

Twenty-Second Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year B

There is a sound and level-headed presentation of law and instruction in today's readings. Meaning and intention are underlined as important for a mature approach to guidelines for personal integrity and community standards of living.

Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-8 This book was so named because it contains a second rendition and analysis of the laws that are first presented in the book of Exodus. Deuteronomy is Greek for second law (*deutero* = second; *nomos* = law). It was compiled and edited a long time after the death of Moses but it is presented as the last instructions of the great man to his people. In effect, it is a summary of the legacy of Moses.

The setting of today's reading is Moses addressing the people of Israel and teaching them how they are to conduct their future life in the new land in which they have just arrived. His central point is that their future prosperity will depend entirely on their conformity with the terms of their covenant with God.

What stands out in today's extract is that nothing can be added to or subtracted from the laws Moses handed on. This is actually a clue to the fact that Deuteronomy was written as a reform law that was addressing crises that occurred in the 700s BCE. These crises may be summarised as (i) a falling away from the worship of YHWH and an embracing of the Canaanite deities, (ii) a breakdown of family solidarity brought about by social change and the move from a purely agricultural barter economy to a money economy, and (iii) corruption in the political and judicial systems. This reality backdrop is just further evidence that everything in Scripture was written in response to experience. All biblical writers were reflecting and often allegorising on real events.

The final remark of the author is that the people of Israel can consider themselves more fortunate than other nations because they have a God who actually cares about their welfare and takes the trouble to guide their lives with growth-promoting laws and instructions.

Psalms 14/15 This song reinforces the message of the reading from Deuteronomy, namely, the person who lives with integrity will always be a welcome guest in the tent of the Lord. This is a powerful message in a society that highly values the virtue of hospitality. People would seriously avoid behaviour that would render them unwelcome in the tent of another. The psalmist is emphasising that honest people who lead lives of justice and good character are welcome in the tent of the Lord and will surely delight in divine hospitality.

James 1:17-18, 21-22, 27

If we do dishonest and hurtful things we are damaging our inner person

James is exhorting his community to avoid all forms of wickedness and self-serving negativity and to pursue the values of wholeness, graciousness and respect for others. Most translations render this recommendation as having the power to 'save our souls'. But it misses the heart of the Greek original, which has the sense of preserving the integrity of our inner self. For most Christians the expression 'save our souls' has to do with finishing the course and getting to heaven. But this is not what James means here. He is saying that people living according to the values that are advocated in Scripture can safeguard the vitality of their inner self that is made up of mind, thoughts, feelings, heart. The implication here is that if we do dishonest and hurtful things we are damaging our inner person and are not advancing our growth to maturity.

The reading finishes with a direct reference to the age-old practice of extending graciousness to the disadvantaged, represented here by the widow and the orphan. Going a long way back in the history of the people of Israel the practice of extending kindness to the widow, the orphan and the refugee is embedded in Jewish tradition as something that would gain favour with the Lord (Exodus 22:22, Deuteronomy 10:18). Jesus echoed the very same sentiment with his reference to the criteria for divine judgment:

Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you...for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a

stranger and you welcomed me. I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me (Matthew 25:34-36).

Notice that none of this has to do with religion as most people understand 'religion'. It has everything to do with seeing Christ in the people we deal with in life. It is about reaching out to others with generosity and openness and not being scarred and hampered by the inability to accept difference and rejoice in the variety of creation.

Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23 Here is a reading that displays the level-headed thinking and sheer common sense of Jesus. Mark has previously drawn attention to the disapproval of Jesus displayed by influential Pharisees and other Jewish religious leaders. He begins this section with some background, for his non-Jewish Christian readers, to the Jewish customs of washing hands before eating and washing cooking and food utensils. Remember Mark was written around 71 AD and a good many Christian communities were made up of a mixture of Jews and non-Jews.

The complaint of the Pharisees about the disciples not conforming to the cleanliness customs is answered with a broadside from Jesus. He is obviously aware of their motives and highlights the tension that occurs also in the other gospels, namely, the Pharisees and other leaders are scrupulous about adhering to human generated customs but can ride rough-shod over requirements of the Torah. Jesus doesn't answer their question but goes on the attack to expose the hypocrisy of the Pharisees' position. In the polished style of masterly Jewish debate Jesus refers to Scripture with a direct quote from Isaiah (29:13).

This is a brilliant insight into Jesus' practice of establishing priorities in life based on sound values.

Around 701 BC the Assyrians advanced on Jerusalem and the prophet Isaiah warned that the corruption and hypocrisy in Jerusalem's political, social and religious leadership would likely be the cause of the city's downfall. The Jerusalemites were going through the motions of prayer and ritual sacrifices but their brazen immorality gave the lie to their superficial religion. In a similar vein Jesus accused the religious leaders of his day of putting human traditions ahead of the Torah that was handed down from Moses. This is a brilliant insight into Jesus' practice of establishing priorities in life based on sound values.

He then illustrated his point by affirming that nothing going into a person can make them unclean. It is what emerges from us, our words and actions, that demonstrate the goodness or disorder in our character. Jesus offers a sample list of evils that emerge from a damaged personality with a twisted mind. Notice that these are all relational misdeeds that harm and lead to the destruction of human relationships.

In this gospel extract Jesus is encouraging us to name and establish our priorities, to have a mature perspective on what things are important and what issues are merely froth on the top. We can all have a notional awareness of the dangers in an inordinate need for control, lacking due respect for others, criticising, blaming, not accepting difference and so on, but it takes a firm set of healthy priorities and buckets of respect to nourish our relationships with compassion, good humour and emotional regulation.

We do better to inquire first rather than judge.

Anonymous

Most of us spend too much time on what is urgent and not enough time on what is important.

Stephen Covey. Author of *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*

Knock knock

Who's there?

Wooden shoe.

Wooden shoe who?

Wooden shoe you like to hear another joke?

Knock, knock.

Who's there?

Dishes.

Dishes who?

Dishes the police, open up!

Laurie Woods