

Homily for 22 p.a. (B) 2018

“You put aside the commandment of God to cling to human traditions.”

✠ In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

A priest was once called out for an emergency in the early hours of the morning. On his return home, he was accosted by a mugger with a knife, "Your money or your life!", the thief said. However, when the thief saw the priest's Roman collar, he told him to put his wallet away. The relieved priest took out a packet of cigarette to calm his shaken nerves, and, before lighting up, offered one to the mugger. The latter proudly refused, saying, "No thank you, Father! I've given up cigarettes for Lent."

Religion is always under threat from revisionism of all sorts. There are those who take the plain commandments of God and explain how they don't really mean that; there are those who try and incorporate them into an ossified package under their personal control – to deflect them according to an agenda; and there are those who quite simply treat them as a vehicle for something else. Jesus is pretty severe about all this: “you put aside the commandment of God to cling to human traditions”, he says, accusingly. In summary:

*This people honours me only with lip-service,
while their hearts are far from me.
The worship they offer me is worthless,
the doctrines they teach are only human regulations.*

Now, the mugger who proudly refuses a cigarette from the priest in my opening story has got something a little bit wrong about the practice of his faith. He is, obviously, not making any connection between his awareness of the faith and his daily life as he lives it. Of course, some issues of the moral and political life are open to debate among Christians, but the thief can be under no illusion that what he is doing is right according to God's will, unless, of course, he is doing what we all do, but in an extreme form, that is to say, kidding himself.

Now, we all like to be comfortable, we like to have a comfy bed, a comfy chair, comfy shoes and, maybe a comfy car. Sometimes, we like our faith to be like that as well; we like it to be comfortable and accommodating so that whatever we do we are still sustained, comforted and supported by it. The thief – well, perhaps he thought that the eighth commandment against stealing and the tenth commandment against coveting should not be literally understood in a contemporary context where educational disadvantage and social exclusion had put him in the regrettable position of having to take a personal initiative in the

reallocation of scarce financial resources. Perhaps he thought that he wasn't exactly stealing, but, after a certain fashion, striving for social justice, which is a contextual thing in terms of its moral probity.

No, I am not convinced by that. But, being human, I can more easily be convinced when the commandments of God become inconvenient to me in some way. If I find that if I am being pricked by my conscience in little ways because, say, of my failure to worship God enough, because of my failure to love his people enough, because of my failure to obey the commandments, yes, like everyone else, I am tempted to cut the sacred texts a little, to trim, to wheedle, to negotiate into a situation where I am sort of relating to God, but also sort of suiting myself. The extreme example of the failure of this approach is that of the person who shows up in Church on Sunday full of piety and good intentions, but who dumps it all on the way out of church, having got a sufficient religious fix or a guilt catharsis to carry him or her through the next week. Most people who do that sort of thing know that that is what they are doing. However, less easy to identify in ourselves is the result of long-term trimming of what God wants – we accept the parts of the package that suit us and glide over the ones that don't, rather than seeing the commandments as a daily challenge forming the bedrock of our lives.

Now, I am not suggesting that you take a copy of the ten commandments with you and run through them like a checklist every time that you have to make a decision. There are times when we need to look at the commandments again, but, you know, our faith is about far more than that. Jesus is telling us that it is from within, from our hearts, that evil intentions emerge. We have to make sure that what is in our hearts is the right thing; love, truthfulness, generosity, faithfulness, honesty, piety. These are the things that we need to find when we look into ourselves, and a final litmus test is offered us today by St James, a very practical one: he says, "you must do what the word tells you, and not just listen to it and deceive yourselves". There are times when it is a good exercise for us to look at what we believe, and then to look honestly at what we do, and, without wheedling or negotiating, let our consciences make a fair judgement. Amen.