

COLUMNS COMMENTARY

The 'quality' of the law is love

By Father Albert Shamon
Courier columnist

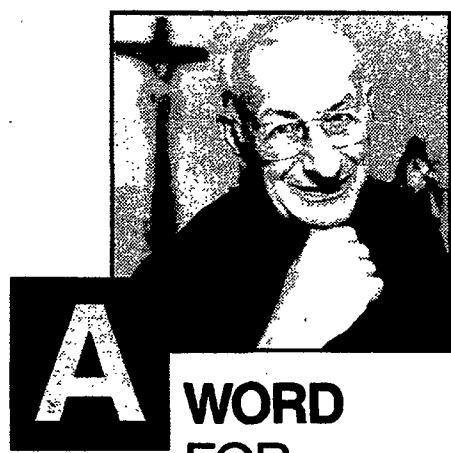
Sunday's Readings: (R3) Mark 8:27-35; (R1) Isaiah 50:4-9; (R2) James 2:14-18.

In the plays of Shakespeare, there is a point called the crisis. The crisis is the turning point in the drama. If the play is a comedy, for instance, everything gets worse and worse for the hero up to the crisis, then at that point something happens that completely reverses the situation.

In Shakespeare's "The Merchant of Venice," the merchant Antonio borrows 3,000 ducats from Shylock. The loan arrangement stipulates that if Antonio failed to repay the money at the appointed time, he would have to forfeit one pound of flesh — taken from nearest Antonio's heart — to Shylock.

Antonio runs into a streak of bad luck, and becomes unable to repay the debt. Friends offer Shylock thrice the loan. But Shylock is adamant. His hatred for Antonio is so venomous that he will have only his pound of flesh.

The matter is brought to court. Portia, Antonio's lawyer, pleads for mercy — "mercy drops as the gentle rain



**WORD
FOR
SUNDAY**

from heaven." Shylock is unmoved. She offers triple the loan. Shylock refuses to budge. He urges the law. It's on his side. "Bare thy breast," he bids Antonio, as he strops his razor with devil's delight. As he lifts the blade to slice off his pound of flesh, Portia halts him.

On a legal technicality, Portia reverses the entire situation. The bond stipulates "a pound of flesh" — but no blood! Furthermore, Portia points out

that Venetian law decrees that any alien seeking the life of a Venetian forfeits his own life and property.

This is the crisis in the play: the critical point that turns things right. Not Antonio, but Shylock, is now in jeopardy.

So it was in our Lord's life according to St. Mark. Everything seemed to be going His way. When He reached Caesarea Philippi, even Peter confessed Him to be the Messiah. But then, at that very moment, the picture changed.

Messiah He was, but not at all the kind of one Peter and the others had thought — not a political, regal Messiah, but a suffering Messiah! Horrors. His back, they would beat. His cheeks and beard, they would pluck. His face, they would buffet and spit upon (R1). This could not be. And Peter, who had been the first to glimpse His Messiahship, was the first to repudiate His Messianic mission.

So often we have faith in a truncated Christ: a God of glory, but not a God of gall. St. James speaks of practical faith (R2). Practical faith is not simply accepting formulas: "Thou art the Christ." Practical faith is a way of

life — of living in conformity to the Gospels. If faith without works is dead, so, too, are works without faith.

Pagans got around this by performing religious rituals independent of moral behavior. From its contact with God, however, Israel realized that liturgy should be the expression of moral behavior. Whenever Israel divorced the two, her prophets fulminated, "This people honoreth me with their lips." They insisted that their lives must emulate the God they worshiped. To worship a God of love and justice and mercy and goodness, they, too, had to love, be just, merciful and good!

Jesus simplified the law to one word: love! Love defies codification. It has innumerable facets; love is caring, sharing, bearing, hearing, reaching out to the need of others. Love demands self-giving, self-denial, self-renunciation — a suffering Messiah. Because one man did this, and He was God, His love makes all other such loves done in Him, with Him and through Him, salvific too.

The work of faith and the faith that works is to love without limits like Him whom Peter called "the Messiah."

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Dr. Joyce Little: Trinitarianism and egalitarianism
Mr. John Regan Jr.: RICO and abortion protest
Mother Mary Agnes Donovan: The sisters of life, a new religious order promoting life

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