

Proper 1 (The Sixth Sunday After the Epiphany)
Cycle A RCL
Revised

Deuteronomy 30:15-20

Deuteronomy consists principally of three farewell speeches of Moses to the Israelites, encamped on the Plain of Moab and poised to enter the Promised Land. This forms the conclusion of the third and shortest of the speeches and an unknown author added it to Deuteronomy after Judah's exile to Babylon in 586 BCE. Moses' warning to the Israelites in Moab to obey the commandments of God, especially those against idolatry, served also as a warning to the exiled Israelites in Babylon that successful tenure on the land of promise would depend upon their faithfulness to God's law.

or

Ecclesiasticus (Sirach) 15:11-20

Jesus son of Eleazar, the son of Sirach, was a wisdom teacher in Jerusalem at the turn of the second century BCE. His grandson, who had immigrated to Alexandria, Egypt in 132 BCE, translated his grandfather's work from Hebrew into Greek, and in this Greek form the book came to be used extensively by the Jews of Egypt. Christians also read the book as part of the Greek Bible they inherited from Judaism and so it is canonical for most Christians. In 1896, the linguists Agnes Smith Lewis and Margaret Dunlop Gibson brought back from a trip to the Middle East pages of a Hebrew manuscript that Solomon Schechter recognized as portions of Sirach. Since that time, other Hebrew manuscripts of Sirach, especially manuscripts from among the Dead Sea Scrolls, have come to light and now give us almost all of the text of Sirach in Hebrew, including our lesson.

Psalms 119:1-8

This unusually long psalm (176 verses) is an *acrostic* psalm. The other acrostic psalms in the Bible begin each verse with a successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet; but in Psalm 119 each strophe has each line begin with the same Hebrew letter and then the following strophe has each line begin with the next Hebrew letter, *etc.* Our reading involves the first strophe of Psalm 119. These eight verses all begin with the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet, *alef*. (The next 8 begin with the second letter, *bet*, *etc.*) Wisdom psalms did not serve temple worship. They derive instead from wisdom teachers who instructed young men in Jerusalem's court schools.

1 Corinthians 3:1-9

Paul here used a technical term from Greek religion to tell his pseudo-sophisticated audience in Corinth that he did not consider them "spiritual people" (*pneumatikoi*) but "fleshly people" (*sarkinoi*), people who have not yet received the enlightenment of Christ. The principal proof of this lack of enlightenment was, in Paul's view, the propensity of the Corinthian Christians to divide themselves into warring factions.

Matthew 5:21-37

At one level, the teachings of Jesus here are not terribly different from those of the Pharisees. The Pharisees too rejected needless swearing and stressed the importance of doing the Law with a right intention (*kavanah*). What may have seemed surprising to many of the Pharisees about the teachings of Jesus, though, was their severity. In our passage, whether it is one of the Ten Commandments (verses 21, 27), another biblical law (verse 31), or a paraphrase of a biblical law (verse 33), Jesus intensifies and broadens the law on his own authority and without references to the "sages" or the "fathers" as the Pharisees would do. The passage contains two words that bear explanation. The NRSV translation "hell" (verse 22) renders the Greek word *Gehenna* from the Hebrew *gey hinnom* ("Valley of Hinnom), a valley south of Jerusalem where Solomon had set up altars to his foreign wives' gods. As a result of Solomon's sacrilege, the Hinnom Valley came to be considered so unclean that people used it only for the burning of garbage. Apocalyptic Judaism thought the fate of the wicked was to be burned up like garbage in the Valley of Hinnom. The word *Raka* has an uncertain origin, coming, perhaps, from Aramaic *reyqa*, "empty," perhaps meaning "empty-headed." Although the insults in verse 22 are unpleasant, they would not normally be sufficient to merit the grave punishments Jesus pronounces.