

TWENTY-SECOND SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Sept. 1-2, 2012 (Labour Day Weekend)

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

Introduction

A man accused of robbery was meeting with his lawyer. The lawyer said to him: "I don't understand you. You tell me you stole money from the grocery store because you were hungry. Why didn't you just steal some food?" The man said: "Because I've got my pride. I believe in paying for what I eat." One of the industrial barons of the 19th century, the famous J.P. Morgan, who was often ruthless in his business practices, was meeting one day with his lawyer. The lawyer told him that something he wanted to do was against the law. Morgan answered: "I don't pay you to tell me what the law says I can't do. I pay you to find me a way so I *can* do it." That is an attitude that we too can pick up. We can come to look on law simply as an *obstacle* to be overcome rather than as a *friend* showing us the wise way to go. So we need to listen to what today's *readings* tell us about God's Law.

They Tell Us that God's Law is a Great Blessing to Us

The Book of Psalms is the prayer book of the Bible. Psalm 119, the longest by far of the psalms, was recited regularly by every devout Jew. Each one of its 176 verses praises *God's Law*. This may surprise us. Why would anyone *praise* law?

Our question arises because we tend to think of law as something imposed on us by the *will* of another. But the correct definition of law is that it is *an ordinance of reason*. Each of the Ten Commandments shows us what reason, or good sense requires if we are going to live a full, human and happy life. The commandments are the embodiment of wisdom. They are like the owner's manual you get with your new automatic washer. Follow it, and you'll be delighted with the machine's performance. Neglect it, and the machine will probably chew up your clothes. So God's Law is a real blessing in our lives.

They Tell Us that Some Laws are More Important than Others

Fifty years ago, if you walked into a restaurant on a Friday, you could pick out the Catholics quite easily; they were the ones eating fish. Today you can easily pick out the Old Order Mennonites; they are the ones with the distinct style of dress. Human communities tend to identify themselves by particular practices they follow or by the way they dress. In today's *Gospel*, Jesus refers to the distinctive rules the Pharisees called on Jews to observe, rules such as ritual washing before entering the Temple.

There is nothing wrong with having special customs or types of dress, to mark our belonging to a particular community of people. However we need to keep such things in perspective. The point Jesus makes today is that there are far more important things that should identify us as His followers, and that is the way we live, speak and treat one

another. We sometimes sing the song: “They’ll know we are Christians by our love.” That’s the correct idea, although the word “love” tends to be rather vague. It might be better to say: “They’ll know we are Christians by our compassion, our respect for others and our pursuit of justice”. These features should stand out in us, no matter what we are wearing, or what social customs we follow.

Labour Day weekend is an opportune time to ask ourselves how seriously we pursue justice, not simply justice for ourselves but social justice, in other words, the kind of laws, institutions and relationships that are needed to sustain the common good. Most Catholics are very ready to practice charity toward those in need. We donate to food banks, for example, and we donate clothing to assist refugees and migrant workers. This is good. However we need to ask ourselves what sort of laws we need to demand, and what kind of institutions we need to promote so that there won’t be so great a need for food banks or clothing depots. What we require are economic policies that make genuine employment possible for all who want it, laws that guarantee a just wage, and purchasing habits that support the businesses that provide work for our people. “Purchasing is always a moral act”, Pope Benedict says in his latest encyclical letter.

They Tell Us We Need to Observe God’s Law Inwardly as Well as Outwardly

Sometimes on occasions like Hallowe’en people wear masks, and we have to try and figure out who that *really* is underneath the mask. In Our Lord’s day, actors in Greek dramas wore masks to indicate the character they were playing. From two Greek words referring to the person under the mask, we get our word “hypocrite”, which means someone putting on the appearance of being one kind of person, while being a different kind of person underneath. Jesus says in today’s *Gospel*, “This people honours me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.”

There is a temptation for us to pay attention to the externals of law, but to neglect the inner disposition, the heart. Our body could be in Church, as the third commandment requires, but our mind might be a thousand miles away. Worse still, we might be people who say our prayers, but ignore our political responsibilities, or do little to make our world, our community and our workplace more just and more respectful of human dignity.

Conclusion

So we need to look on God’s law, especially the commandments, not as our enemy, not as a killjoy, but as our friend, showing us how to live a fully human life. That should encourage us to embrace God’s law, not grudgingly but with our whole heart. It should also lead us to be people who agitate for good human laws, ones that reflect God’s law by safeguarding human dignity and promoting the unique value of human work.