

## Trinity XIV – 22<sup>nd</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year B

Today's Gospel takes us straight into the rather sensitive issue of Jesus' attitude to the Jewish Law. I say 'sensitive' because it is so easy for Christians to separate Jesus from his Jewish heritage and portray him as 'one of us' and not one of 'them'. We have to remind sometimes that Jesus was actually Jewish.

Jesus would have read with pride and appreciation the praise of the Law set out in the Old Testament reading (Deut 4:1-8), and understood it to be what the Hebrew word 'Torah', which we inadequately translate 'law', really means: *not primarily a legal code but 'a light that shows the way'. Like a torch that lights up a path on a dark night, for Jewish people the Torah is a body of wisdom and enlightenment showing how to live as the covenant people of God.*

The fundamental purpose of the 'Torah' – the Law; was to put God's chosen people in right relationship with him and with one another! Jesus being God, understood this divine purpose of the Law and the Tradition. Whenever, the interpretation and practise of the law and various traditions, became an obstacle to fulfill this fundamental purpose of the Divine Law, Jesus spoke against it.

When it comes to the subject of Tradition, people's attitudes vary dramatically. Some people have an affectionate loyalty to traditional ways of doing things. They feel secure when they adapt their own values and behaviour to received wisdom, religiously or culturally, reassured by the knowledge that they are following in the footsteps of many others gone before them. As G.K. Chesterton remarked in his book *Orthodoxy*, "*Tradition means giving votes to the most obscure of all classes, our ancestors It is the democracy of the dead*"

Other people feel fettered by human tradition, whether it be cultural or religious, and call for fresh approaches to fresh situations. For them, much of tradition is petrified opinion – a spent force that should be confined to the realm

of once upon a time. They might consult tradition, but they do not feel obliged to stay within its confines. For them Tradition is a guide, not so much a guard!

In today's Gospel Jesus is accused of breaching traditions of the elders. As I have said earlier, Jesus is not critical of the Jewish law as such; what he challenges is the addition to it of further prescriptions and customs that were not part of the original revelation and which in his view could sometimes work against the true purpose of the Law of God – right relationship with God and Man.

These additional traditions were particularly preserved and guarded by the Pharisees. Again, let us not be too hard on this group. They were historically a lay group who sought to help the Jewish people live out their vocation to be the 'holy people of God' (Lev 20:26) in the mixed society which was the Palestine of Jesus' day. This sense of 'holiness' was reinforced through a host of washings and other rituals of cleanliness which were obligatory after contact with outsiders in the market and other public spheres. In due course, the rituals of holiness originally intended only for the priests and Levites came to be extended to the people as a whole. Observing them, they could live out their high vocation to be a 'nation of priests' in the world (Exod 19:6).

*The intention, then, was good but, as so often happens with religious tradition, attention can be focused on the external rituals to the neglect of the inner conversion of heart central to all relationship with God. When Jesus criticises the Pharisees on this matter he is not really bringing something radically new but standing within a firm prophetic tradition, shown by his quotation of Isaiah 29:13:*

***'This people honours me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me' (v. 6). For him, everything goes back to the heart. No amount of external ritual***

*is of any use if it obscures or distorts the primary truth that holiness is ultimately about conversion of heart.*

The body of traditions which the Pharisees had erected around the basic Torah suggested that ‘uncleanness’ was something that came from outside and threatened to defile the basic holiness of the people of God. Therefore, it had to be warded off by washings and other rituals. Jesus brought a radical transformation to this concept of purity before God: it is not ritual actions that make us pure, but what arises within a person’s heart; and purity or impurity depend on the condition of his or her heart.

Jesus clearly had a different view of the way holiness ‘worked’. Holiness belongs essentially to God. Human holiness came from being in contact with God – **something that begins in the heart.** Jesus, who was supremely in contact with God, went about touching ‘unclean’ persons like lepers and associating with ‘tax collectors and sinners.’ *He* did not ‘catch’ uncleanness from them, as though it were a contagious disease. Rather, the ‘flow’ was the other way round: *they* ‘caught’ holiness and healing from him. Drawn into the sphere of holiness constituted by his person, they were restored to full citizenship in the holy people of God.

The Pharisees could do nothing with people considered ‘unholy’ like this, save try to keep them at a distance by being exclusive. Jesus understood true holiness to be essentially inclusive rather than exclusive. It had to do with God’s reaching out rather than withdrawing to a sacred inner space.

So, Jesus insists, since holiness is primarily a matter of the heart if you want to know whether a person is holy or not, see what comes out of their heart.

The list of vices towards the end of the Gospel is a kind of check-list – to which we could probably add a few more examples relevant for our time.

Therefore, all Catholic and Orthodox Christians who have inherited the Sacred Tradition in the context of their own cultural context need to remind themselves from time to time the purpose of all that they do in Church; their various rituals, religious practices and devotions – Right relationship with God and with others – Do we encounter God in Jesus Christ? Does our worship deepen our love for God and Man? Have our hearts become hardened, so that God cannot get in?

This is what James emphasises in the Epistle, when he virtually defines **‘pure, undefiled religion’** as **‘coming to the aid of orphans and widows in their distress, and to keeping oneself unstained by the world’** – meaning preserving oneself not from contact with people, or certain food, but from an undiscerning acceptance of the popular views and values of this world, that keep changing from generation to another. Let us be encouraged in our resolve to have a heart for Jesus, his vision and values, who fulfills the Law and the Prophets in his person.