

TWENTY-SECOND SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME — B

READING I Dt 4:1-2, 6-8
READING II Jas 1:17-18, 21b-22, 27
GOSPEL Mk 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

This section from Deuteronomy likely took place during the time of the exile, when God's people questioned the reason for their predicament and prospect for the future. The author preached that a repentant and renewed community was possible. To prompt them, Moses is depicted as urging his audience to obey for two reasons. First, the covenant demands will help them to live: Enjoy intimacy with their God. Secondly, the wisdom of the covenant legislation will demonstrate to the pagans Israel's humaneness and closeness to The Lord God. It should be noted that the command not to add to or subtract from the Law (typical of ancient Near Eastern formulations) was not an absolute. Israel always adjusted to new situations.

The authorship of the Epistle of James is disputed. Some hold that the author is James, "the brother of the Lord" (Gal 1:19), who was the head of the Jerusalem Church (see Acts 12:17; 15:13), and who died around the year 62 A.D. Others think that the author is an anonymous Jewish Christian who wrote around the end of the first century A.D. The recipients were probably Jewish Christian communities living outside of Palestine.

The Epistle of James is much like the wisdom literature of the Old Testament, which consists largely of exhortation. The author rejects theoretical Christianity; He endorses practical Christianity: One which proves the vibrant presence of Christ through concrete deeds. By accepting the Gospel, the believer experiences a divine birth which God destines for all people. Such believers are to act upon God's Word and show the power of that Word in daily living. A specific example of pure and undefiled religious practice is the care of orphans and widows: Perennial objects of concern in the biblical community.

In vv. 1-8, Mark discusses the problem of ritual purity, specifically the washing of hands, and the distinction between clean and unclean foods. What is at stake is not the value of law, but the Pharisaic interpretation of law. (Although ritual washing of hands applied only to the priests, the Pharisees extended that obligation.) The larger question is the concern for the Gentile mission: Gentiles do not have to become Jews before becoming Christians. In v. 6, Jesus challenges his opponents by citing the Greek text of Is 29:13. The Pharisees have placed purely human traditions on a higher level than the Word of God. Hence, they prefer to disregard God's law to cling to their own machinations.

In vv. 14-15, 21-23 Mark reflects Jesus' attitude towards law. For Jesus, sin is not a question of this food or that food. Sin means the human spirit gone wrong. Hence, sin is not what goes into a person but what comes out of a person. In effect, Jesus was suggesting that the whole theology of law should be revisited.

The observance of man-made laws should uphold human values. We are told to obey traffic laws but do not reflect enough on the values contained therein. We are obliged to pay taxes but do not question sufficiently the way they are used. We are commanded to keep Church laws but do not ask enough about the values found therein. Not infrequently, we are programmed to obey because we are commanded. Yet Christian maturity dictates that the observance of man-made laws should uphold human values.

The book of Deuteronomy insists on legal observance because of the preservation of human values. The Israelites were asked to observe so that they might live. Hence, Deuteronomy improved the lot of female slaves (15:12-14) and stressed that the sabbath rest was not only for slave owners but for slaves as well (5:14). Deuteronomy presumed that legal observance would convince the world that Israel was a wise and intelligent people. In Deuteronomy, therefore, the observance of man-made laws should uphold human values.

Jesus revolutionized the understanding of law in Palestine. Instead of citing the authorities, Jesus spoke in his own name and the people liked it (Mk 1:22). Regarding the sabbath, he insisted that the institution was for the people, not the people for the institution (Mk 2:27). In dealing with the problems of ritual purity and the distinction between clean and unclean foods, Jesus implied that it was unreasonable and inhuman to obey merely because it was commanded. In effect, Jesus maintained that the observance of man-made laws should uphold human values.

Taxpayers, who seek to find out where their tax money is going, seek human values. Drivers, who endeavor to find out the reasonableness of traffic laws, pursue human values. Citizens, who question nuclear proliferation and the care of our common home, are intent upon human values. People who raise questions about foreign policy seek out human values. All such people are not content with merely observing the law because it is commanded. They look for the larger human implications. They believe that the observance of man-made laws should uphold human values.

Eucharist raises the question of law. The community must ask itself whether it celebrates liturgy on Sunday simply because it is commanded, or because it feels the inherent need to worship. Eucharist recites the drama of the one who revolutionized the understanding of law in Palestine. Eucharist presses the community to inquire whether it has preserved Jesus' revolutionary thinking. Eucharist, too, professes that the observance of man-made laws should uphold human values.