



Twenty second Sunday Ordinary Time 2006

Deuteronomy 4: 1-2, 6-8 James 1:17-27 Mark 7: 1-8, 14-15, 21-23

All the readings for today have the common theme of law. There are commandments to be observed if we are to be faithful to God. Law with a capital "L" is the Torah.

To think of it as a collection of laws is to miss its wonder. Torah is about witness or testimony. Is God good? Look at the evidence, judge for yourself. Observances or commandments are to help us be worthy witnesses to the goodness, mercy, love and justice of God. This is not the way we generally think about law. We often see it as something, which gets in the way of our pursuing our own aims and desires.

External laws are only necessary if we live in community. The hermit in the desert needs only the law of the heart.

Problems occur if laws themselves become more important than the people whose lives they are designed to serve and protect. If we remove the first three of the traditional Ten Commandments, which have application to a group founded on belief in God, the other seven commandments are the minimum for basic community living.

The reading from Deuteronomy goes beyond a set of observances to provide for a way of life. It focuses attention on the benefits that come from a life of fidelity. You will have life, and you will take possession of the land. Your life of observance will be evidence of your wisdom and intelligence. You will be an example to all. Through your way of living others will come to know God.

The passage from the letter of James belongs to the later part of the first century of the Christian era. The exhortation of the writer is to live a life that reflects its nature as gift from God. Two areas are highlighted; anger which results in offences against the justice of God and intemperateness which blocks the word of God from taking root and flourishing in acts of mercy.

The image of the mirror, which is omitted from the set reading, is intriguing. For some people a mirror is a convenience, to check appearance, for others it is a reminder of who they are and what they aspire to be.

If the word of God is something you listen to occasionally but never put into practice then you are like the first person. The second type of person carries the image of what they are called to be and this effects their actions throughout the day.

The gospel shows us what happens if observance becomes separated from the heart and mind and spirit. It is not the observance itself that Jesus criticises but the attitude of the “law observers” who see their position as one that enables them to judge others.

The other criticism is about making human laws sacred. He accuses these people of setting aside God’s way for human ways. Jesus uses one custom, that of hand washing before eating, to expand on the theme. Of course it is important to observe the rules of hygiene but if there is to be an *emphasis* on purity, surely the most important thing is purity of heart.

The “evils” listed are products of the human spirit. They are the result of a disordered spirit and are the responsibility of the person who indulges in them. They don’t come from outside (someone else’s fault) but from the deep recesses of the heart. To take responsibility for ones own thoughts, words and deeds is the beginning of moral adulthood.

As adults in the Christian community we need to reflect on our religious laws from time to time to check that they promote growth and freedom and do not quench the spirit. Healthy community living promotes and serves the wholeness of each individual.

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