

THE EMMAUS SERIES

22nd Sunday Year B

Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-8

James 1:17-18, 21-22, 27

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

Their hearts are far from me

We resume our readings from Mark's gospel. Life in a human community is governed by 'laws and customs', as Moses reminds the people of old Israel in the first reading.

These regulations and their interpretation can give rise to confusion; so Moses urges the people to 'add nothing' and 'take nothing from' the law which he gives them in the name of God. We meet the same issue in today's gospel reading: Jesus is being hounded by antagonists – some of whom have come from Jerusalem for the purpose. They resent the fact that the disciples of Jesus 'do not respect the traditions of the elders' and observe ritual purifications. The response of Jesus has an important lesson for every age, as we endeavour to make Church regulations that are truly life-giving.

As is usually the case, the Response to the Psalm expresses well the message of the liturgy's readings: 'The just will live in the presence of the Lord'. As the Sermon on the Mount (Mt chapters 5 and 6) teaches us, we are truly the People of God if our life together gives expression to the ways of our Father in heaven. This is the standard against which we should evaluate the 'laws and customs' we draw up for the Church's common life, and the way they are applied.

The words of Jesus, in this and similar exchanges, are surprisingly sharp. The issue is far more important than a detail of ritual observance. Those who were leaders in Israel should have been helping the people to live according to the ways of God – so that they would be 'a light to the nations', as the prophets had taught. Instead they had lost sight of Israel's great destiny, and worked against it, in fact, by elaborating a system of self-serving regulations. They have no real concern for the ways of God, Jesus tells them, and he quotes against them the words of Isaiah: 'This people honours me only with lip service, while their hearts are far from me'. Jesus shows himself a true interpreter of Israel's faith as he urges his followers to find integrity through the motives of the heart rather than in the observance of external rituals of purification. No wonder the people followed him so eagerly.

But in what follows – as Jesus departs radically from the provisions of the Old Law concerning foods considered to make a person 'impure' – we recognise that he is conscious of an authority that is above the Law of Moses.

In the second reading we begin to read from the Letter of James. This letter, associated with the name of James 'the brother of Jesus', a leader of the Jerusalem church, gives us a glimpse of the outlook that united the first Jewish converts to faith in Christ. It is very down to earth and practical, filled with the spirit of the Wisdom literature of the Old Testament. And because this literature fosters life in harmony with the ways of God, it illustrates well the spirit Jesus advocates in the gospel. James points to 'the Father of lights', the giver of 'everything that is perfect'; he urges making the message of the 'Word' of God our life standard; and we should honour God especially by our generosity to those in need.

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