

COMMENTARY ON READINGS FOR SUNDAY, SEPT. 4, 2005
(Twenty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time)
(Ezek 33: 7-9; Ps 95; Rom 13:8-10; Matt 18:15-20)

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These readings speak about conversion, turning back to God and seeking to follow God's ways with one's whole heart. Ezekiel, whom we shall encounter again in three weeks, preached during the early part of the Babylonian Exile. This priest-prophet was charged by the Lord to effect Israel's conversion in exile. Three aspects characterize his ministry: first, getting Israel to realize how much it had offended God and "defiled" itself; secondly, correcting fatalistic notions that children paid for their parents' sins (Ezek 18:2); no, everyone was responsible for his or her own sin, and could neither despair of the past nor rest on its laurels, as the case may be. Thirdly, Ezekiel fostered the hope of a despondent people (Ezek 33:10; 37:11): if one turned from one's prior-life wrongdoing, God's salvation, a purification and new birth, really (Ezek 36:16-38), would be available and would manifest itself in unimaginable ways.

Ps 95, the daily "invitatory" prayer in the Liturgy of the Hours, is a warning not to harden one's heart when the Lord speaks *today*. Cf. Heb 3:7-4:13. The reading from Romans summarizes God's law as consisting of love of one's neighbor as oneself; see also Lev 19:18, 34 (mandate to love the foreign worker as oneself); Luke 10:25-37 (the "Good Samaritan"); Mark 12:28-34.

Matthew's Gospel has a strong interest in early Church order. Here we see how "fraternal correction" is to be done (cf. Lev 19:17). In the Bible, one needs at least two witnesses to settle disputes (Deut 19:15). Of course, if they are false witnesses, great wrong can be committed (see 1 Kgs 21, the episode of Ahab/Jezebel and Naboth's vineyard). Note the authority the Church has to make binding decisions (cf. that given specially to Peter in Matt 16:19; cf. John 20:22-23). Finally, let us remember that the Church —us— is God's Temple (1 Cor 3:16-17); when we gather together, Jesus is with us (the Jews experience God's glorious presence, the Shekinah, when they study Torah). Jesus, God-with-us (Matt 1:23), will remain with us until the "end of the world," Matt 28:20).