

22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time, B – September 2, 2018 – Very Rev. Bryan W. Jerabek, J.C.L.
Cathedral of St. Paul, Birmingham, Ala. – 5pm Vigil, 8:30 & 11am Sunday Masses – 850 words

Moses, in our first reading this week, sees the revelation of God’s law as a great blessing for the people of Israel. Because God chose to reveal his law to them, they were a “great nation”; it was also a sign that God was particularly close to them. This was in contrast to the other nations, not chosen by God and effectively left to their own devices, to live as slaves of their passions and subjects of their rulers. The revelation of God’s law to Israel meant the laying out for them of the path to salvation; for following that path Israel would be, in the words of Moses, “wise and intelligent”.

Legalism is something that is always found in at least some sector or another of any society of laws; it is difficult to avoid entirely. Legalism involves a sort of fixation on the outward form of the law, while its “spirit” or deeper meaning is ignored or sidelined. The Pharisees and Scribes were continuously at odds with our Lord over such matters. They took great pride in their knowledge and following of the law; but Christ had eyes to see into the depths of their hearts, and he saw that their zealous observance of the law was little more than an empty shell. In challenging them on this he does not invite them to forsake the law and simply do as they wish; instead, he calls them to a deeper understanding that leads, in their living out of the law, to inner transformation.

And it is important that we remember this. So often the response to legalism is a rejection of law. But that is not what Jesus has revealed. Recall how he also said in another gospel passage that he had not come to abolish the law but to fulfill it. He reaffirms the law by living it in its proper sense, and perfectly. God’s moral law is challenging: so much does he love us that he does not just leave us to our own devices, but calls us to something much higher. When we are hypocritical about how we observe his law, he renews his call to follow it in its proper sense – not forsake it. And Jesus does this by modeling the way that we should live. Following the moral law is imitating Christ. To do so is to be wise and intelligent.

There is a hint in today’s gospel that shows us the way to avoid falling into the trap of legalism ourselves – or, if we are already in it, how to get out. Christ says, quoting the prophet Isaiah, “This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me...” Are our hearts close to the Lord? Is my heart close to the Lord? Can I say that with sincerity? The sincerity of our prayer and worship is an indicator of how well we are following the Lord. For our heart is so often our guide in life, and where our heart is, to there our actions tend as well. When our hearts are with Christ, we desire to follow the moral law – even if it is sometimes, or often, a struggle. When our hearts are far from him, following the law is a drudgery, and perhaps we might do so, but only or mostly for legalistic reasons.

If we do find that our hearts are far from the Lord Jesus, then we should not become discouraged, but rather seek the remedy – with confidence. Very often the remedy involves taking the first step of making a good confession. So many people nowadays do not use this sacrament as they should. Experiencing his forgiveness for our failures is a way to reignite the love that was once there but that at some point started to become more of an empty shell. It will open the gates of grace and contribute to real spiritual progress. If you have not made your Easter duty, or if you have perhaps not even used this sacrament in many years, I invite you to return. If you do not make use of this sacrament regularly, I invite you to do so more often. It is a wise and intelligent thing to do in order to serve the Lord in sincerity.

The greatness that Moses spoke of to the people of Israel is not for only a select group anymore, but for all who draw near to the Lord, who is very close to us. It is to serve him not

only outwardly, but more importantly, inwardly. His law is meant to transform us. Legalism will not get us into heaven. Only by a sincere imitation of Christ – which is precisely what following the moral law is – can we hope to come to share in the glory that God has planned. Let us ask ourselves the questions throughout this week: “Is my heart close to the Lord?”, and, “Can I say that with sincerity?” May the Lord Jesus remove whatever barriers might hinder us, as we seek to follow him sincerely.