

22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year B, September 2nd, 2018

Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-8

This is the fifth and last book of the Pentateuch, which is the name given to the first five books of the Old Testament.¹⁰

Moses said to the people: This is the first of the three sermons that Moses, who had been disobedient and was consequently unable to enter into the Promised Land, spoke to the people just before he died. 600,000 men of fighting age survived to enter Canaan. On the plains of Moab overlooking the Promised Land, Moses gathered the people to hear his final words. He now delivered three long speeches that together formed an impassioned exposition of Yahweh's covenant. Only Moses, Joshua, and Caleb, and a few people who had been children forty years earlier, survived of all those who had seen the plagues of Egypt, the miracle at the Reed Sea, and the proclamation of the law on Mt. Sinai. Most of this generation had been born in the desert.² There are some distinctions between the covenant at Sinai where God appeared to Israel in fire and smoke and here at Moab where He is silent and absent. God spoke directly to Israel at the time of the first covenant but here He has commanded Moses to do the talking. God has not spoken directly with Israel for forty years because of their worship of Baal-Peor. In addition to the original covenant agreement, God added three new sets of conditions: legal concessions, ritual stipulations and redemptive curses. These all contain distinctive elements peculiar to Deuteronomy which were given, for the most part, because of the hardness of Israel's heart.¹⁷

1 "Now, Israel, hear Truly listen to the statutes Laws and decrees Judicial decisions based on the laws which I am teaching you to observe, that you may live, and may enter in and take possession of the land which the Lord, the God of your fathers, is giving you. The giving of the Law is intimately connected with the promise of the land.¹ As the Israelites moved into the land and began to settle down among pagan peoples, the law was the safeguard to keep them devoted to the one true God. The law taught them to avoid the false idols and sinful ways of their neighbors.⁴

2 In your observance of the commandments of the Lord, your God, which I enjoin upon you, you shall not add to what I command you nor subtract from it. There was a great cry by the people to change some of the laws and Moses told them that these laws were the work of God. He knew that to make changes in God's law would be to assume a position of authority over God.⁷

6 Observe them carefully, for thus will you give evidence of your wisdom and intelligence The observance of the law is connected with wisdom which is the ability to recognize the TRUE values of life.⁵ to the nations who will hear of all these statutes and say, 'This great nation is truly a wise and intelligent people.' Israel's obedience to the Law will be an eloquent lesson for all other nations,

which implies a mission for the chosen people.³ One test of the quality of our observance is what others have to say about us. Remember the words of Jesus: “By this shall the world know you are my disciples, that you love one another.”⁶
7For what great nation is there that has gods so close to it as the Lord, our God, is to us whenever we call upon him? Moses stresses the privileged position of the Hebrew people, chosen as they are by God from among all the nations of the earth, and enabled to draw near to him in a close relationship quite beyond the experience of the Gentiles. The fact that God is so near his people and so accessible to them turns out to be the main argument for keeping the Law.³ Clearly, the law is not a burden, but rather, is another expression of God’s love for Israel.⁵

8Or what great nation has statutes and decrees that are as just as this whole law which I am setting before you today?” The Code of Law, which is found in Deuteronomy, does not fall easily into any class of legal formulations found in other ancient Near Eastern and Oriental codes. As a whole, it transforms the laws that were customary in the area. This transformation affects not only the practice of the law in details but also the spirit in which law is conceived and expressed. The code in Deuteronomy is not only a covenant obligation, it is more; it is a gift of Yahweh, it is Yahweh revealing Himself as the deliverer of Israel.¹⁰

James 1:17-18, 21b-22, 27

This letter was probably addressed to Jewish Christians living outside of Palestine. It may have been the earliest New Testament text, written in 49 or 50 or it may have been written about 60 to counteract some assertions of Paul who wrote in 54-58.⁹

Dearest brothers and sisters: In verses 13, 14 and 15 James argued that the real source of temptation lies within ourselves, in our own disorderly appetite and that temptation to evil cannot come from God.¹¹ Here he continues his argument.

17All good giving and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, This refers to God as creator of the heavenly luminaries—the sun, moon and stars.⁴ They are the prime instance of his giving good gifts.¹ From God as the changeless Fount of Light and Life only what is lightsome and living, only what is best for us can come. Hence the folly of supposing that temptation to sin could come from him.¹¹ **with whom there is no alteration or shadow caused by change.** Unlike the heavenly bodies, whose movements according to times and seasons result in corresponding variations in the light they send forth, their creator is unchanging; therefore his goodness never diminishes.¹

18He willed to give us birth by the word of truth This involves the acceptance of the Gospel message which was the necessary precondition of Baptism.¹¹ **that we may be a kind of first fruits of his creatures.** The first fruits are the choice

portions.¹¹ This OT image seems here to envision the author and recipients of the letter (who are first generation Christians) as having already experienced the divine birth ultimately destined for all mankind through Baptism.¹ Another consideration is that we are to be an offering to God that represents all creation.⁴

21 Humbly welcome the word that has been planted in you and is able to save your souls. The Gospel is received through instruction and it takes root and grows like a seed in the hearts of the faithful.¹¹

22 Be doers of the word The general theme of a “religion of deed” is characteristic of James and this verse is the unifying theme of his whole letter.⁸ Sacred Scripture frequently exhorts us to put the word of God into practice.⁹ As it says in Matthew 7:26: “Everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a man who built his house upon the sand.” **and not hearers only, deluding yourselves.** This means having a false understanding of the nature of genuine religion. It is important to know what God’s word says, but it is much more important to obey it! The word of truth from God will save us, but only if we act on it, merely hearing it is not enough.⁴ “Mr. Smith, he went to church. He went there every Sunday. Mr. Smith, he went to hell for what he did on Monday!”

27 Religion that is pure and undefiled Another translation says “Religion that is pure worship without stain” **before God and the Father is this: to care for orphans and widows** These are the natural objects of charity in the community. Women were dependant on their husband or father or son. They could not inherit. Without a man, a widow was an obvious victim and at the mercy of creditors and judges. In the early church there was an approved list of widows who could receive care from the church. They had to be at least 60, childless with no relatives, have a reputation of living a good life and they were expected to devote themselves to prayer and good works. Younger widows were expected to remarry.¹⁰ **in their affliction and to keep oneself unstained by the world.** This is not a complete definition of religion but it emphasizes certain aspects without which the practice of religion has no meaning.¹ Jesus himself tells us: “Whatever you do to the least of my brothers, you do unto me.” Early church writers often speak of virtuous lives as our first worship of God, which provides the basis for honest liturgical worship.⁴

Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

1 When the Pharisees with some scribes who had come from Jerusalem The mention of Jerusalem shows that the scribes represent the official attitude of prominent Jewish leaders toward Jesus.¹ **gathered around Jesus,**
2 they observed that some of his disciples ate their meals with unclean, that is, unwashed hands.

3(For the Pharisees and, in fact, all Jews, do not eat without carefully washing their hands, keeping the tradition of the elders. Hands were washed not for reasons of hygiene or good manners but because the custom had religious significance: it was a rite of purification. In Ex. 30 the Law of God laid down how priests should wash before offering sacrifice. Jewish tradition had extended this to all Jews before every meal, in an effort to give meals a religious significance, which was reflected in the blessings which marked the start of meals. Ritual purification was a symbol of the moral purity a person should have when approaching God; but the Pharisees had focused on the mere external rite. Therefore Jesus restores the genuine meaning of these precepts of the Law, whose purpose is to teach the right way to render homage to God.¹²

4And on coming from the marketplace they do not eat without purifying themselves. And there are many other things that they have traditionally observed, the purification of cups and jugs and kettles and beds.) Mark explained these Jewish rituals because he was writing for a non-Jewish audience of Christians who had been pagans. He explains these customs in some detail to help them realize the significance of the events and teachings reported in the Gospel story.¹²

5So the Pharisees and scribes questioned him, “Why do your disciples not follow the tradition of the elders but instead eat a meal with unclean hands?”

6He responded, “Well did Isaiah prophesy about you hypocrites, Jesus is accusing them of acting without sincerity. as it is written: ‘This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me Legalism takes account of a man’s outward actions; but it takes no account at all of his inward feelings. We may serve God outwardly and bluntly disobey God in inward things and that is hypocrisy.

7in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines human precepts.’ This is from Isaiah 29:13 where Isaiah reprimands Jerusalem for consulting its politicians while rejecting the prophets. Because their leaders routinely exclude the Lord from foreign policy decisions and rely instead on their own wisdom, their worship of the Lord has become empty and vain. No longer, says Isaiah, will Yahweh tolerate their lip service when their hearts are devoid of living faith. The Pharisees have fallen into the same trap of rejecting God’s wisdom in favor of their own. As a result, their venerated traditions are empty and in dangerous competition with God’s will as revealed in the gospel.¹³

8You disregard God’s commandment but cling to human tradition.” Jesus’ focus is on healing while the scribes and Pharisees focus is on hand washing.¹⁶

14He summoned the crowd again and said to them, “Hear me, Jesus directs their attention to himself.¹ all of you, This is a universal doctrine.¹ and understand.

15Nothing that enters one from outside can defile that person; but the things that come out from within are what defile. This was a surprise because there was no rabbinical teaching like this. It came to have significance when the Church was

confronted with the question of whether Gentile converts were to observe Jewish dietary regulations. At our distance it is hard to realize how cataclysmic this principle was. It was over this practical matter, more than over theoretical issues, that Christianity divided from Judaism.¹⁶ This is the reference for the phrase “I confess to Almighty God, and to you my brothers and sisters, that I have sinned through my own fault in my *thoughts...*” which we find in the Penitential Rite at the beginning of the Mass.

21 *From within people, from their hearts,* In biblical terminology, the heart is the center of the person and the source of every decision that manifests itself through deeds. Jesus thus links true defilement with the heart, where evil actions and intentions have their hidden beginning.¹³ Every outward act of sin is preceded by an inward act of choice. *come evil thoughts,* which give rise to evil actions, *unchastity,* This is not limited to fornication but includes every kind of traffic in sexual vice.¹⁴ *theft, murder,*

22 *adultery, greed,* This refers to the love of having which is in the heart of the man who sees happiness in things instead of in God. It has been defined as the *accursed* love of having.¹⁴ *malice,* Actively evil, this is the quality of a man who desires to harm others.¹⁴ *deceit,* The word means crafty, cunning, clever treachery.¹⁴ *licentiousness,* This is a disposition of the soul that resents all discipline. Such a person is marked by disregard for legal and moral, especially sexual, restraints.¹⁴ *envy,* This refers to the sadness at the sight of another’s goods or advantage and the immoderate desire to acquire this for oneself, even unjustly. When it wishes grave harm to another it is a mortal sin. The 10th Commandment requires that envy be banished from the human heart. Through the devil’s envy, death entered the world. *blasphemy,* The act of showing contempt or lack of reverence for God which is forbidden by the Second Commandment. *arrogance,* This word refers to the man who has contempt for everyone except himself. This feeling of superiority is a form of pride and God resists the proud.¹⁴ *folly.* This refers to *moral* folly.¹⁴ It means wickedness, especially lewd behavior.

23 *All these evils come from within and they defile.”* Fulton J. Sheen makes an interesting point that people can see the sin within us: “Drunkenness is in the eyes, the bloated cheek. Avarice is written in the hands and on the mouth. Lust is written in the eyes. There is not a libertine, a criminal, a bigot, a pervert who does not have his hate or his envy written in every inch of his body, every hidden gateway and alley of his blood, and every cell of his brain.”¹⁵

Some of the material for this commentary was taken from: (1) “The Jerome Biblical Commentary,” (2) “The Story of Stories” by Karen Lee Thorp, (3) “The Navarre Bible: Pentateuch,” (4) “Workbook for lectors and gospel readers: 1997” by Lawrence E. Mick, (5) “The Book Of Deuteronomy” by Raymond E. Brown, S.S., (6) “Workbook for lectors and gospel readers: 2003” by Aelred R. Rosser, (7) “The Bread of Life Catholic Bible Study” by Deacon Ken e³ Marie Finn, (8) “You Can Understand The Bible” by Peter Kreeft, (9) “The Navarre Bible: Catholic Epistles”, (10) “Dictionary of the Bible” by John L. McKenzie, S.J., (11) “The Sunday Epistles And Gospels” by Monsignor Patrick Boylan, (12) “The

Navarre Bible: St. Mark,” (13) “Ignatius Catholic Study Bible: The Gospel of Mark,” (14) “The Gospel of Mark” by William Barclay, (15) “Life of Christ” by Fulton J. Sheen, (16) “Mark: Good News For Hard Times” by George T. Montague, S.M., and (17) “A Father Who Keeps his Promises” by Scott Hahn.

In loving memory of Peg Schneller, who compiled these commentaries.