

22nd Sunday (B)

31st August 2024

'Law and Love'

Deut 4: *Now Israel take notice of the laws ...*

Ps 14: *who shall dwell on Your holy mountain?*

James 1: *do what the word tells you*

Mk 7: *you put aside the commandments of God to cling to human traditions.*

In one of the *Pirates of the Caribbean* films — I know, that dates me a bit! — the wayward pirates, when challenged about their not keeping the 'pirate code' think for a brief moment and reply, "well, it's not so much a rule, as a 'guideline'." As we hear the Lord in the Gospel today, criticizing the *minutiae* of the Pharisees' keeping of the Jewish Law, we might feel a bit as if the sort of laws we are urged to keep as part and parcel of our Catholic faith should also be considered more 'guidelines' than rules! Is that really what Jesus is saying, as He bristles at the Pharisees' attitude? — 'guidelines,' not 'rules,' as if to say, "don't worry too much about keeping them"?

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. (Mk 7: 6–7)

Are the Church's rules really like that? We could list a lot of laws which the Church requires of us, on all sorts of

different levels, some more grave, others less so. For example, that we must attend Mass diligently every Sunday; that we must go to confession at least once a year; that we must fast from food for an hour before Holy Communion; that we must hold marriage to be for life; that we must abstain from all sex outside marriage; that we must protect life from conception to natural death; that we must not consult horoscopes; that we must not defraud our employer or our employees; that we must pray. Are these the same sort of thing as the merely 'external rules' of the Pharisees that Jesus criticizes? In other words, do they actually *get in the way* of loving God, as Jesus suggested that some of the Pharisees' strict observances did? Should we take the laws of the Church as *rules*, then, to be obeyed at all costs, or just as *guidelines*, to be kept or broken as we see fit (given consideration, but not 100% binding)? There is often a human tendency to keep rules as if the rules were 'god' — that's Jesus's critique, isn't it? But if divine laws are understood properly, not 'god' in themselves but *the gift from a loving God*, then we can live them properly, and

live them well. Here are a few considerations:

(i) **Law is not alien to God:** He has always given us laws! Law is not in any way opposed to, or antithetical to, God. He made the world in the beginning, He ordered it and gave it its laws: *physical laws of nature*, which guide the unfolding of material Creation from the first tiny fraction of a second until today, billions of years later, according to the plan of His mind. But, seamlessly and consistently, He also gives *spiritual* (moral) laws for His spiritual Creation, i.e. laws of human behaviour. Think of the Ten Commandments, given to us by God back in our Jewish ancestry 3000yrs ago; perennial laws that are the backbone of good human behaviour, governing our relations with God and with each other. These are not take-it or leave-it type ‘guidelines’ — these are fundamental to living well in God’s sight. Much of the law of the state is built on the basis of the Ten Commandments, even if not explicitly acknowledged. And in the latter verses

of our Gospel reading today Jesus lists 12 ‘evil things’ (“fornication, theft ...”) — yes, these things are wrong, forbidden, against His holy law. So: law is not alien to God’s being or His will for Creation.

(ii) **Laws are good for us:** they are not an unfair, restrictive, or shackling imposition! They give us a true guide to what is right, as God intended it for us. They are, therefore, a source of *freedom*. Thank God, we don’t have to work everything out from first principles, flailing about in the darkness wondering where to begin finding some enlightenment. God in His infinite benevolence *wants to benefit us*, and so provides these laws for our good. They’re not an invitation for discussion, but a clear direction given us from on high, from One who wants us to flourish, and not to founder.

(iii) **To obey laws is not blind, or brainless.** As human beings, spiritual creation with free will and intelligence, we’re invited by God who made us this way, both to *think*, and also to *believe!* Reason and

faith are (as Pope St John Paul put it) ...

“like two wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of truth; and God has placed in the human heart a desire to know the truth — in a word, to know Himself — so that, by knowing and loving God, men and women may also come to the fullness of truth about themselves” (Fides et Ratio, n.1).

The Church herself is God-willed, and has mulled over the will of God, expressed in Christ for 2000 years. So, the laws that we are asked to obey are not random, or man-made; they are Spirit-led. They are truly consistent with our God-given human nature. They do not go against our human freedom, they do not constrain or damage our liberty, because they are from God, and He knows us perfectly, and therefore the laws work in our favour, a rule for good, and therefore happy, human life. They are, as it were, “the Maker’s instructions,” and we absolutely operate at our best by keeping them.

(iv) **We can’t pick-and-mix**, believing this, dissenting from that. That wouldn’t make sense: the whole of

the rule of faith comes as a package. When we know and understand that it is out of *love for us* that the Maker gives us our instructions, we will want to keep the whole law, all the Church’s rules. If at this point in time there are parts of Church teaching that you haven’t yet understood, or feel alienated by, that’s understandable, it’s a normal stage to go through. In that case you need to study the question, and to pray to God to reveal to you His will. We each need Him to enlighten our hearts by His Spirit, so that we may see the good that He intends by our keeping of that law. The faith is self-consistent, it ‘hangs together,’ a whole and great good, and in time we come to realise this; but we do need to pray for enlightenment, sometimes, for our hearts to be open to the good and the truth. It’s OK, we need not be afraid that the faith is a delusion, or a rigged set of rules just to keep us docile. Christ is not about that; He wants us *truly alive in Him*, not in any way ‘drugged’ or kept down at heel, but fully alive!

It is the Catholic faith that we would truly be better people if we were to keep God's commands in full. It says again and again through the book of psalms, *They are happy who follow God's law. We are happy when we follow God's law*, when we try each day to keep the whole faith — especially the things we might find hardest to obey — not simply rule-keeping for rule-keeping's sake, but out of love for God Himself, the divine and benevolent law-giver, the One who wishes nothing other than our complete happiness. Those laws which we struggle with, let's ask today, here and now, for grace to understand and keep. The saints, many of them, struggled in their own individual ways to stay on the 'strait and narrow' and yet they teach us that to win through to life we need to keep focus on Christ's law, *not firstly because it is 'law'* but because it is *Christ's*, and that means it is derived from His divine Love. *Lord, how I love Your law, it is ever in my mind.*

To conclude and to emphasize again, *today's psalm* is a wonderful reminder that the spirit of keeping God's whole Law is much greater than 'law-keeping' as such, for

the sake of law-keeping. I think that the words of Ps 14 echo that great saying of Jesus in St Matthew's Gospel —

[37] *"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.* [38] This is the great and first commandment. [39] And a second is like it: *You shall love your neighbour as yourself.* [40] On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets." (ESV: Matthew 22:37–40)

In the light of that overriding ethos of Jesus's Gospel law, let's hear Ps 14 again. How are we putting into practice the keeping of God's whole law? How honest, innocent, and keen to be utterly good are we, loving the law of God, just because it is good? Surely we do want to be wholly clean for Jesus and for real, deep, and long-lasting happiness ...

*Lord, who shall dwell on Your holy mountain?
He who acts without fault; he who acts with justice
and speaks the truth from his heart.
He who does no wrong to his brother,
who casts no slur on his neighbour,
who holds the godless in disdain
but honours those who fear the Lord.
He who keeps his pledge, come what may;
who takes no interest on a loan
and accepts no bribes against the innocent.
Such a man will stand firm for ever. (Ps 14: 2–5)*