

Commentary on Sunday Scripture – Year B

Twenty-second Sunday of Ordinary Time

First reading (Deuteronomy 4.1-2, 6-8)

The Gift of the Law

What was special about the Law laid down for Israel? Many of the laws are known also from law codes of neighbouring peoples, written on stone or clay tablets and recently discovered; some are more primitive, some more sophisticated. Running through them all, however, are two threads.

First, if you want to be the People of God, this is the way you must live, to be like him and keep company with him and be his very own. So the Law was a testimony of love, and obedience to it is an expression of grateful love: 'Be holy as I am holy.'

A second thread is respect for human dignity, and especially that of the poor and needy. In other law codes, nobles have more honour and privilege than commoners, free men and women than slaves. In Israel, all have equal respect, and every faithful Israelite must remember that God's protecting hand hovers over those who are in any misfortune: created in the image of God, you must treat the widow, the orphan and the immigrant as I treated you when you were strangers in Egypt. All this was enshrined in the written Law, interpreted by the oral traditions of the elders - not always so successfully, as we see in the gospel.

Question:

What have love and holiness in common?

Second reading:

(James 1.17-18, 21-22, 27)

Putting the Word into Action

For the next few weeks we will be reading the Letter of James, the longest of the seven so-called 'catholic' epistles, written not to any particular person or community but to the Church universal, throughout the world (which is what 'catholic' means). The real author is unknown, but it purports to come from James, the first leader of the Jerusalem community after Peter's departure. As we know from Paul's letter to the Galatians, James continued to value the Jewish way of life and observance of the Law, even while following Jesus. The Letter accordingly contains many practical lessons about fulfilling the Law of Christ, stressing especially - as at the end of this reading - the need to care for the poor and the weak.

It is full of striking, pithy images, like that of looking in the mirror and then going off and forgetting what one saw (verses omitted in the middle of this reading). The author applies this to care of the poor: it is no good glancing at the Law and then claiming to be religious while neglecting those in need. Religion consists not in 'piety' but in putting one's beliefs into action.

Question:

Do you prefer to live by law, where everything is cut and dried, or by the challenge of the Beatitudes?

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Gospel:

(Mark 7.1-8, 14-15, 21-23)

Clean and Unclean

Legal observance has its dangers, for it is sometimes easy to obey the law exactly while forgetting its purpose. It is no good driving doggedly just below the speed limit while endangering life and limb. The more exact the laws, the greater the temptation to manipulate them to evade their purpose.

The Pharisees were as aware of this danger of distortion as is the modern stickler for exact observance. But the Pharisees have a bad press in the gospels because, at the time the gospels were written, hostility between Christians and Pharisaic Judaism were at their height. During Jesus' own lifetime their opposition was not so obvious. For instance, they had no share in the Passion and Crucifixion of Jesus.

In any case, Jesus' own final saying here, while it may apply to the Jewish ritual law, has much wider application than the observance of Jewish rules for clean food. It is more akin to the saying in Matthew: 'A sound tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor a rotten tree bear good fruit. By their fruits you shall know them.' A person's true qualities are seen by that person's actions; their true intentions and character, what comes from the heart, becomes visible in their words and actions.

Question:

Is there any danger in Christianity of a 'dead' obedience to law?
