

Conversations with Scripture

*An ongoing newsletter dedicated to the interpretation of Scripture
and the Sunday readings from the Roman lectionary*

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Breaking Open the Word of God

Sunday Reflections

22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time – September 1, 2024

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



The Pharisees Question Jesus ~ James Tissot, 1886 – 1894 (Brooklyn Museum)

The teaching of Deuteronomy left no wiggle room at all. The very survival and prosperity of the Israelites in the land they were entering depended on one thing: meticulous and conscientious observance of God's ordinances and statutes.

This would be evidence of their fidelity to God and would make an impression on other nations. These nations would wonder at the wisdom and discernment of the Israelites, whose fidelity would ensure that God was always near and ready to help them.

They were warned not to add anything to these ordinances and statutes, nor to subtract anything. Most of these laws were concerned with building a just and humane society.

Standards were set for doing business, farming, personal conduct and human relationships. Provisions were made for the protection and care of the vulnerable, poor and marginalized.

Most of these make sense, even today. But there were also many regulations regarding

sacrifice, worship and purity. Today some of them seem puzzling and at times harsh.

We must remember, however, that they made sense in their original context three millennia ago.

These laws and ordinances formed a discipline that bound the people together and defined who they were. They were also an outward sign of their loyalty and obedience to God.

Today many of the norms, expectations, customs and regulations have disappeared or been called into question — and often for legitimate reasons.

Many human rules and traditions get mixed in with what originates from God. But we cannot exist as a community without a centre and spiritual culture that unites us to one another and to God. To do so encourages disintegration and sometimes extremism.

We are followers of Jesus together, as a community rather than a loose confederation of spiritual freelancers.

Whatever we decide defines us as the people of God must be embraced willingly and joyfully as a sign of our faithful relationship with God.

This relationship with God is very simple; it is we who make it difficult and complicated. James defines pure and undefiled religion as generosity and love: caring for widows and orphans and the poor and vulnerable. As part of that commitment, he adds the necessity of keeping oneself spiritually pure.

The word of God that has been implanted in our souls can do its work only when it is nurtured and put to use.

James leaves us with very sound advice: Be doers of the word, not just those who hear

and do nothing. Our religious faith is a verb, not a noun. Love ought always to be expressed in deeds.

There is always a danger in religious observances and this Gospel story describes it well. Human traditions and customs are often deified and treated as doctrine. All religions have been guilty of this.

People continue doing things without really understanding the reason or what a custom or practice signifies. The real goal of the law is easily forgotten — it is mercy and justice. In the argument over purification of vessels and washing of hands before eating, Jesus challenged His listeners to ask themselves some questions.

Where does impurity come from?

Jesus insisted that it did not come from food or anything else outside the body. He focused on the human heart as the wellspring of all evil and malicious intentions and thoughts. They eventually take form: sexual immorality, theft, murder, greed, envy, pride, slander and folly, to name a few.

A person from whom these things come is defiled, but by their own inner disposition. That is the source of the problem, and it should be the focus of all efforts at purification.

People need to cleanse the temple of their heart and mind. The rules and traditions are there to remind us of this. When we forget this fundamental principle, it often happens that we begin to project our own impurity and darkness on other people, groups and institutions. It is difficult at first to accept, but often other people are not the problem — we are.

There is one law that must never be violated nor set aside, and that is the law of love.

The Good Shepherd



Christ the Good Shepherd from Roman catacombs 3rd century

Early Christians practised what today might be called cultural appropriation. Following the advice of Clement of Alexandria (159-215 AD), they used pagan imagery but changed the meaning. Images of fish, vines, flowers, and the famous female figure praying with arms outstretched were repurposed pagan symbols. Sometimes Greco-Roman myths were incorporated. This image of the Good Shepherd, taken from the catacombs, is a fine example. Taken from several streams of Greek mythology, it was used by the early Christian communities to adorn sarcophagi (stone coffins) and as frescoes on walls. It was meant to call to mind the Good Shepherd in John 10 and Psalm 23, as well as several other passages.



Birth of Mary by Giotto (1267-1337)

In the centuries following the writing of the New Testament, many apocryphal gospels were composed claiming to fill in the gaps of the early life of Jesus as well as the birth and infancy of Jesus. They contain virtually no reliable historical information but provide us with an insight into the popular piety, sacred imagination, and liturgical life of early Christianity. The 7th century work scholars call pseudo-Matthew was a compilation of several apocryphal works such as the Protoevangelium of James, and the Infancy Gospel of Thomas. The ox and donkey at the Nativity – not mentioned in Matthew – are taken from this work. The dominant themes of these works are the disparity in ages between Mary and Joseph, her virginity (both before and after the birth), the divinity and power of the infant Jesus, and the casting down of pagan gods. Normally the 8th of September would be celebrated as the Birth of Mary but this year it falls on a Sunday, so it is included in this issue.