

August 30, 2009

**The Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 17b)**

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

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Georgia

*The Rev'd Geoffrey M. St. J. Hoare*

Making As

Jesus' attitude to the law of Israel is not always easy to sort out. Certainly he was not as bent on denying the usefulness or validity of the laws as some have suggested. At the same time and clearly he wanted to reframe the purpose of the law so that it could be life giving as was the intent when Moses was first given the Commandments. There is clearly a place in our moral development for simply obeying the rules. In time, however, the rules become less important in and of themselves and are more a pointer toward what really matters. St. Paul got this when he makes the point that the law shows us the reality of sin<sup>1</sup>.

You may be aware of The Rite of Reconciliation in the Prayer Book. It may be more familiar to you as 'confession'. When using the rite, some people confess a long list of the rules that they have broken. Their penitence is usually heartfelt or they wouldn't be making use of this spiritual practice that is available to everyone but not often used in much of The Episcopal Church. I'm sure that God honors such an offering. But I think that confession is rather more useful spiritually when the penitent confesses what was sinful about breaking the rules rather than simply naming the fact that they were broken. What was it about this or that piece of wrongdoing that broke relationship with God or self or others? For those broken relationships are the result of the broken rules and the true consequence and content of sin. The law points to what is important rather than serving as a policeman or supreme governor in itself.

I've been reading pat Conroy's latest novel<sup>2</sup> which moves back and forth in time between a group of adults and the time when they formed their friendships as teenagers. It has put me in mind of my own development. I remember in particular how my main academic efforts in my teen years involved trying to get the right answers and so make the right grades. I saw essays on works of fiction as puzzles in which I had to try and get the right answer. I worked on the unexamined assumption that there really was a 'right answer' out there somewhere and I simply had to work it out or find it. The idea of really thinking for myself, offering interpretations, taking intellectual risks, 'trying things on' and the like was something that came rather slowly for me. I was well into my undergraduate years when I started taking courses in seminar settings where I finally began to grasp that there wasn't some mythical 'right answer' to many of

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<sup>1</sup> Romans 7:7

<sup>2</sup> *South of Broad*

the questions of –say–religious language and religious knowledge, (my favorite course at the time), and that what was required was that I share my thoughts. I was, in effect, beginning to be liberated from the rules. The secret to making As was not ‘getting the right answer’ any more than obeying the rules is what life is all about. (I believe that it is no accident that it was in this same time frame that I began to shed a very heavily rationalistic type of evangelical Christianity, in favor of a faith that is not all about getting the right answer and is more about living into right relationship in God’s grace.)

It is all too easy for us to read our passage from Mark today in such a ways as to give us a new set of rules. What is important, says Jesus, is not all the purity laws about clean hands and clean pots. What is important is clean hearts. The things that come out of us are the problem, not what we do or don’t eat. We should be worried about fornication, theft, murder, adultery and the like, because these evil intentions come from the heart. We can be quick to judge such behaviors, especially in others, and quick to set up laws with penalties for such wrongdoing. All this activity puts off the moment when we have to look into our own hearts which is the path that will lead us to the heart of the gospel. One point of the gospel is that we can be somehow released from these evil and destructive impulses and not simply by exercising such will power as we might have in keeping the law and affecting a kind of moral rectitude. It is as we grasp the might and majesty and magnificence of God’s extraordinary grace that we find ourselves being transformed by love.

And here is where things get tricky for us more often than not. Who among us does not have something about ourselves or our lives that we would just as soon change? And yet somehow all the love in the world does not seem to fix whatever it is that we would change. If only there was some pill or magic solution. If only there was some kind of jailhouse-like conversion that made everything alright in the twinkling of an eye. But what goes on inside us that affects our behavior – compulsions, desires, thoughts and so on do not seem to be so easily changed. Would that we were like Jean Paul Sartre’s mythic waiter who is only really a waiter when he is waiting tables and who can be anything he chooses as a matter of existential freedom simply by choosing something else in good faith. But we are not. A philosopher called José Ortega y Gasset gets closer to the complexity of our makeup when he writes “I am myself plus my circumstance”<sup>3</sup> Who we are is certainly bound up with our wills and our choices, but also with our circumstance, --our history and the way we were raised, commitments we have made and the unique ways in which our circumstance have shaped who we have become over time. We cannot wave a magic wand and simply find our whole makeup, our desires and hopes and expectations changing in the twinkling of an eye. No. Conversion is a long process of opening ourselves to knowing, --really knowing—the love of God. This kind of deep conversion leads to the transformation of our desires, and shifts in the circumstance of our life as we allow ourselves and our choices to be shaped by what really matters. We engage

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<sup>3</sup> *Meditations on Quixote*

the spiritual practices of the faith. We gather around the Lord's Table. We study the story of Jesus that tells us who we really are and for what we can hope reasonably in relation to God. And in time we find that the law points us to notice new things even as we can rejoice that the old has passed away. We can rejoice that what comes out of our hearts is increasingly kind and generous and loving and we find ourselves increasingly liberated. We start living for relationship rather than high grades. We discover that the law is not a policeman but a gift of grace and we give thanks for the time we have had for such transformation to take hold in the depths of our being.

In our customary time of silence for prayer, I invite you to consider what you might like to change in your life and then ask God's help in the days and months and years to come in effecting that change in your heart. Let us respond to the gospel in silence and in prayer.