

22ND SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME, B  
THE HEART OF TRUE RELIGION

*“Nothing that goes into a man from outside can make him unclean; it is things that come out of a man that make him unclean. For it is from within, from men’s hearts, that evil intentions emerge” (Matt. 7: 15, 21)*

**As We Return to the Gospel of Mark:** I like to welcome us back from our five-week break-off from Mark’s Gospel. During those weeks, we had a faith journey through the Gospel of John (Chapter 6) to unravel the mystery of the Eucharist embedded in the Miracle (“Sign”) of the Multiplication of Five Loaves and Two Fish. Jesus declared: “I am the Living Bread come down from heaven. Anyone who eats this bread will live forever; and the bread that I shall give is My Flesh, for the life of the world” (John 6: 51). The entire teaching of Jesus was repugnant to many, yet a source of faith for others. This “sign” that prefigured the self-offering of Jesus on the Cross and the Sacrament of the Holy Eucharist has continued to be a “sign of contradiction” and division in Christendom to this day. Even now, the question remains: “Will you also go away?” (John 6: 67). We rely on the grace of God to answer like Peter: “Lord to whom shall we go? You have the Word of eternal life” (John 6: 68).

**The Law and Its Intentions:** There is a way we generally perceive laws. Sometimes, we see the laws and commandments as restrictions of our freedom, and as instruments to trap us. But that is not so. In the First Reading (Deut. 4: 1-2, 6-8), Moses explains to the people of Israel the real purpose of the laws and customs he was commanded to teach them. He explained that if they would observe them, they would have life, enter, and take possession of the land God had given to their fathers. He went further: the laws and customs were to demonstrate to others their wisdom, understanding, greatness and the closeness of their God. God’s Commandments demonstrate God’s love for us; they lead us to the realization of God’s plans in our lives; they concretise our relationship with Him. When we approach God’s Commandments with love, it becomes easy to obey, our obedience becomes our gifts to God. But when we see it as infringements, they would become burdens too heavy to bear. How do we perceive the laws? How do we relate to them? What motivates our obedience?

**This Is True Religion:** The Second Reading (James 1: 17-18, 21-22, 27) takes us beyond the seeming misunderstanding that could come from the import of the First Reading. St. James tells us that obedience to the Law is not enough. Sometimes, obedience to the law, especially the prohibitions, can lead to passivity and disconnectedness. St James exhorts us to live active Christian lives which are to “do what the Word says, and not just listen to it and deceive ourselves.” He invites us to a life of actively living the Word by relating and connecting with others. A Christian, who desires to live out “pure unspoilt religion” must take his Christian life beyond the walls of his house and of the Church. We must be seen to be like Christ, Who went about doing good (Acts 10: 38). St. James puts it thus: “Pure unspoilt religion, in the eyes of God our Father, is this: coming to the help of orphans and

widows when they need it and keeping oneself uncontaminated by the world.” We are called to reach out to the abandoned of our world, “the poorest of the poor” and to maintain the holiness of life amidst the corruption of the world. The grace of our prayers, the warmth of our love, the blessings we have received, and the generosity of our hearts must be felt by others. This is what true religion is all about – sharing love.

***Our Good Works Must Come From the Heart:*** The encounter of Jesus with some scribes and Pharisees centres around the motives for obedience. The Pharisees, whose name translates as “the separated ones” or the “separatists”, set themselves apart as “the holier-than-thou” of the society. They were looked upon as the teachers of the Law and held in high esteem and exalted above others because of their puritan ways of life. Contrary to the order of Moses that nothing should be added nor subtracted from the Torah (Deut. 4: 2), the Pharisees added 365 prohibitions and 248 prescriptions to the already existing 613 commandments in the Torah. This is where their argument with Jesus comes from: “Why do your disciples not respect the tradition of the elders but eat their food with unclean hands?” This was not an issue with hygiene rather it was ritualistic. For the Pharisees, true religion meant strict outward observance of the law. Jesus had a different and the richest understanding. The followers of Jesus must be guided not by legalistic adherence to the law but by love, which must motivate all actions from the heart.

***Being Religious Is Not Being A Hypocrite:*** The response of Jesus has taken His accusers by surprise: “It was you hypocrites that Isaiah rightly prophesied ...” By calling them “hypocrites”, Jesus knew they were “stay actors” hiding their real faces with masks. They led double lives, had double standards – one for others and another for themselves. Jesus knew they never practised what they preached, and so had cautioned us not to imitate them (Matt. 23: 3). What Jesus is teaching us here is that a Christian is supposed to be consistent in words and deeds in private and in public life. Being religious is not about what we do for people to see but what we do when we know no one will ever find out. This is integrity.

***The Heart is the Matter:*** Jesus speaks with authority: “Listen to Me, all of you.” Here is a strong reference to His personal authority as the Son of God, Who has come, not to abolish but to perfect the law. He turns the entire interpretation of the law by the Pharisees on its head by laying emphasis, not on the external observances but on the interior life. “Nothing that goes into a man from outside can make him unclean; it is things that come out of a man that make him unclean. For it is from within, from men’s hearts, that evil intentions emerge.” Biblically, the heart represents the inner depths of the person, the seat of a decision where a person either responds to God or resist Him. The heart is the seat of love or hate, of goodness or evil. It is the seat of choice. When the heart is pure, all is well. For out of the fullness of the heart, every action flow (Matt. 12: 34).

***My dear friends,*** the Commandments present us the opportunity to express our love for God and neighbours. They are intended for our freedom, guidance, and salvation. We

should relate with love, understanding and appreciation. For where there is love, there is no law; even when there is law, the law itself is love. Let us open our hearts to God that His grace may purify all our intentions and actions.