

Sunday Thought

29th August 2021 22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time

Readings

Song of Solomon 2: 8 - 13

Psalm 45: 1 - 2, 6 - 9

James 1: 17 - 27

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

Siblings First!

In the Gospel reading for today Jesus is confronted by Pharisees and doctors of the Law whose rules and disciplines of religious life get in the way of the greatest, God-given laws – to love God and all people. That is not to say that in religious and social life rules are unnecessary. Rather, like seeing objects in water, where the shapes appear to bend, there are times when a life immersed in love finds it necessary to *bend the rules* and fulfil the Commandments!



Hannah was in the garden, firmly grasping the hands of her two young men – Peter aged six and Paul just four. The boys had just received a maternal dressing down. Hannah explained to me how she had been as firm as possible with them while trying to suppress a desire to laugh at their behaviour. She led us into their farm cottage. The boys went off to play and she told me about the latest children's drama. The bin lorry had called earlier. Hannah asked Peter to go out to make sure the galvanised metal lid had been replaced properly. Aware of the activities of vermin in the surrounding farm buildings she had stressed to the boys her unwritten rule that the lid should always be kept on the bin. She had reminded them as they went out now. Of course, Paul went too. It was a little while before they returned. Hannah had rightly assumed that the boys were distracted and playing. Peter came alone. 'Where's Paul?' Mum asked. A self-satisfied grin widened across Peter's face as he replied. 'Oh, he's in the dustbin! I DID put the lid on!' Hannah was not sure how well the boys had understood her explanation of how a brother's safety sometimes meant a variation in the rules.

The religious lawyers and Pharisees had come out from Jerusalem to Galilee intent on finding fault with Jesus' teaching and practice. They were seeking a pretext for destroying his popularity which would hopefully bring an end to his mission - and to him. They soon noticed that Jesus' disciples had been eating without observing religious hand washing rules, as would normally be the thing for Rabbis and their associates.

There were many such ancestral rules observed by the 'religious'. They related bodily cleanliness to purity of heart before God, but could become a matter of pride and competition. They may seem petty to us today, especially those about 'washing up'! There are good intentions with such rules which are still observed by Judaism and Islam today but it must have been difficult to keep them when on 'open-air' missions with sick people all around, eager to touch and be touched.

Jesus immediately countered the Pharisees' criticism, explaining how for him it was a matter of '*heart before hands*' or *brother before dustbin lid*! It was putting man-made rules before God's law and before Kingdom priorities. Some of my generation will remember the similar negative limitations of Sabbath rules, although we often long for those times when Sunday felt a very special day in the whole community.

I think James would appreciate the dustbin story. He loved to use everyday images, just as Jesus did. In today's excerpt from James' letter he speaks of being slow to be angry and quick to listen because anger doesn't achieve God's purposes. The relevance of that can be seen today in many political meetings and school playgrounds. Listening to the words of God and not living by them, he says, is like looking at yourself in the mirror and straightway forgetting what you saw! For James, true religion is basically to observe the laws of love for God and for neighbour. Real religion, he says is caring for others, especially the needy like orphans and widows, while being sure to keep yourself pure and uncorrupted by the world. People often say to me, as an excuse to not talk religion, '*Oh , I'm not religious.*' I can hear James reply, '*Does that mean you don't care about the poor and that you live a quite disreputable sort of life? !!* All our rules must be fulfilled by love for God and for all humanity.

A Prayer (using Song of Solomon 2:8-13 and Psalm 45)

Eager to Worship God

Lord God, to worship you is like an invitation to your royal court where all your treasures of love, truth, and holiness are displayed for us to view and to share:
where we listen to your words in the eloquent voice of your Spirit.
To worship is to share the fragrant beauty of a personal springtime.
We come, running, eager to accept your invitation.

