

22nd Sunday per Annum - B
Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-8;
James 1:17-18, 21b-22, 27;
Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23
Little Flower - 9/2/12

My Brothers and Sisters,

For the last several weeks, our Gospels have come from Jesus' Eucharistic Discourse in the sixth chapter of John's Gospel. Today we return to Mark's Gospel. Today I would like to offer several brief reflections on various verses from today's readings. I hope that everyone finds at least one to think about more deeply.

St. James wrote, "*All good giving and every perfect gift is from above.*" In other words, God is the giver of all gifts, human and divine. God gives us gifts directly or indirectly through others or through his provident love for us. If God is the giver of all gifts, we are called to always be thankful to God. We show our gratitude to God by sharing our gifts with others.

Moses said to the people, "*For what great nation is there that has gods so close to it as the LORD, our God, is to us whenever we call upon him?*" If this was true for Israel, it is even more true for us. Jesus is God's greatest gift to us. He is Emmanuel, God with us. However, he is also the Word made flesh, the Son of God having become human. Moreover, he promises to be with us wherever two or three are gathered in his name and for all days even until the end of the world.

James wrote, "*Humbly welcome the word that has been planted in you...Be doers of the word and not hearers only...*" This passage reminds us of a theological axiom: whenever God gives a gift, God asks for a response.

Moses also said to the people, "*Now, Israel, hear the statutes and decrees which I am teaching you to observe, that you may live...*" The paradox of Christian life is that the more we obey God's Word and keep the commandments, the more free and the more fully alive we become.

We tend to define religion by belief and worship. However, St. James includes in his definition of true religion "*to care for orphans and widows in their affliction and to keep oneself unstained by the world.*" Service to others, especially to those in need, is as much part of our practice of religion as believing in Jesus, celebrating Eucharist, and keeping the commandments.

James calls us to keep ourselves unstained by the world. When I was growing up in the 1950's and 60's, we were not exposed to a lot of different and contradictory voices. The various communities of which we were part shaped our thinking and our behavior and, therefore, our character. Those communities were primarily family, church, school, and neighborhood, and all of them for the most part were in agreement about the values and principles by which we should live our lives.

No more! Today we are bombarded by so many different voices, especially from the media. All of these voices are giving us conflicting messages about what is good, what is beautiful, and what is true. Pornography offers the best example. In the past, pornography was not easily or readily available to the average person. Today it is everywhere and easily available to anyone of any age.

My brothers and sisters, we deceive ourselves if we do think that our beliefs, our values, our behavior, and ultimately our character are not influenced or shaped by these messages. Jesus' words then come true: "*From within people, from their hearts, come evil thoughts, unchastity, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, licentiousness, envy, blasphemy, arrogance, folly. All these evils come from within and they defile.*"