

22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time, B Cycle, 2015

1st Reading: Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-8 "Observe the commandments of the Lord, your God."

Responsorial Psalm 15: "The one who does justice will live in the presence of the Lord."

2nd Reading: James 1:17-18, 21b-22, 27 "Be doers of the word and not hearers only."

Gospel: Mark 7:1-23 "God's commandment is above human tradition."

♪♪ *Seek ye first the Kingdom of God, and God's righteousness.
And all these things shall be added unto you, Allelu, Alleluia* ♪♪

I hear that song in today's readings. I hear a word that comforts the afflicted and afflicts the comfortable. My friend Pat the porcupine is an image of Jesus the prophet. He or she takes care of those in the family, but defends any attackers with sharp quills. Pat is a bit prickly.

I hear words of wisdom rather than legalism. The promise is clear in the words I sang - words from the mouth of Jesus, - but if we really listen to his words in today's Gospel, we may need to ask some hard questions.

Are we here at Mass today just to keep the letter of the law - like the Pharisees did - or because the choice to be here expresses and strengthens who I am as a follower of Christ?

St Francis used to say to his followers, "*You only know as much as you do.*" We don't think ourselves into a new way of living; we live ourselves into a new way of thinking. To follow the way of Jesus is about what we do, how we live, much more than what we know and how we think.

The 1st reading talks about keeping the commandments, not just knowing how to list them. The Responsorial Psalm sings, "The one who *does* justice will live in the presence of the Lord." In the 2nd reading, James writes: "Be *doers* of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves."

If you really want to know whether the values of Jesus influence the way you live, take a good look at your calendar, your checkbook, & the speed dial on your phone. They will tell you how you spend your time and money & who you spend your time with and your money on? That is where the rubber hits the road -

and that is where we are called to live the Gospel.



The Pharisees tried to seek the kingdom of God by keeping all the rules. The problem was that sometimes they were seeking their *own* way to righteousness rather than God's. They treated their righteousness as their possession rather than God's gift.

In the Gospel passage they give themselves away when they condemn those who don't do it their way - starting with the disciples of Jesus.

The Pharisees were mostly from the city, where water was available, but the country people of Galilee - the home of most of Jesus' first disciples - found it much more difficult to keep the rules about washing because water was not as easily available. But Jesus really gets upset because the Pharisees are condemning the poor - starting with his own followers.

The Pharisees thought they were living their religion, but Jesus challenges them to look inside to see what they were really seeking, and then to discern what *God* was calling them to do.

If Religion is only a habit, something we pay attention to once a week because that's the way we have always done it, we need to listen to James in the second reading. He puts this teaching of Jesus into clear language: ... *"Religion that is pure and undefiled in the eyes of God our Father is this: coming to the help of orphans and widows when they need it and to keep oneself uncontaminated by the world."*

Jesus and James make it clear that God has a special place for the hungry and the homeless and the sick. They challenge us the way Pope Francis does in our time. The Pope is echoing Jesus and James when he calls us to treat immigrants as members of our family, to find ways to make it possible for veterans & others to have a decent place to live & to care for the earth which is our home.

James gets even more specific in the verses that are not in the reading we have just heard. If you listen to God's word and do not put it into practice, you are like someone who looks into a mirror at the face they were born with and then goes off and forgets what they look like. Then he gets personal, and writes: *"if you do not control your tongue and imagine you are devout, you are deceiving yourself. Your worship is pointless."*

The Pharisees tried to put the spirit of the Law of Moses into a set of rules, 613 of them. But sometimes they put the letter of the law above the spirit of the law. Jesus catches them putting their own rules *above* the command of God. I included verses omitted in the Lectionary in the Gospel reading because they tell the story of how the Pharisees allowed people to neglect the love they owed their own parents (one of the 10 commandments Moses was given by God) in order to contribute more money to the Temple.

Now, Jesus was not against washing or dedicating our possessions to God. In fact, it is a human reality that we must express our faith in God in external ways and the customs of the Jewish people around washing and eating have even been proven to be good hygiene by later science.

What he says is clearly that *God's law is above human rules and customs*, and, when there is a conflict, the human law is less important. As one of my mentors used to say, "God is absolute, everything else is relative."

The Gospel today is an expression of what the Church calls the "Hierarchy of truth." Simply put, it means that some truths are more important than others, and when I have to make a choice between two good things, I am called to choose the higher law.

I remember when my Dad had suffered a stroke and my mom was taking care of him. Sometimes she chose to stay home & care for my Dad rather than go to Church because she was fulfilling a higher law than the one that required us to be in Church.

In our culture, we see the conflict between human law and God's command in some very painful examples. Both abortion & capital punishment are legal here in the US. Yet, the commandment of God is "Thou shalt not kill" and the teaching of Jesus is "Love one another as I have loved you."

We are rightly concerned about our own rights as Americans, but when we argue for laws that allow even the mentally ill to buy a gun and shoot someone to make a point we are acting like the Pharisees in Jesus' time.

If you have ever watched "Law and Order", the difference between the law written on our hearts by God and the human laws we have created to express them is often painfully clear, and, in fact, is what makes for a good drama.

In the history of religion, the *human* desire to convert others has sometimes overwhelmed the *divine* truth that we are all children of one God. We see it both in the Christian crusades and the Islamic Holy War - which deny the core teachings of the Koran & the Bible in the name of gaining control over land or people.

What does this mean for us here today?

In today's Gospel, Jesus makes it clear that nothing outside me can separate me from God or join me to Christ. Only my own choices can do that. The teaching of Christ calls us to think about why we make the choices we do - and about the consequences of our choices.

It's not the *fact* of being divorced or married that separates me or joins me to Christ, it is the choices we make from within our situation.

It's not the *state* of being straight or gay that joins me to or separates me from Christ, it is the choices I make as the person I am.

The Spirit of Christ gives me the light to look inside and see whether my behavior and attitudes seek God's way first. The same Spirit, through the Eucharist we celebrate today, gives us the power to change what needs to be changed. And when I do act more like a Pharisee than a disciple, I can always turn to Christ for forgiveness - because he is Lord of all that is, and all of who I am and what I do.

I leave you with the questions I hear in today's Scriptures:

Am I here at Mass today because being here expresses and strengthens who I am as a follower of Christ?

Do the values of Jesus influence the way I live, the way I spend my money, the way I schedule my days and weeks?

Does the Spirit of God guide the way I look at others & myself?

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