

22nd Sunday OT

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

When I began my study of the Scriptures at the seminary in Toronto, we were told that the original commandments were probably only the **Ten Commandments** with simple short phrases to help remember them beginning with “Thou shalt Not!” because the tribe of Israel was nomadic. Simple, ten fingers, Ten Commandments!

As Israel settled on the land, life became more complicated. With land there were laws to protect property, and over the centuries the **commandments multiplied**. And what better place than after the Ten Commandments in the book of Exodus, which was the original list of just ten. The laws extended into the Books of Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. And...there are actually two versions of the Ten Commandments: one in Exodus and the other in Deuteronomy.

By the time of Jesus, **the noble ideal of Law described in Deuteronomy had degenerated**. The Pharisees, who had objected to the healing of the man with the withered hand on the Sabbath, reappear in this gospel reading. With them are the scribes from Jerusalem, who had accused Jesus of being in league with Beelzebub. They criticize Jesus for allowing his disciples to eat bread with unwashed hands. Mark interrupts his narrative to explain the washing customs of the Pharisees. Did his Gentile readers need this explanation or is he quietly urging the Jewish Christians in Rome to see something of the **absurdity of these oral additions** to the original Law?

In his reply, Jesus makes a counter accusation. He calls his critics hypocrites, because they misunderstood the original intention of the law in their attention to its detail. Here Jesus appeals to the prophet Isaiah, “These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.” **True religion comes from the heart**, not from the lips. Remember last Sunday I quoted from John’s gospel from the passage of the Samaritan woman at the well, “There will come a time, when people will worship in spirit and truth.”

In the second reading, James answers three questions. Who is God? God is the father of lights. He created the stars. Their movements in the heavens contrast them with God who is unmoving and solid, ever reliable. The second question is: Who are we? We are the children of God through his word of truth. This word may

be the gospel that has been preached or his Son. The third question is: How do we worship this God? By the practice of true religion. In this letter from James ***with its stress on deed***, this means care for the orphan and the widow. James echoes language familiar to his Jewish-Christian readers from the humane provisions of their Law which we have met in Deuteronomy and the Psalm of today.

Jesus invites us to an ever-deepening level of living the law in our lives that must come from the heart. Jesus singles out “evil thoughts” which Mark lists in today’s gospel and which reminds us of Paul’s ***works of the flesh*** catalogued in Galatians.

The best example of this is Jesus’ ***exhortation on the commandments***. Let me use one in particular as an example, “Thou shalt not commit adultery.” Jesus asks us to go even further in our thoughts and in our hearts. “But I say to you, everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart.” The eye is the guardian of the soul. Do we live in such a way as to guard even our thoughts as Jesus commands? This is what Jesus means as living the laws from the heart, so that when we worship God it will be in spirit and truth.

You can know a person by the friends they keep. As Christians, it is good to hang out with other Christians.

After I joined the Navy, I was due for my first home visit, and it had been a while. I remember well the fist encounter when I got home. My brothers and sisters wanted to surprise my parents and had arranged to pick me up at the airport and bring me home right before supper. So, I stood with my back to the fireplace and was telling my parents about my experiences so far in the Navy. My parents were standing in front and my brothers and sisters in the back. They kept waving to me and pointing to their mouth. I thought they wanted me to hurry up so we can eat supper. But after we sat down at the table, my youngest sister told me that they were trying to tell me to watch my language, since every other word was a profanity at the utmost level. I won’t use any letter of the alphabet to tell you which one in particular. I had absolutely no idea that I was talking that way. I am glad they didn’t have cell phones back then; it might have been an impediment to my ordination.