

HOMILY SUNDAY 22-B (Homily 02)

“Religion From The Heart”

(Dt 4:1-2, 6-8; Ps 15; James 1:17-18, 21-22, 27; Mk 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23)

After I was ordained a priest in 1974, I did a pastoral year out of Edmonton. Towards the end of that year, while I was waiting for my obedience from Rome, I applied to go to the Holy Land with a group from Newman Theological College. I had the time; it was not that expensive and would be paid by my father, and what an opportunity to enrich my ministry as a young priest. However, the Oblates at that time had a rule that we were not to make any overseas trip until after 25 years of ordination, so I was refused. I could hardly believe that the Oblate leadership at that time would go by outdated rules rather than see the value of such a trip. That, I believe, was my first real run-in with the shadow side of life lived only by the rules.

I could identify with the frustration Jesus feels in today’s gospel, as he has a run-in with the religious authorities who could only see life through the lens of human tradition and man-made rules. We are invited today to live a religion from the heart that puts compassion before regulations.

There is an interrelated progression throughout the readings for today that bear out this focus on love rather than loyalty. In the first reading, we are told that diligent obedience to the commandment of God to love leads to a good life of justice, closeness to God and true worship.

In the gospel, we see that abandoning the one commandment of God which is love, and clinging to human traditions instead, leads to legalism and a fixation on superficial rules and regulations. The end result, as Jesus puts it, is vain worship, not true worship.

Jesus goes on to state categorically that true religion, religion from the heart deals with sins, here listed as murder, fornication, theft, wicked actions, slander, folly and deceit. The implication is that repentance for these actions and receiving forgiveness from them is much more important than focusing on the keeping of ritual actions.

But Jesus does not stop there. He continues to explain that true religion, religion from the heart goes deeper into the causes of sin and deals with our sinfulness (that which makes us sin), our defects of character, here listed as avarice, licentiousness, envy and false pride. The implication is that these roots of our sinful actions are taken away through healing that is accomplished by humble awareness and prayer.

The second reading then presents us with a model of religion based on love, caring and holiness of life. That is the ideal that Jesus is seeking from those who would follow him, and not a dependence on a pseudo-holiness that comes from the keeping of ritual actions and prescriptions for cleanliness that are nice but have little to do with the essence of love and genuine caring for others.

During my third year of university, I was invited to join *Up With People*, an international singing group of young people that travelled the world promoting peace and harmony among nations through the gift of music. I had heard that they had some rules but wasn't sure what they were. Before leaving, I set some rules for myself. I was not a smoker and did not care for alcohol. I also was not interested in dating as I was discerning a possible vocation to priesthood, so I would also follow a program of prayer while traveling.

Upon arrival, I was told that the group had three basic rules: no smoking, no drinking and no dating. I smiled as I realized that I really did not need these rules at all. I had my own inner norms to guide me that actually met and transcended the group's rules.

After about a month of touring with *Up With People* in the States, a group of us went to a restaurant/bar in a particular city for a coke. On the way we helped a woman who was struggling in a wheel chair. We invited her to join us and had a great time.

At rehearsal some weeks later, I received a letter from her during a rehearsal break on stage, thanking me for the friendship that we extended to her. A picture of her fell out of the envelope when I opened it. A cast member, noticing this, told me that she had heard that we were in some kind of trouble because we had broken the rules in that particular city. I was shocked and realized, perhaps for the first time for me personally, how risky it is to base one's life only on superficial rules and regulations that can be abused and misconstrued.

The message from today's readings is clear. Let us live lives of genuine, true religion from the heart that seeks only to do God's will, a will that is to love God with our whole being, and then to love all others as Jesus himself has loved us.

The Eucharist that we celebrate today is no mere superficial ritual action. It is a making present of the total loving sacrifice of Jesus on the cross for us. Ransomed, forgiven and healed, we who participate are empowered to go out and do the same by loving as he loved us.

So let us leave here committed to living out a religion from the heart, one that seeks only to fulfill the greatest commandment of all, the commandment to love that puts compassion before regulations.