

Dear Friends,

There is a well-known liberal Jewish rabbi called Jonathan Romain, whom I once saw waiting for a train at an Underground station. At the time I had a project to complete as part of a course of studies, which was to find out something about Jewish spirituality. I took the opportunity to ask Rabbi Romain if he could give me a one-minute rundown on the subject! He was waiting for a different train, so there was no time to say much, but one thing I did manage to pick up was that "Jews do not have spirituality, that is for you Christians."

I wondered what this meant. On another occasion, on a flight to the Holy Land there were a number of ultra-orthodox Jews travelling, and I got into conversation with one of them, who said something like, "For us there is no separate item that can be called spirituality: it is living the Law by which we know God."

Spirituality has become something of a buzz-words these days. You will often hear people say, "I am spiritual, but I do not want to subscribe to a religion." Again I wonder what this might mean. I think what they intend is that they have a sense of something more than, or other than, the world in which we live, which we can see and touch, but they do not subscribe to any particular beliefs about what that other might be. This sense can lead them to have certain values or ideas about how we should live, but they do not want to pin it down to specific notions about God or the nature of the universe.

I am not sure whether this position is defensible. It seems to me that if you do have a sense that this world is not all that there is, you cannot but ask questions about what this means and will seek answers to those questions. Spiritual people will say that we cannot know anything about God, we cannot even know for sure that he does exist, so there is no point in pursuing such matters, and certainly not in constructing a set of religious beliefs about him: it is how you live that matters, whether you live in a self-centered or other-centered way. I do not think anyone would want to dispute that how you live matters a lot!

Religions come about, however, because in wondering about the world and their life people find - through experience - that some ideas about it make more sense to them than others. We do not believe in God and Christ as his Son because we like the idea of it or wish that it were so, but because we believe that we can genuinely know God in ourselves, in other people, in the world around us. Knowing him in those ways we come to see that it is the same God whom we know also in prayer, in the Scriptures, in the sacraments of the Church, and this helps us to continue believing that our religion is rooted in the truth about God.

Spirituality and religion to my mind need to go together and can support each other. If you only have some indefinable sense of the Other, it can easily be free floating and individualistic; if you have religious beliefs, they can easily become a dead letter unless they proceed from real knowledge of the Other, God, who is at the heart of the religion. Here is where Jewish and spiritual people come together in saying it is how you live that matters most, whether you are following the Law or not.

In the first reading of this Sunday's Mass, from the book of Deuteronomy (the Second Book

of the Law after Exodus/Numbers), the writer strongly insists that the people should keep the commandments of God exactly as he lays them down for them. In doing so they will show their wisdom and understanding, and it is living the Law that keeps them close to God: 'What great nation is there that has its gods so near as the Lord our God is to us whenever we call to him; and what great nations is there that has laws and customs to match the whole Law that I put before you today?'

It may be that this is what the rabbi and the man on the aeroplane meant when they said that there is no extra element which we can call spirituality over and above living the Law, in doing which we know God. And certainly the Christian Scriptures too often say that there is no point in professing beliefs about God unless you live by his commandments, putting the beliefs into practice. The letter of St. James in this Sunday's second reading, for example, says that "Pure unspoilt religion, in the eyes of God our Father, is this: coming to the help of orphans and widows when they need it" - and doing everything else that the Law enjoins.

As Christians we have the teaching of Christ to consider and know the fierce criticism he directs against those who place so much emphasis on living the letter of the Law that they overlook how their own behaviour contradicts their belief in God. In this Sunday's Gospel reading he contrasts outward observance with what is going on at the heart of a person, and seems to suggest that it is the inward knowledge of God - what we mean by spirituality! - that matters most. He says, "This people honours me only with lip-service, while their hearts are far from me." And he says it is not what comes into a person from outside that makes him clean or unclean, it is from within that good or bad intentions emerge.

The demands of Christian living are not easy. We must not only do the right thing, but do it for the right reason. Our inner self, the heart, and our outward action must cohere. Quite a tall order, you might think! Certainly it directs us towards the importance, perhaps the priority, of giving attention to God. We can think of the two sisters, Martha and Mary, receiving Jesus into their home. Martha bustles about being very busy, sweeping the house, laying the table, cooking a nice meal, while Mary just sits and listens to Jesus speaking, apparently doing nothing. But maybe that is the sort of loving attention that he, and we, need most. It can even be easier to be busy doing things than sitting still and giving heartfelt attention to the other. We can also ask why Martha is so busy. Is it really because she wants to please their guest, or is it that so people will say, "Isn't she marvellous, so hard at work while her lazy sister does nothing?" If that is what we want, the good report of others, we can have it, but what will please and satisfy most is not people's opinion of us, but the loving attention of our heavenly Father. As Jesus says, "It is Mary who has chosen the *better* part, it will not be taken from her."

Time we give simply to attending to God will always benefit us, and will be evident even more in how we do what we do, how we live our lives. Spirituality and religion - the heart centred on God and the outward observance - go together, both are needed. An American Franciscan called Richard Rohr leads a Centre for Action and Contemplation. In a talk I heard him say that people ask which is the most important word in that title, to which he replies, "The most important word in our title is the word *And!*"

Wishing you every blessing, Fr. Robin.