

**ECHOING GOD’S WORD
IN THE
CATHOLIC FAITH COMMUNITY**

**TWENTY-SECOND SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME
September 1, 2024**

SCRIPTURES:

Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-8
James 1:17-18, 21-22, 27
Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

Keep God’s word; add nothing to it.
Do the word you speak.
God’s commandments come before all others.

READ THE SCRIPTURES:

Read the Scriptures carefully in your group beginning with the Gospel. Take a few minutes in silence to hear the Lord speaking to the heart. Remember that the word of God in the Bible is primarily addressed to the Church Community. What does God want the community to hear today?

SCRIPTURE BACKGROUND:

Deuteronomy:

The Book of Deuteronomy, edited and reedited many times, perhaps dates back, in its basic form, to the seventh century before the Common Era. It is the “Second Law” or the second articulation of the teachings and guidance given by God for his people. The Law or Torah for the Jews meant many things: revelation of God’s will for his people, a code of conduct that would provide a unique identity for the people of Israel, a means of getting close to God. Surely it was considered most sacred, not to be tampered with, any more than God was to be tampered with. Originally, Torah referred to the “10 Words.” Eventually, it came to mean the Five Books of Moses.

James:

There are five different men named James in the New Testament. The one to whom this letter is attributed was thought in ancient times to be “James, the brother of the Lord,” who was head of the Jerusalem community until his early martyrdom. But that authorship is unlikely, since this letter is the work of a very literate Greek-speaking Jew who does not represent any of the rigid Jewishness of the “brother of the Lord” James. This letter was probably written late in the first or early in the second century of the Common Era. The message (for the next four weeks) will focus on the “living up to the word which we profess.” Authentic worship of God requires that we do the works of God: taking care of the helpless in their distress and keeping oneself unspotted by the world, whatever that means!

Mark:

Originally, Jewish concerns about clean and unclean food had been based primarily on concerns for personal and community hygiene. Some foods were not safe to eat in an environment that did not know anything about bacteria and did not have access to refrigeration in order to retard the development of these organisms. Religious laws about food were an effective way to make sure that people did not eat what was unsafe.

With time, the prohibitions on foods evolved so that the laws were enforced for their own sakes and not for the sake of good health. Religious “purity” laws became badges of identity, something like not eating meat on Fridays was for Catholics before Vatican II. Even when it became safe to eat certain shellfish, for example, most Jews continued to abstain for religious reasons.

The problem Jesus seems to have with these observances was that they appeared to have become more important than the spiritual values behind and around these laws. Not putting certain foods into the mouth became more important than the harmful words that came out of the mouth. Jesus refers to the heart as the source of personal sin, rather than what we put into our stomachs.

Hand washing was required only for priests about to perform some ritual duties. This had been extended to laypersons who came into contact with Gentiles. Such was the problem for the Jewish members of the Christian community that included many Gentiles at the time this Gospel was written. Mark reached back into the tradition to quote the words of Jesus about all purifications.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What role do religious rituals play in your life? Do you still genuflect before entering your pew at church? To whom do you genuflect? To the wall on the left or on the right? Is your attention directed to the Lord Jesus present in the Blessed Sacrament in the tabernacle? Why do you genuflect if the Eucharist is reserved in a chapel entirely separate from the space for the assembly? Merely out of habit?

2. Discuss the moral code taught by Jesus. The “wicked designs” that come from the human heart: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, envy, blasphemy, arrogance, an ‘obtuse spirit (?)’ What does he mean by saying that these actions originate in the human heart? What is to be done to bring better actions out of the heart? Do you take care to keep these things out of your heart so that they will not pass into your behavior?

3. What have you found that is positive about religious rituals? What about kneeling for personal prayer; standing for communal prayer? Making the sign of the cross? Using holy water as a reaffirmation of one’s baptism? Extending a sign of peace before holy Communion? Holding hands during the Lord’s Prayer at Mass? (!!!) What rituals do you shun and why? What rituals contribute to the effectiveness of your prayer?

PRAYER

**Lord, we pray that we may honor you,
not only with our lips
but with the whole power of our lives.**

CATHOLIC DOCTRINE

Fundamentalist Christians love to throw at us Catholics the words of Jesus from today's Gospel, quoting from the Prophet Isaiah, "Empty is the reverence they do me, because they teach as dogmas mere human precepts." And Jesus goes on to say, on his own authority, "You disregard God's commandment and cling to what is human tradition." Of course, we trigger off this quotation when in our teachings we say that "tradition" also contains God's revelation, not just the written word of the Bible: Bible and tradition. So, we are accused of substituting human tradition for God's precepts.

I have no easy answer to these accusations. We are dealing here with words used as weapons. We can shift meanings in the heart of the argument and end up making unfair representations of each other's positions. Of course, Catholics do not substitute human traditions for God's commandments.

It would be more accurate if we were accused of adding to God's law. There, I would suggest that we plead guilty! And then, I would suggest that we offer justification for this so-called adding. The fact of the matter is that the Church believes that it has been given the authority to act in the name of Christ and to develop and to apply the commandments of God to ever-changing situations, just as Jesus himself did to the situations of his time. The Catholic Church truly believes that Jesus Christ continues to teach through the ministry of the Church in the power of the Holy Spirit.

In the Acts of the Apostles, we read: "And Jesus continued to work through all" even after his ascension into heaven. Concerning what to do with the circumcision of the Gentiles, the assembly of the Church at Jerusalem said, "We and the Holy Spirit have decided...." Surely, there is precedent in the New Testament itself to the Church to go beyond the literal word of God's law and the specific teaching of Jesus in his earthly life.

But, sacred tradition is something quite different from mere human tradition. It is unfair on the part of Protestants to accuse us of substituting. The tradition upon which the Church draws to articulate the faith as it is proposed today means that whole heritage of experience that the Church has had through the ages, under the divine guidance of the Holy Spirit, to maintain loyalty to Jesus Christ and his teachings.

The Catechism: # 84, 97

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