

## **TWENTY-SECOND SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME: September 1, 2024**

Many of you know that the monks were on annual retreat this past week. Everything closed down. Signs were posted that read that the monastery, bookstore, office, grounds were all closed to the public. “You are not welcome” was the message! What do you think happened? Yes, there were people looking for Mass, gifts to buy, or just walk the grounds. And the response we have heard in the past was something like, “Oh, I didn’t think that applied to me.” This is one way that people are able to get around legal restrictions.

The Word of God today teaches us the importance of rules, laws, observances but also wants us to interpret them. Rules and laws are important in any society. We are a nation of laws, not of individual people who can dispense with law when it is not convenient to our own political gains. Children especially need rules. They need them for their own protection and also to learn the values that underlie the group to which they belong – whether family, church, state, or nation. But religious norms and our history show there are sometimes conflicts between a law and one’s conscience. This is not a matter of preferring what I like but what I believe is truly right. The Dalai Lama once said that we all should learn the rules very well so that we know how to break them when it is appropriate. This requires a conscience that is formed according to our beliefs in the common good, the care of the poor, and children and widows and the needs of all people for basic human rights such as food, lodging and human dignity.

Our first reading from the Book of Deuteronomy gives Moses’ teachings on the identity of God as based in the Torah. Like children the formation of this people demanded adherence to the law that stressed the ten commandments, giving up child sacrifice, fidelity in marriage as well as keeping the Sabbath. Later teaching, such as the Prophets, taught them the importance of justice. At the time of Jesus there were different rabbinic schools that interpreted how the law was to be kept, literally or more loosely. I have heard one Rabbi describe the Torah as less a rule book and more of a wave, a tendency towards God.

Today’s readings from the Letter of James as well as Mark’s gospel bring a different approach. Christianity, unlike Judaism and Islam, is not a religion of the Book. It is a religion of personal relationship and discipleship of Jesus Christ. Jesus is the Word and is Sophia but also is our source of meaning and life. Today we hear from James these words, “Be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is

this: to care for widows and orphans in their distress.’ Widows and orphans were the typical people of the time who needed to be cared for. Today we would add migrants, the abused, those discriminated against.

It is Jesus who directs us to develop our religious faith from only external observances to an interior relationship with God. Religion must develop from childhood rules to a life of prayer, to listening to the Holy Spirit, and above all, love. Jesus taught a new way as a Rabbi, a teacher, a prophet. He never said “adore me,” but “follow me” and become the human being you were created to be. In today’s gospel he says we are to live our traditions but also need even more to respond to life with our heart. “For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come, fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.”

How do we come to the loving relationship with us that he invites us to? Well, what is your image of Jesus? Who is he for you? There are some images, like the holy face of Jesus and Divine Mercy, which emphasize earning his love. But do you recall the image of the Sacred Heart of Jesus? This image was very popular through the nineteen-fifties. Every Irish house I have ever been in has a picture of the Sacred Heart. Many of these pictures are really sappy, really poor art. But I think the art has gotten much better as I checked some examples out in our Bookstore.

Now I hear that Pope Francis is writing an encyclical on the Sacred Heart and this should be published soon. I have begun to like this devotion again. It is the heart of Jesus that in human flesh shows God’s love for us which is always and everywhere shown to us. The problem is that it is too good to be true. We have difficulty in believing God truly wants to share this life with us. We have a hard time believing God is so loving, that this love is so wonderful and all so-encompassing that the One who is mindful of all our failings and darkest secrets still finds us lovable. Put differently the Christian faith does not rise or fall on what we do. It rises or falls on what God does. The impediment to belief is not that the Christian life is too hard. It is that the Christian promise is too big. The apostles did not get it after two to three years hearing Jesus so we can be forgiven for our lack of credulity.

Jesus says, Come, follow me. We have said yes but keep looking for short cuts. Jesus emphasizes that this is a matter of the heart, a conversion for most followers. Can I learn to gaze on all people and this world as Jesus gazes on it?

Can my heart throb in love for those whom Jesus embraces, especially the poorest, most undeserving of God's love? Can I offer my heart even to be hurt as Jesus did? Can I have the same compassion Jesus had for those suffering? Today that means we do not look apart from the wars, greed and selfishness. Jesus' compassion calls us not to turn from the bad news in our world today but to pay attention and feel Jesus suffering in the people of Gaza, Israel, the Ukraine, Lebanon as well as those in our own country. We must have open hearts, open eyes. This must form the center of our prayers and actions. There we find Jesus living and loving in the worst of situations.

The mainline religions have over emphasized keeping the laws and accepting the intellectual truths of the faith. The times call us to grow up in our faith and be true followers of Jesus Christ. The world needs real believers to give hope and direction.

**Timothy J. Joyce, S.T.L., O.S.B.**