

## 22nd Sunday Ordinary Time

2 September 2018

Fr Jarred Mercer

### Readings

Deuteronomy 4:1-2 and 6-8

Psalm 15

James 1:1, 7-18 and 21-22

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

‘Keep [God’s commandments] and do them; for that will be your wisdom and your understanding’ (Deut. 4.6)

+In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit

In her brilliant collection of essays, *When I Was a Child I Read Books*, Marilynne Robinson says that, ‘Wisdom, which is almost always another name for humility, lies in recognizing our share in humanity’s inevitable fallibility’. Wisdom is seeing ourselves as fallible, as incomplete, as not yet having it all figured out and therefore open to others, listening, searching things out, seeking to know and become more than we now know and now are. Wisdom is humility.

And this is what Deuteronomy tells us is the result of following God’s commandments in our own lives. Living the law results in *wisdom*. And Deuteronomy goes further to say that the law brings God near. God is near in the law. Why?

We often think of the law in the Hebrew Bible, or Old Testament, as just a list of rules to follow, often with severe consequences for rule breakers; as a cause for judgement, or something to instil fear.

But this is not the true nature or function of the law at all. It was a display of God’s character in the world; showing God’s people what God’s life and love looked like when lived out within human life and relationships. Now, because the law was lived out

within the boundaries of imperfect, fallible human life and relationships it could not accomplish this goal perfectly. But its purpose was to point beyond itself to its source in God; to bring God near, as Deuteronomy has it.

The law became dangerous, however, when it ceased to point beyond itself and pointed *to* itself. When it ceased to demonstrate God's ways in the world and came to be perceived as itself a 'god'. The law was not given to be an end all and be all, but a revealer of something more; a means to our ultimate end in God.

So when Jesus comes as the fulfilment of the law, he comes as the full accomplishment of 'bringing God near'. And Jesus' accusation of hypocrisy levelled at the Pharisees brings their misuse of the law into sharp focus.

'Hypocrites', he calls them. Something we are all too familiar with, and perhaps particularly aware of given recent news of more grotesque scandals in Church, this time from Pennsylvania. The evil actions of these men, coupled with their profession of faith in our loving and merciful God, makes the sting of their behaviour even stronger.

It is easy to tell that these men are hypocrites: they say one thing and turn around and deny it with their lives. But Jesus accuses the Pharisees of a different sort of hypocrisy here. The Pharisees in our Gospel reading are not intentional deceivers. They actually are living what they teach. They might be smug, but they're not what we would typically call *hypocrites*, actors pretending to be what they are not.

The Pharisees are a different kind of hypocrite—the kind who through self-exaltation can hold themselves above others; whose ears are closed to criticism and hearts are stunted from growth because they think they have made it already, think they have it all figured out.

The result of following the law is wisdom, remember, and wisdom is another name for humility. So these teachers of the law have not in themselves developed the fruit of the law. Though they keep all the law's rules, though they arbitrate how everyone else around them is upholding the law's rules, they are not themselves *truly* law abiders.

In the words of Jesus' quotation from Isaiah, these teachers of the law, who observe it to the letter, have actually 'put aside the commandment of God'.

The law that was meant to reveal who God is, has become a concealer rather than revealer of God. Rather than pointing to the authority of God, in the hands of the Pharisees, the law has become its own authority, in which people come to stand on their own two feet, perfectly able in themselves to live rightly and justly, removing their need for God and God's revelation entirely.

We're not always so different, are we. Our faith becoming a litmus test for who is in or out, for who is righteous and who is not, rather than a source of eternal joy. Christ contests the life of the Pharisees, and our own lives in judgement when we are like them, because this type of 'holiness' is discriminatory and the opposite of grace; creating boundaries and building up walls to exclude others in the community from access to God's love and mercy through a living faith.

Christ comes as the fulfilment of the law, as the truest and fullest revelation of who God is in the world, and shows us that true holy living, the true life of godliness, is one of welcome and embrace, one that creates an equal society of friends, not a separate sub-society that keeps others that are not like it out. Jesus creates a new society in which no one is 'unclean'.

And so we kneel at this altar and hold out our hands to receive the joy of our salvation, as rich and poor, as immigrant and citizen, as sorrowful and joyful, as hurting and as healed, as every size and colour and shape and orientation and gender, all of us, as *equals*. No one can hold themselves up over another as we all humbly kneel low on our knees and receive the same life-giving food.

We are all needy beggars at the table of God's mercy and God lavishes unending love on all of us the same.

The ways of God lead to true wisdom, and wisdom shows us, all of us, our brokenness and need; our *humility*. Wisdom is another name for humility.

And this life of wisdom, is not only the life of the new society here gathered at the same table, feasting on the same life-giving bread. It turns us outward.

James tells us that the fatherhood of God means the sister- and brotherhood of humanity. Here lies the true spirit of the law. The way of wisdom.

James 1.27 does not give us an entire summary of Christian faith, but it lays out pretty clearly what it means to be a Christian: 'Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world'.

The Pharisees' use of the law was exclusion. Faith to them was not a source of welcoming joy but a means of arbitration, a boundary line, a litmus test for themselves and everyone around them, so that the law came to conceal God's love from them rather than reveal it.

But James tells us that true faith places us in humility, in wisdom, on equal terms with those the world sees as the 'least', even to be with them in their affliction. This is what it looks like to become not only hearers but doers of the word, what it means to not 'deceive ourselves', James says. In other words, what it means to not be hypocrites.

But, this glorious call of Christ is not cause for guilt or shame for the ways we fail it, that would be just another form of hypocrisy, treating faith like a litmus test of purity rather than a source of unending joy.

The gift of equality, of humility, of love that we are called to is the same reality we receive here as Christ meets us, all of us, whoever we are and wherever we've been, in the unending grace of his resurrection body.

To keep oneself from being 'unstained from the world', is not a ritual purification but a life of love. Our calling is simply an outworking of what is already gifted to us in

Christ. It is just to live as who we are: a eucharistic community, a people of continual thanksgiving; a people through whom the whole world can see that God is near.