

22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time – by Father Dave

The story is told of a holy abbot who for many years was the proud owner of a pet cat, which had strayed onto the monastery grounds. The holy abbot felt sorry for the cat and adopted it, and, whenever he went to pray, especially if it was for a long liturgical service, he would gently tether the cat in the entrance to the chapel doorway so that it couldn't run away. He had done this for many years and, when he eventually died, his former monks felt they must continue the custom. As soon as they gathered for worship one of their number would ensure that the cat was present in the doorway. But, of course, eventually all the monks who had known the old abbot died. And finally the cat – who had lived to a great old age for a cat – died too. It was decided that the ancient custom must be maintained, and so another cat was acquired and duly posted at the chapel door at the start of every service.

The years went by and one day a new recruit, quite a young man, joined the monastery. He was intrigued by the cat's presence and asked one of the older monks for an explanation. "Strange that you should ask," he replied, "but, I have no idea why we do that. It's just that this is the way we've always done things around here."

Customs, traditional ways of doing things, are part and parcel of every society, religious community, and individual. Some customs and traditions can be extremely useful, but over time they can become pointless. They can even become dangerous, especially if they're clung to blindly, without any thought of what lies behind them, or of their probable consequences, or of the possibility that there might be a more helpful way of doing things.

Today's Scriptural Readings speak of this. Moses, in Deuteronomy, commands the people to follow their God-given "laws and customs". And in the Gospel the Pharisees and scribes complain to Jesus that His disciples are not "complying" with what the Law requires.

Today's readings explain what true religion is. It is not simply a scrupulous, external observance of rules, laws, traditions and rituals. It is a loving, obedient relationship with God expressed in obeying His Commandments, worshipping Him, recognizing His presence in other human beings and rendering them loving and humble service. Prayers, rituals, Sacraments and religious practices only help us to practice this true religion in our daily lives.

St. James defines true religion as keeping the word of God and doing His will by helping the needy, the poor and the weak in the community. He challenges Christians to become doers of the word, not merely hearers. In today's Gospel, Jesus describes true religion as serving God and all His children with a pure and holy heart.

Today's readings prompt us to examine our attitude towards our own religious customs and practices. We, too, can become rigid and narrow – saying: "We've always done it this way." Sometimes when we see changes that have been approved by the Church – changes

that do not change the doctrines of our Faith but only in the translation of some prayers that we've been used to – we balk at it. Even around our homes with our families we may have "traditions or customs" and say: "It's always been this way." We are stubborn and cling to the assumption that our way of doing things is the best way – the only way.

Jesus ends the controversy in today's Gospel by insisting that the heart is the source of "evil things"; but, by implication, the heart is also the source of good things. Jesus desires a heart that is humble, a heart that knows its own limitations, a heart that is ready to accept change when change is called for, a heart that is in fact like unto His own. He calls us to be, like Him, "gentle and humble in heart."

Let us pray for the Conversion of the World
& for Peace.

Saints for the week – **August 29, The Beheading of St John the Baptist** – his parents were Zachary, a priest in Jerusalem, and his mother was Elizabeth, a kinswoman of the Virgin Mary. He lived as a hermit in the desert of Judea until 27. He began to preach along the banks of the Jordan River and stated, "Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand." Many people came to hear him, including several who would become Christ's apostles. It was John who baptized Jesus and pointed Him out as "the Lamb of God Who takes away the sins of the world." After the baptism, John continued to preach along the banks of the Jordan.

The Gospel of Mark records the circumstances of John the Baptist's death. Herod had John imprisoned because the Baptist had condemned the ruler's marriage to Herodias, his brother's wife. Infuriated with John, Herodias plotted to kill him. At a birthday banquet, Herod, delighted by the dancing of Herodias' daughter, told her that he would give her anything she requested. At her mother's prompting, she told him, "I want you to give me the head of John the Baptist, here and now, on a dish." John's death is celebrated by a feast, because it resembles in so many ways the death of Jesus. Like his Master, John went to death silently and helplessly, a victim of petty revenge, human cowardice and cruelty. His death in such absurd circumstances was his confession of faith in God, Who alone sustains the human heart when it seems crushed by evil and injustice.

The Nativity (birth) of John is celebrated on June 24.