

22<sup>nd</sup> Sunday (B)

30<sup>th</sup> August 2015

'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, there is a moment when the wayward pirates, challenged about their not keeping the 'pirate code' think for a moment and reply, "well, it's not so much a rule, as a 'guideline'."

As we hear the Lord in the Gospel today criticize elements 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 of our faith should also be more 'guidelines' than rules! Is that really what Jesus is saying? — 'Guidelines,' not 'rules,' as if to say, "don't worry too much about them"?

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 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 do not defraud our employer or our employees; that we must pray. Are these the same sort of thing as the 'external rules' of the Pharisees that Jesus criticizes? Do they actually get in the way of loving God, as Jesus suggested the Pharisees' observances did? Should we take the laws of the Church as rules, to be obeyed at all costs, or are they just guidelines for us, to be kept or broken as we see fit? (Given consideration, but not 100% binding?) There is, of course, always the tendency to keep rules as if the rules were God — that's Jesus's critique — but if divine laws are understood properly, as a gift from a loving God, then we can live them well.

Here are a few considerations:

- (i) **Law is not alien to God:** He has always given us laws! He made the world, and ordered it, and gave it its laws: laws of nature, and laws of human behaviour. Think of the Ten Commandments —

given to us by God back in our Jewish ancestry., 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.

- (ii) **Laws are good for us** — they give us a true guide to what is right, as God intended for us. They're not an invitation for discussion, but a clear direction.
- (iii) **To obey laws is not blind, or brainless.** We're invited to *think*, and also *believe*! The Church 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 truly consistent with our 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, therefore the laws work in our favour, a rule for good and therefore happy human life.

- (iv) **Can't pick-and-mix**, believing this, dissenting from that. That wouldn't make sense. 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 there are parts of Church teaching that we haven't yet understood, or feel alienated by, then we need to pray and ask God to reveal to us His will. We need to ask Him to enlighten our hearts by His Spirit, so that we may see the good that He intends by our keeping of that law.

It is the Catholic faith that we would truly be better people if we kept God's commands in full. It says again and again through the 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, not simply as 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. *Lord, how I love Your law, it is ever in my mind.*