

22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year B

Fr. Samuel Springuel

29 August, 2021

1st Reading Deuteronomy 4:1–2,6–8

Responsorial Psalm Psalm 15:2–3,3–4,4–5

2nd Reading James 1:17–18,21b–22,27

Gospel Mark 7:1–8,14–15,21–23

Most of us have probably spent some time lying on our back looking up at the clouds and pointing out how this one looks like a bunny and that one a car or some such thing. It may have been a while ago, perhaps when you were a kid or had kids of your own, but there is something about the experience of looking up at the clouds and finding familiar shapes that is relaxing and brings a smile to our faces.

I'd be willing to bet that you've also found yourself staring at the wood grain of a piece of furniture or flooring, or the texture in a stone or road surface only to find some strange face staring back at you that disappears when you blink and look again.

In both cases, we see these shapes or faces because there is an aspect of our minds that craves order. Random stimuli, be they cloud shapes, wood grains, or stone textures, don't fit into any of the usual boxes we use to organize our perceptual field and so our mind tries to impose more familiar categories onto them in order to make them easier to process.

This desire for order isn't just a visual phenomena; it can also occur in the way we structure our moral and spiritual life. Rules and traditions arise because they provide order to our lives and allow us to neatly categorize our behaviors and experiences into boxes like good and bad, just and unjust, pure and impure. This, in turn, allows us to make predictions about how various courses of action might turn out and thus exercise some control over our lives. Indeed, one can argue that it is our ability to not just recognize in, but also impose order on, the world around us that has allowed the human species to become such a dominant force on this planet.

The problem is that we can take that desire for order too far. Both of my earlier perceptual examples demonstrate this, as we are seeing shapes or faces which aren't really there, but they are relatively benign examples. When it comes to our moral and spiritual life, the consequences of imposing more order on the situation than is actually present are much more serious.

Such is the situation for the Pharisees of Jesus's day. They were rightly proud of The Law: it had been given to them by God through Moses on Mount Sinai, and they considered it to be the most just of all the laws of the nations they knew about. However, in their zeal to honor the Law, they extrapolated from it and created rules and traditions which were not in the Law itself.

Of course, this was done with good intentions; much like we wear a crash helmet to protect our head in the event of an accident, so too these additional traditions were intended to ensure that the Law was not violated by accident. The washing rules mentioned in the Gospel, for instance, were meant to ensure that someone who had been inadvertently, and perhaps unknowingly, exposed to a source of impurity while out in public, would remove that impurity before it could propagate within their home or to their food or, most importantly, to their worship in the Temple.

The problem that developed for the Pharisees, that Jesus is railing against, is that avoiding violations of the Law became an end unto itself. They forgot that the Law did not exist for its own sake, but rather to promote due reverence and right relationship with God, the source of that Law, and justice amongst God's people. In adamantly enforcing their traditions, the Pharisees may have avoided technical violations of specific precepts of the Law, but they undermined the Law's whole *raison d'être*. It would be as if we insisted people wore helmets, but those helmets were too big for them: covering their eyes (and thus significantly increasing the chance that they would get into an accident) and providing inadequate protection in the event of a head strike as they slide off the head and expose it to hitting the ground.

We Christians today are not immune from this sort of zeal either. I'm sure any one of us can think of some group, or perhaps even one or more specific individuals, whose zeal for a particular teaching of the Church is such that we feel they rigidly enforce it at the expense of the love Jesus commands us to have for one another. We must be careful however, in casting such judgements. As Jesus reminds us elsewhere in the Gospel, we must remove the plank from our own eye before we attempt to remove the splinter from someone else's. Each of us have our own overabundance of zeal: rules or traditions which *we* are determined to protect at the expense of love of God and neighbor. The plank in our own eye often means that we are blind to the damage we do; that we only see the good things that we mean to protect with these rules and traditions. In this we are deluding ourselves into thinking that we are righteous, favored in God's eyes, even as we hurt those on the margins: the widow and the orphan, the poor and the outcast whom God especially loves and in whom we should find the face of the Lord who said, "whatever you did for the least of these, you did for me."

This is not to discount order. The Law is God's gift, as is our ability to reason, to discern order in the world around us, and we should make use of these gifts. However, we should always acknowledge our own imperfections, question our assumptions, and strive to develop our knowledge, rules, and traditions to be ever more in line with the will of the Father of lights. It is in doing so that our imperfect can approach the perfect gift from above.