

22<sup>nd</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time, 29 August 2021

Scriptures: Deuteronomy 4:1-2,6-8; James 1:17-18, 21-22, 27;  
Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

Homily: Fr. Ken

Today's three scripture readings raise one of the more vexing issues of biblical religious faith. Just what religious rules and regulations does God demand we keep, and which ones can we discard?

Is it possible that some of our most fervently kept laws don't even come from God?

The act of keeping laws goes back as far as Scripture itself does.

Interestingly, however, the act of keeping religious laws did not always provide a ticket into heaven, as many Christians believe.

The majority of our Jewish ancestors knew nothing of a heaven or hell as we conceive of it. Belief in heaven did not enter Judaism until just one century before Jesus' birth. In fact, many Jews today still do not believe in a heaven.

It was only in 100 B.C. that some Pharisees received the insight that we find in the first chapter of the Book of Wisdom. They began to realize that if people build a proper relationship with God in this life, the eternal Yahweh, that is God, will continue that relationship into eternity.

The author of the Book of Deuteronomy, this weekend's first reading, was writing approximately 500 years before the Pharisees' life-changing insight on the afterlife. The author clearly tells his readers why they are to keep God's laws: he says "that you may live, and may enter in, and take possession of the land which Yahweh, the God of your ancestors, is giving you".

In other words, he says that you may have a long, and fulfilled life right here and now. Thus, only a fool would waste the only life he or she will ever experience; only a fool would ignore the 613 laws of Moses that guarantee a long and fulfilling life.

But how do we know which of these 613 laws or any other biblical regulations are from God and which have been created by human persons? In the Gospel for today, Jesus zeroes in on that distinction.

Some Scripture scholars contend that, because of the way the Gospels were created, we can know practically nothing about the historical Jesus. Yet even the most rigorous of these scholars concede that this particular Palestinian Jewish carpenter, that is, Jesus, who lived between 6 B.C. and 30 A.D., had a reputation for either breaking religious laws, or finding ways around them.

When his followers later remembered his ministry among them, they also remembered his law-breaking personality, something essential for those committed to carrying on his ministry.

Hence the question: What regulations are we to keep, and which ones are we free to break?

The Jews of Mark's Gospel distinguish between human and divine regulations. Just because someone is faithful in adhering to "the tradition of the elders", is no guarantee he or she is actually keeping God's law.

This we already saw in chapter 2, the beginning of Jesus' public ministry, with a series of "conflict stories" demonstrating Jesus' conviction that we cannot build up the Kingdom of God by just simply keeping an institution's rules and regulations.

God only becomes evident, working effectively in our lives, when we go beyond, and even counter to, what organized religion demands.

According to both the historical and the risen Jesus, rules should change when one is made aware of the harmful effects of those rules. That seems to be why Jesus insists we always remember the Sabbath was made for us, not vice versa. Laws were created to help us, not simply to be obeyed.

Similarly, in the Second Vatican Council it states that moral decisions be made "in the light of the Gospel and of human experience".

Pope Francis seems clearly to be following the example of Jesus and Vatican II, in determining which laws should be kept and which should be adapted.

In the not too distant future, Pope Francis will be announcing the next Synod of Bishops, except that it will be a Global Synod, not just for bishops but for the entire Church. The first step will be to establish that all the People of God will manifest total honesty about the impacts on people of current laws and practices regarding contemporary ecclesial and global issues.

Pope Francis has consistently called for such honesty, assuring people that they are free to say whatever they think needs to be heard. He will challenge bishops and others who are in dispute among themselves to voice the impact and effects of current Church teaching on the very lives of God's people, by listening to the human experiences of the people in every diocese and archdiocese throughout the entire world. What Pope Francis wants is honesty.

It is from the honest discussion of how people's lives are impacted today, that Pope Francis and the bishops can move forward in responding positively to the needs of the People of God.

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