



Archdiocese of San Antonio
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Some of us do not like controversy. Others revel in it. It does not really matter whether or not we like it because we will surely encounter controversies throughout our lives. It is essential that we keep the issues in perspective.

Today, Samuel comes to Bethlehem. The elders are immediately worried. Is he coming to check up on them on behalf of Saul the king? Or has he broken with Saul, thus making it risky for them to welcome him? Samuel is tight-lipped; he is on a dangerous mission from God. He summons Jesse and his family, but does not tell them why he has done so. We know that God had rejected Saul and ordered Samuel to go to Bethlehem to anoint a new king – someone from the family of Jesse. The narrative slows down and stalls when none of Jesse's sons proves to be the chosen one.

Samuel seems confused. He is sure he has the right town and the right family, but not yet the right person. In a quandary he asks if there is perhaps another child. There is -- a young shepherd boy tending the flocks, and everyone – including us – has to wait until he can be brought before the prophet. The little boy has no claim to anything, no credentials to offer. At first, we are not even told his name until, with the anointing, the Spirit of God rushes upon David. This little boy has potential for greatness, and he is God's choice to replace Saul. We join the elders and Jesse's family to witness this new beginning, which is both unexpected and controversial. But the controversy has only begun! David will risk his life many times before he actually becomes king.

A constant biblical theme is that God chooses the ones most unlikely in the eyes of others to be the leaders among God's people. Like the young Jeremiah, we sometimes ask, "Why me, Lord? I'm too young, or I'm too slow, or I'm too old!" But God does not withdraw his call or change his mind about our mission and ministry. Rather, he sends his Holy Spirit upon us to enable us to carry out our mission.

Today's gospel provides a different kind of controversy – interpretation of a key commandment regarding Sabbath rest. Jesus' disciples pick some heads of grain and rub them in their hands before eating them to assuage their hunger – on a Sabbath. The Pharisees who were very diligent about observing every minute detail of the law are scandalized. They had identified nearly forty kinds of actions that were prohibited on the Sabbath – including reaping grains of wheat or oats. They immediately question the right of the disciples to feed themselves that way on the holy day.

Jesus addresses their concerns. He reminds them of a biblical precedent from the time of David. Then the Lord gives two principles, pointing out that the Sabbath rest was meant for the re-creation of the human person, not the other way around. Also, as a human being he understands hunger. As the Son of God he has the authority to condone what his disciples had done – to interpret the Law of God in a way consistent with its purpose.

Such controversies continue in our own day. Last Holy Thursday, Pope Francis washed the feet of twelve prisoners in the Casa del Marmo Prison in Rome, including two women and two Muslims. Some Catholics concerned primarily about tradition and rubrics pointed out that priests are to wash the feet of twelve men. It is customary for the Bishop of Rome to wash the feet of twelve priests at St. John Lateran Basilica, the cathedral church of Rome. One national Catholic newspaper devoted a very long article to explaining how the Holy Father could do what he did and why no one else can – seemingly missing totally the eloquent gesture of evangelization symbolized in the Holy Father's action. Can you begin to imagine what those two women prisoners or the two Muslim prisoners felt when Pope Francis showed them God's love for them by washing their feet as mandated by Jesus at the Last Supper?! The Holy Father adapted the rite to the real situation, the community where he was celebrating the liturgy.

It is important to know the purpose of *torah* or God's law. It is to help us establish, maintain, and restore, when necessary, right relationships – with ourselves, with the earth, with one another, and with God. When we are not in right relationships, we are unjust. Jesus teaches us that the law of God is summarized in this: loving God totally, holding nothing back; and loving our neighbor as ourself. If that is the purpose of Law – as Jesus explains in many ways in the Sermon on the Mount – then we are to keep that in mind as we apply the law in our lives. Obeying God's law needs to be understood in terms of the consequences of our actions on the most basic relationships in our lives. The covenant is primarily relational, not juridical or legalistic.

We do not need to look for controversies; they will find us. Keeping matters in perspective helps us cope with this dimension of our lives. We have the example of Jesus and the gifts of the Holy Spirit to help us – and also the example of our Holy Father.

May Our Lady of Guadalupe, the Star of the new evangelization, show us the way to proclaim the Lord Jesus and his gospel – using the right words when necessary.