

22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time – Cycle B

Note: Where a Scripture text is underlined in the body of this discussion, it is recommended that the reader look up and read that passage.

1st Reading - Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-8

On the plains of Moab, God charges Moses, now close to death, once more to proclaim the Law which he received through the revelation on Mount Sinai. This proclamation is contained in the fifth and last book of the Pentateuch, is called in Hebrew *had-debharim* (the words) and in Greek *deuteronomion* (second law). Moses is addressing a new generation of Israelites, all of whom would have been under the age of 20 when the Exodus began. By having the Law restated again, Yahweh is reminding them that His covenant with Israel is made with all generations (29:13), both present and future: it is an everlasting covenant. This proclamation could almost be called an encyclical of Pope Moses – there is no new revelation, only restatement with, in some cases, a relaxation of the requirements.

Today's reading is taken from Moses' first address and is called "The Prologue to the Promulgation of the Law to All Israel."

4:1 Now, Israel, hear

Hear (Hebrew: *sema*) A standard opening for a liturgical address.

the statutes

(Hebrew: *hoq*) A positive decree of Law

and decrees

(Hebrew: *mispat*) A judicial decision as a basis for case law. Moses is preeminently a teacher and this is instruction that observance of the law is an essential condition for the possession of the promised land, Canaan is seen as a source of temptation.

which I am teaching you to observe, that you may live, and may enter in and take possession of the land which the LORD, the God of your fathers, is giving you. ² In your observance of the commandments of the LORD, your God, which I enjoin upon you, you shall not add to what I command you nor subtract from it.

This is a prohibition against changing the mutual obligations of the covenant. In Revelation 22:18-19 a similar prohibition occurs which is sometimes used by fundamentalists to attack Catholic Traditions (such as the perpetual virginity and assumption of Mary) which

are not specifically mentioned in Holy Scripture. That prohibition applies only to the book of Revelation like this one applies only to the statement of the requirements of the covenant. If the prohibition were more far reaching than this, the Bible would end here and there would be no books of the prophets – or a New Testament.

6 Observe them carefully, for thus will you give evidence of your wisdom and intelligence

The Hebrew word *hokmah*, translated here as “wisdom,” is usually translated as “prudence”. It is translated as wisdom here because wisdom eventually became identified with the law (Sirach 24; Proverbs 8:22-36). This may also be an appeal to the ruling class of that day.

to the nations, who will hear of all these statutes and say, ‘This great nation is truly a wise and intelligent people.’⁷ For what great nation is there that has gods so close to it as the LORD, our God, is to us whenever we call upon him?

This theology of “the God who is near” is connected with the ideology of the ark of the covenant as the center of God’s active presence to the people; He comes near in divine manifestation, which is intimately associated with the ark of the covenant. The ark is also the political center – Israel is a “great nation.” God rescues His people when they call upon Him.

8 Or what great nation has statutes and decrees that are as just as this whole law which I am setting before you today?

2nd Reading - James 1:17-18, 21-22, 27

The name James was very common, up to five men are called James in the New Testament:

- 1) James, son of Zebedee, called “the greater” (Matthew 10:2; Luke 8:51; Acts 1:13; 12:2)
- 2) James, son of Alphaeus, also an apostle, called “the less” (Matthew 10:3; Mark 3:18; Luke 6:15; Acts 1:13)
- 3) James, “the brother of the Lord” (Galatians 1:19; Matthew 13:55, Mark 6:3)
- 4) James, apostle and Bishop of Jerusalem (Acts 12:17; 15:13; 21:18; Galatians 1:19)
- 5) James, to whom the risen Jesus appeared (1 Corinthians 15:17).

Scholars generally agree that “the brother (cousin) of the Lord” is the Bishop of Jerusalem to whom the risen Lord appeared. This narrows the field down to three Jameses: James the greater, James the less, and James the Lord’s brother and Bishop of Jerusalem.

James the greater was martyred by Herod Agrippa around A.D. 44 (Acts 12:12) and it's unlikely that he could have been the author of this letter. Regarding the two remaining Jameses, we cannot be sure that they were one and the same person but the likelihood is that they were. In fact Luke and Paul, after the death of James the greater, make reference only to one James, the Bishop of Jerusalem and brother of the Lord (Acts 12:17; Galatians 2:9,12).

In summary, it is fairly clear that the letter was written by James, the Lord's brother and Bishop of Jerusalem, who was probably also known as James the less, son of Alphaeus, listed in the Gospels as an apostle (Matthew 10:3; Mark 3:18). James the Bishop of Jerusalem was martyred around the year 62 at the instigation of the high priest, Annas II.

Our reading for today comments on our birth in God's word and appeals for us to be doers of the word.

17 [A]ll good giving and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights,

A reference to God as creator of the heavenly bodies (Genesis 1:14 ff; Psalm 136:7-9).

with whom there is no alteration or shadow caused by change.

Unlike heavenly bodies, which change position and cast shadows, there is no variation or shadow in God: no evil can be attributed to Him, but only good things.

18 He willed

It is by God's choice that we are born.

to give us birth

The Old Testament context is Deuteronomy 32:18, the New Testament context is John 1:12-13 and 1 Peter 1:23.

by the word of truth

This probably refers to the Gospel message.

that we may be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures.

The Old Testament context is Deuteronomy 18:4 which was applied by Paul to Christ (1 Corinthians 15:20), to pioneer converts (Romans 16:5; 1 Corinthians 16:15), and to the gift of the Spirit (Romans 8:23). It is envisioned that the author and recipients of this letter have already experienced the divine birth ultimately destined for all mankind.

21b [H]umbly welcome the word

(Greek: *logos*) New Testament usage means God's saving revelation, foreshadowed in the word given to the prophets and in the word that is a synonym for law (torah), but fully expressed only in Christ and the gospel.

that has been planted in you and is able to save your souls.

Acceptance of the Christian faith at baptism, including the ethical demands involved.

22 Be doers of the word

Summary of the whole epistle

and not hearers only,

This is similar to Romans 2:13. The general theme is of a "religion of deed" (see Matthew 7:24-27).

deluding yourselves.

Having a false understanding of the nature of genuine religion. To listen docilely to the word of God one needs to try to keep evil inclinations at bay. Otherwise, pride – deceiving itself with all sorts of false reasons – rebels against the word of God.

27 Religion that is pure and undefiled before God and the Father is this: to care for orphans and widows

The Old Testament often refers to widows and orphans as deserving special attention (Sirach 4:10; Psalm 68:5; 146:9; Deuteronomy 27:19) and the first Christians made arrangements for the care of widows in the early communities (Acts 6:1 ff; 9:39; 1 Timothy 5:3 ff). The title "God and the Father" is chosen in view of God's fatherly care of widows and orphans.

in their affliction and to keep oneself unstained

Pure and undefiled. These qualities, usually ritual and cultic, are appropriately applied to the practice of external works of charity and to inner integrity. No complete definition of religion is attempted here, but only an emphasis on certain aspects without which the practice of religion has no meaning.

by the world.

The word “world” is used in a degrading sense meaning opposition to God. (St. Paul uses the word in this sense in 2 Peter 2:20; John 1:10; 7:7; 16:8-11; Ephesians 2:2).

Gospel - Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

After a five week detour on the scenic route (the Gospel of John and Jesus’ Bread of Life Discourse) we return to the Gospel of Mark, rejoining it immediately after Jesus’ walking on water.

7:1 Now when the Pharisees with some scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around him,

The mention of Jerusalem shows they represent the official attitude of prominent Jewish leaders toward Jesus. The Pharisees (the name means “the ones set apart”) followed a way of life which they considered to be almost perfect. They considered their way as superior to others; affirming the resurrection of the dead, the existence of angels, and the holiness of life. They practiced sexual abstinence for periods of times and fasted twice a week, observed the paying of tithes, ceremonially cleansed their pots and cups, and recited many prayers.

2 they observed that some of his disciples ate their meals with unclean, that is, unwashed, hands.

Hands were not washed for reasons of hygiene or good manners but because the custom had religious significance: it was a rite of purification. In Exodus 30:17ff the law of God laid down how priests should wash before offering sacrifice. Jewish tradition had extended this to all Jews before every meal, in an effort to give meals a religious significance, which was reflected in the blessings which marked the start of meals. Ritual purification was a symbol of the moral purity a person should have when approaching God (Psalm 24:3 ff; 51:4,9) but the Pharisees had focused on the mere external rite. By not washing, Jesus restores the genuine meaning of these precepts of the Law, whose purpose is to teach the right way to render homage to God (John 4:24).

3 (For the Pharisees and, in fact, all Jews,

Unlike Matthew 15:1 ff, which was written for Jewish Christians, Mark adds a long explanation of the customs in question for the benefit of his gentile readers.

do not eat without carefully washing their hands, keeping the tradition of the elders.

The “tradition of the elders” is a rabbinical term for the body of unwritten laws that the Pharisees considered equally as binding as the written Torah (Galatians 1:14).

⁴ And on coming from the marketplace they do not eat without purifying themselves. And there are many other things that they have traditionally observed, the purification of cups and jugs and kettles (and beds.) ⁵ So the Pharisees and scribes questioned him, “Why do your disciples not follow the tradition of the elders but instead eat a meal with unclean hands?” ⁶ He responded, “Well did Isaiah prophesy about you hypocrites, as it is written:

Jesus doesn't answer the charge directly but cites from Isaiah 29:13 in the Septuagint form. The Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament made about 200 B.C.) differs from the Hebrew text in that it adds “teaching as doctrines human precepts” (as opposed to those of God).

‘This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; ⁷ In vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines human precepts.’ ⁸ You disregard God’s commandment but cling to human tradition.”

Even if Jesus had not cited Isaiah 29:13, this would comprise the answer to the question of verse 5. The Pharisees would have denied this charge, for they perceived themselves as making practical and concrete the teachings that were not clear from the law itself.

¹⁴ He summoned the crowd again and said to them, “Hear me, all of you, and understand.

An indication of the universality of Jesus' doctrine, implying that what follows is a mysterious revelation.

¹⁵ Nothing that enters one from outside can defile that person; but the things that come out from within are what defile.”

The truth expressed here must have been surprising to the Jews, to judge from the fact that no parallels are found in rabbinical literature. Its implications were only realized when the Church was confronted with the question of whether gentile converts were to observe Jewish dietary and other regulations (Acts 10:14 ff; 15:28-29; Galatians 2:11-17), although this doesn't appear to be cited in these discussions. Some important codices add “If any man has ears to hear, let him hear” which would form verse 16.

²¹ From within people, from their hearts, come evil thoughts, unchastity, theft, murder, ²² adultery, greed, malice, deceit, licentiousness, envy, blasphemy, arrogance, folly.

This is a catalog of sins featuring both evil actions and vices. Other such lists appear in Galatians 5:19-21; Romans 1:29-31; 1 Peter 4:3. The catalog device was common in the Greco-Roman world and was also known in Judaism.

²³ All these evils come from within and they defile.”

This final sentence summarizes the message He has delivered through the catalog of sins.

“This is an answer to those who consider that evil thoughts are simply injected by the devil and that they do not spring from our own will. He can add strength to our bad thoughts and inflame them, but he cannot originate them” [Saint Bede The Venerable (ca. A.D. 725), *Homilies On The Gospels*, 2].

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