

22nd Sunday of the Year

(Year B)

The Commandments Of Life.

*We rejoice in the Law of God which is pure religion,
totally different from any man-made law or human tradition.
It is fulfilled in this sacrament of love.*

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

Some years ago I was invited by a priest-friend to concelebrate and preach at a his church up in Sunderland, on the occasion of the anniversary of the parish's foundation.

I remember travelling up by train to Durham station, where I was to be collected, and sharing a carriage with a small, but somewhat overbearing group of businessmen, each of whom took it in turns to talk loadly down their respective mobile phones. One particular mobile was set to loadspeaker, and being naturally inquisitive, which is to say, nosy, I found myself eavesdropping on the conversation. It broadly went something like this:

“That’s all very well, George, (or what ever name it was) That’s all very well, George, but what you are proposing flies in the face of tradition.”

There was a long pause before there was a reply:

“Tradition can hardly settle the argument. What you are pleased to call tradition is something some of us see as nothing more than a pair of handcuffs. Who is to say which outlook is the right one?”

Just what they were talking about, I really have no idea, but in listening to their brief exchange, it struck me, that when it comes to the, often emotive and even passionate subject of tradition, people's attitudes can, and do, vary quite dramatically.

Some people, for example, have a great, and often affectionate loyalty to what they see as the ‘traditional’ way of doing things. They feel somehow protected within safe, clearly defined parameters. In fact, some people feel secure enough to adapt or conform their own values and behaviour to gain what they see as ‘established wisdom’. And they are reassured in the knowledge that they are following in the ‘tried and tested’ footsteps of past generations.

On the other hand, some people feel somehow tied, or constrained by tradition. And so, they call for new approaches to new situations. For them, tradition is just old-hat and stale opinion, something belonging more to the world of anecdotal ‘once upon a time’ than to the present. Whereas, at times they might refer to tradition, they feel no obligation to stay within its limitations, or within. its confines, as they would see it. As the British playwright and novalist W.S. Maughan once wrote, “Tradition is a guide and not a jailer.”

In today's Gospel Jesus is accused of flouting tradition. The religious officials from Jerusalem and the local Pharisees, want to know why Jesus permits his disciples to completely disregard the unwritten tradition of the Elders. In essence, what the Pharisees have a problem with is that Jesus' disciples do not wash their hands before they eat!

The complaint is not that the disciples are ignoring basic hygiene, rather, the complaint is that they are ignoring the tradition of ceremonial washing. And, as far as the Pharisees are concerned, the consequences of Jesus' disciples' failure to observe this, albeit, unwritten tradition is that they are numbered among the 'unclean'.

However, according to the written Law, ceremonial washing was required only of priests before they entered the sanctuary. And we see an allusion of this in the priest's ablutions before the consecration of the elements.

Having said that, by the time of Jesus the ritual of hand-washing, before every meal, and even between each course, had somehow been extended to include, not just the priests, but all virtuous, God-fearing Jews.

This unwritten tradition of legal interpretation, this oral law, was regarded by the Pharisees to be as binding as the written Law. And they expected Jesus to share their religious outlook. Jesus' response to his accusers is to accuse them of being hypocrites, and he quotes the prophet Isaiah to drive home his point:

“This people honours me only with lip-service, while their hearts are far from me... The worship they offer me is worthless, the doctrines they teach are only human regulations.”

In clinging to empty, meaningless human traditions, people forget the commandments of God.

Jesus wants to free people from the burden of all oppressive traditions, traditions that are merely centred on approved performance, because he knows that when religious performance is lacking in heart, it makes for hollow, worthless worship. And so, Jesus teaches the crowd revolutionary doctrines, doctrines which put him at odds with his own religious tradition:

“Nothing that a man eats can defile him,
only what comes from his own heart”.

Thus, Jesus declares all foods clean, and shifts the focus of moral attention to how people choose what they actually do.

Eating 'unapproved' food with unwashed hands, is an invented 'defilement'. Jesus isn't concerned with dietary purity, nor with bodily cleanliness. He is concerned with the purity of ones' heart. And he cares about our heart's stirrings, the personal issues that concern us, and influence our choices, and our behaviour. The territory within, with all its complex emotions and desires, holds Jesus' attention. He knows that no external law can ever change people's hearts, even if it makes them socially conform. That is why, when he began his preaching, he invited everyone to:

“Set your hearts first on the kingdom of God.”

Jesus believes that when people's hearts are centred on God, they are emancipated. They are freed from the litany of human regulations that would script their every move.

For many of his hearers, what Jesus said was bad news because it contradicted the traditions they so zealously, and so passionately honoured. We call it good news, or Gospel, a word that liberates us from a world of meaningless regulations. It also challenges, and invites us, to live a religion of the heart; to have a clean and pure heart for Jesus, and for his values. This will always be our real religion, our tradition as Christians.