") or toll collectors who in general were a remarkably fair and honest group of people routinely stereotyped, condemned, and shunned by their peers. Whom do contemporary American believers stereotype, condemn, and shun? How would Jesus respond?"

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