

*Readings for September 7, 2008*

[Ezekiel 33:7-9](#)

[Psalm 95](#)

[Romans 13:8-10](#)

[Matthew 18:15-20](#)

**This Sunday's Readings – the 23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time** – Just as last Sunday's readings described what it means to be a disciple, this Sunday's readings describe the responsibilities that each one of us has to one another. The first reading is from the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel, who prophesied in Babylon from approximately 597 BC to 571 BC – the period just before and during the Babylonian Captivity.

What is unique about Ezekiel is that he is the only man called to be a prophet outside of Israel. He was also a priest and was known from his teachings as the "Father of Judaism". In this reading, God appoints Ezekiel a "watchman for the House of Israel". In the defense system of Palestine, the watchman was a very familiar person. The watchman resided in the outer towns watching for invading armies. He would then warn Israel of the impending attack. In this situation, Ezekiel is the "watchman" who warns the people not to sin and to follow the Law during a period of despair after the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple. He speaks for God and is to keep the people of God on the "straight and narrow". This is one of the roles of a prophet. Ezekiel is further told that it is not enough to simply tell the sinner that he will die for his sins. He must go beyond that and try to dissuade the sinner from his wicked ways (reconciliation) or else he (Ezekiel) will be held responsible for the sinner's death.

This is one of the responsibilities of a prophet. This message is clarified even further in the Gospel reading from Matthew. This reading is divided into two parts – reconciliation and prayer. Reconciliation is broken down into three steps, which are similar to those developed by the Qumran community. In the first step if your "brother" (in this case fellow disciple) "sins against you", it is your responsibility to take him aside in private, and confront him with his sin. If he listens and repents, then that is the end of it – "you have won over your brother". If he does not, then proceed to step two, which is bringing in one or two witnesses, so that you have facts based "on the testimony of two or three witnesses". If he still will not listen then it must be brought before the church. In all of the gospels, the word church is only mentioned twice and only in Matthew's gospel. The first is in chapter 16:18 when Jesus gives the keys to the kingdom of heaven to Peter – the universal church. In this section church refers to the local community. If he still will not listen then he is treated as a Gentile, in other words excommunicated.

As John J. Pilch of Georgetown University states "The force of excommunication is lost on American individualists who have little allegiance to any group, including family... Not so our Mediterranean ancestors in the faith. Without community one is effectively dead. One has no network, no support, no hope. And to be lumped with one's enemies is the worst of punishments". The disciples are then given the same power as Peter to loose and to bind. In other words they have the authority to settle conflicts between members of the community. In the second part on prayer, communal prayer is given a higher priority over private prayer.