

**Where is the Church Heading?**      Wednesday, November 14, 2007    7:30 PM  
COR Center    SMMP Adult Faith Formation

I think that the beginning of being a pastor of a new parish it's important for me to **reflect on: What is a parish for?** And I think we all might carry on a conversation about: What is a parish for? I think that too often we jump from the particular to the general, and we start with vision statements and mission statements about our particular parish, without thinking first about: Well, what is a parish for in general?

Now **Jesus** himself had some fundamental ideas about life. He was Jewish, as you know, but he did not accept all of Judaism. But you might be surprised to know he **never rejected any of the written Law**. And there were six hundred, over six hundred written laws, six hundred-thirteen. He accepted all of them as the word of God. On the other hand, he was somewhat radical in the way he more or less **combined all the laws and summarized them in two**—that's true. He had his radical side, but he also had a very traditional side.

Now where he constantly disagreed with his own co-religionists was about what was called the "**oral tradition**." This is what constitutes the *Talmud*, especially the part called the "*Halakhah*," an oral tradition that according to the rabbis went back to the time of Moses and was orally imparted to the priests at the time of Sinai. **Jesus didn't accept that**, clearly. And the early Church didn't accept it at all, clearly. This is why really **Judaism and Christianity are distinct religions**. And we are. Part of getting along and understanding one another and developing **interfaith relationships is recognizing that we really are different** first and foremost, and not pretending we are all more or less the same.

However, going back to the written Law, Jesus did accept the written Law, especially the Book of Deuteronomy. Now Deuteronomy is really the second law; at least it's called the second law. It's actually the third time it's really put forth. But it's the second law, and it has a certain sort of coherence to it. **Deuteronomy influenced Jesus' life, as also did Isaiah and the Book of Psalms** more than any other part of the Old Testament. So it seems to me, if we're going to wonder about: What should Jesus' followers be doing in the twenty-first century? we might want to go back to: **What did Jesus think in the first century? What was his idea? What was his background? What was his purview?** So I thought I'd share a few ideas.

Now background to that is some way of thinking about society, because Deuteronomy is all about society. Sometimes because we are Americans and because we live in a country where we have freedom of religion totally divorced from the state—thank God—nonetheless, sometimes because of that **we blind ourselves to the social implications of our religion**. So I want you to think about: Maybe there is a way in which our **religion is supposed to be affecting the society we are living in? Not simply being tolerated but being influenced**—that's what I want to suggest.

Now when I originally addressed the staff, I drew a little figure—very useful for Christians—the idea of a pyramid or **a triangle**. But in this particular case what this represents is the way in which societies structure themselves, where this line represents

**political structures.** This line represents **economic structures** and this line represents **religious values.**

This is the contention of a particular author; Linthicum is his name, Robert Linthicum. And his observation is that **at the root of every society there are actually religious values,** even if those religious values are atheistic, because by “religion” he means **the fundamental core values that make everything work.** This works this way. There are **articulated and unarticulated values.**

In our society we have many articulated values that don’t go anywhere. That’s true of every society. We have our politicians, for example, talk about what they want or what they believe, and it sounds wonderful. And you say, “Well, that’s what I believe in.” But they really don’t, or they may well not, because very often those are not the actual values that are supporting the structures that they are bringing into being or supporting.

So, first of all, we have to be a little bit skeptical. It is not rude to be skeptical. It is not rude to want leaders, your leaders, our **leaders,** to be **held to account for what they claim to believe in.** So we have to **look at articulated values,** listen to them and then say, “Well, now are these really what people believe in? Is that really what’s making this thing work?” And then we have to **look at unarticulated values,** values that no one says anything about, but are really working, influencing the whole society.

Now the system, any system, the system we call our society, involves first of all the values on the bottom, then the structures on the side, and then individuals. **Not every citizen is very significant.** But there are certain citizens they are very significant in putting together the system we call our society. **The significant ones are the ones who are the managers of the society in whatever way.** We could sometimes even include church people if indeed they have tremendous influences. Sometimes they do; sometimes they don’t.

What Christ was working for, what Deuteronomy worked for in the beginning, what **Christ returned to, was the idea of systemic change.** Now systemic change means a change of everything—a fundamental change. He preached *metanoia*, **which is a fundamental change in the way people think.** But that is only the beginning of something much grander, which is **the transformation of, not only individuals but whole societies, through the power of the kingdom.**

So Jesus’ first message is: “The kingdom of God is at hand. **The kingdom of God is at hand,**” **which means near—near but not exactly functioning.** So he called on people to open their arms and their hearts and their minds to this kingdom and to welcome it. And then he **demonstrated what it was like through his works, especially healing.** And if you noticed his healings are not ordinarily the healings of things we would think of. For example, it’s not necessarily the healing of someone with cancer, but they are rather more significant in this sense that they are the healings of people who are born blind. That’s actually not a disease; but if you were born blind, you would like to be able to see. The whole idea of **blindness is very symbolic in regard to whether people**

**really know where they are or are really in touch with the light.** Well, the blind are not.

Look at the other actual healings that Jesus effects. Leprosy. Now leprosy is not Hansen's Disease. It is not the sort of thing that existed on Molokai. Leprosy in the Bible means any contagious disease that required someone to be secluded from the community. So when Jesus went to heal lepers, he was reintroducing people into a communal life, so that sense of being more than simply a miracle, a wonderful thing. It was more than a wonderful thing. It was a wonderful thing, but it was also a wonderful thing that **reconnected people.** So it was also a way of **preaching in sign.**

You will also remember that when Jesus healed one of the men of blindness, he took him away from the crowd. That's also significant because a lot of our blindness is the fact that we are living with each other, and we tend to see what everyone else sees. And if we see something someone else doesn't see, we probably don't believe we did see it, because we live by consensus. And one of Jesus' ideas was to **break the power of consensus.** And he did so with this startling gospel that began with **a requirement that people change their way of thinking and then open themselves to this kingdom.**

It's through the word, "**the kingdom of God**"—the term did exist in Judaism. It's found in the Book of Daniel, for example. **In the Book of Daniel it refers to a coming age of freedom from oppression.** But with **the way Jesus used it,** it didn't simply have that idea. It was a little fuller. It really tied into a much more powerful idea found throughout the whole Old Testament, **the idea of covenant.**

You will recall, the night before Jesus died he took a cup of wine, the kiddush cup from the Passover Seder, and he said, "This is the cup of my blood, the blood of the new and everlasting covenant. It will be shed for you and for all so that sins may be forgiven." Now that's very significant as well, because what he is saying at that time is that his impending death is not some sort of terrible tragedy; it is not some horrible shame, and it's not murder. It's actually a sacrifice. It's an offering that he is giving and **he is giving it in order to break down the enmity that exists among people and divides people from God.** So covenant is an old idea.

The third basic idea that goes together with kingdom and covenant is *Shalom*. "**Shalom I leave with you,**" Jesus says. And *Shalom* in Hebrew does not mean peace in the ordinary sense of absence of war; it's a little more developed.

In all these things we are discussing the **difference between the world as it is versus the way it ought to be.** Kingdom and covenant and *Shalom* define the world as it ought to be. It ought to be a kingdom of God—the world now, not some other time, not some other place. Of course, the power of God cannot be limited to the present age or to the material world. That's true. But **there is no reason why the kingdom of God should not reign in the material world in our present day lives.** That's Jesus' clear message, and the Church has never doubted that. Individuals have doubted it. In fact, there's a certain version of Christianity that doubts it completely. It's called "pre-millennialism." Pre-

millennialism denies that the kingdom can come now. It cannot come until Armageddon destroys here and establishes the kingdom in power. Until then we are poor, hopeless, powerless, miserable sinners who can't do anything. That is the view of a very large swab of American Christians, sad to say. In the old days we would have called that "heresy." We don't use that word any more. But it's not gospel according to the Church's traditional understanding. The kingdom has come, and the kingdom can take root. **Jesus told his disciples to pray every day for the kingdom.** "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth." "Thy will be done on earth" means it's not being done in the way things are, but it can be done. That's the way things ought to be. **That would involve the kingdom. That would involve a reestablishment of the covenant. That would involve Shalom,** which I will describe in a little while, as a primary condition of life on earth. So it is our role then as believers, **baptized believers, gathered together in a parish to proclaim the way the world should be and to do something about the world.**

Going back into the book of Deuteronomy to look a little bit about how this was envisioned in the first place, we see that **Israel existed in its covenanted form as a distinct, separate entity different from all the other nations.** The nations in plural, Goyim are not under the guidance of God—they are not. This is not a Christian viewpoint. I'm talking about the original Israelite idea found in the Book of Deuteronomy. God's direction is only for Israel. **God saved a downtrodden people from bondage, and then established them as a people who would then follow his rule and accept him as king.** And accepting God as king is something actually very courageous because it means that what all the kings did for their people, Yahweh would do for his people. It sounds almost like libertarianism—no government. That is really what it was. It was **no government because Yahweh was king.** I'm not recommending we go back to that. I'm simply saying that was the origin of these ideas, that they so much believed in God's power to reign, to rule over them, that they didn't need a government and could not have an earthly kingdom.

Now you know that **this all changed in the time of Saul.** But if you remember what happened, if you read the book of Samuel, Samuel told the people they could not have a king because that was a violation of this very idea of covenant. God came to Samuel in a dream and said, "Samuel, it's not you they are rejecting; it's me. Go ahead, give them what they want, but they'll be sorry." And they were. Nonetheless, that's the whole idea of God being king.

Secondly, God's word is law. **The constitution of Israel was the word of God.** Again, we have to understand this in the context of that time. We cannot redo this. We cannot go back to this, although I think the Pilgrims and the Puritans that came to this country had a very similar idea: that the word of God was the constitution, and it was brief. Basically, the stipulations were what we today call the "Ten Commandments," the Decalogue. That's very brief. **There's no bill of rights, just a bill of obligations.** In fact, some believe that the word "*berit*," covenant, means basically "obligation."

See right now the difference between the ancient understanding of human life and the modern? The modern is based on the rights of individuals, what individuals should have,

what they have a right to. But in the ancient, it was: What ought they be doing? In that the ancient is really more of a religious attitude. The modern comes out of the Enlightenment, which had a very strong atheistic bent. Again, I'm not against people's rights. It's part of our understanding of human dignity. But I am saying: **Where is the emphasis? There's no bill of obligations in any constitution in the United States; not one state has one. That is a flaw.**

**The Book of Deuteronomy then serves as a template against which the prophets would then deliver messages to Israel**, especially to the king when there was a king. In other words, To what extent are you following the direction of God? Isaiah used Deuteronomy to call Israel to accountability, and **Jesus did as well**. This is also the basis for this very strange book that's very hard to understand: the Book of Revelation. It's really a series of vignettes based on the idea of God restoring his people, but in a very peculiar way, as you probably know.

So now as we get into reading Deuteronomy, we have to ask ourselves: What is the context? **Whenever we read, whatever we read—What is the context?** What's being discussed here? What's the message? **The message basically is about coping in situations that were constantly changing, and how do you remain faithful?**

Now that's very similar to what we need to do. We have to, first of all, understand: **What is our context?** Where are we? What are the problems of our communities, our neighborhoods, our state, our county, our nation, the nations of the world? What are the problems that identify them politically, economically, religiously? What are our religious problems? **What's the message? How do we cope with various problems according to God's plan?** I really urge you to think about this seriously. I am afraid that a lot of really good Catholics don't think about God's plan when they deal with economic issues or political issues. They think, well, that's something else again. It's like **we live in a great divorce between things which belong to this world and the things of God** which belong to some other world. But the whole idea of Deuteronomy is everything is about God, and **Jesus' view was also everything was about God. There's no place where God doesn't belong.**

Now this requires a **great delicacy**, of course, even speaking about such matters, because **there has to be an appeal to something that everyone can see**, and that is not so easy. And then thirdly: **What application can we make?**

Now when we go to Christ and the rich young man says, "Well, what must I do to be saved?" He says, "Well you know the law. What does it say?" And he says, **"You shall love the Lord thy God with your whole heart, mind, and soul."** Well, that's Deuteronomy. Jesus once said that the whole Law is contained in that verse and Leviticus, 19: **"You shall love your neighbor as yourself."** Now they had that law; it was in the written Law, but it was not prominent. **Jesus put it together** with Deuteronomy and said, "That's the whole thing." **It's a radical way of editing the Law, but it's something we have to look at.**

So “Hear, O Israel!” Love is an intensely emotional thing, factor, reality. So when the Shema of Israel, this law, the watchword of Israel, says you must “love the Lord your God with your whole heart, mind, and soul,” it’s saying something about the kind of relationship God wants. It is a **wholehearted and deeply emotional and deeply personal affection, worship**. And when we tie that Shema to the idea of covenant, we see that the Book of Deuteronomy is talking about **living in a relationship, not only with God, but with all the other members of the covenant**. We could call this “relational culture.” **Relational culture means persons count**. Persons are important. **Human consciousness is central to our identity**. When Moses asked God, “Well, whom shall I say sent me?” He said, “I AM WHO AM.” He identified himself. He named himself: “I AM WHO AM,” which is *Yahweh* in Hebrew.

Genesis already said before that, that man, human beings, are made in the image and likeness of God. That means that **our feeling of “I,”** our ability to sense our own personhood, that awareness, that **is the image of God within us**. And somehow it reflects the nature of God and shares in the nature of God in a way that’s unique, not that every created thing doesn’t share in some degree the nature of God insofar as God is and everything that is shares in the nature of God through analogy—that’s St. Thomas—but in the very specific way human beings do through this feeling of “I,” this awareness within.

But human beings are also **endowed with free will**, so they can do as they please. God allows us to do as we please. This doing as we please can be setting up an **independent rivalry with God, which is what we call sin**—exactly what sin is, a rivalry with God.

But the **covenant** is not; its collaboration with God, free, deliberate, conscious **collaboration with God in unity with others**. So this affects not only personal, individual relations; it reflects the whole society because **God and society are intertwined**. Just go read the Old Testament; you’ll see that. God and society are intertwined at all times. So relating to God and relating to people is connected. So the social law of Israel, the covenant, is based on a religious value given from God in revelation. **There cannot be any right relationship with God, called righteousness, without a right relationship with neighbors**.

Now there are three groups in Deuteronomy: neighbors, aliens, and foreigners. **Neighbors mean other Israelites**. It is a criticism of the Old Testament understanding of the covenant that neighbors were to receive a certain sort of consideration that was not universally extended to others. Jesus did not follow that, mind you, so we don’t believe in that. We believe in a more universal ethic, but it was not really in Deuteronomy. But interesting enough, Deuteronomy makes a distinction between aliens and foreigners. Aliens are people that correspond to Jesus’ statement: “Those who are not against you are for you.” **Aliens are for you only because they are not against you**. They’re not really one of you, but they’re not your enemy either. That’s an alien. They are different.

Now it often says in the Law itself: “This is also true for your alien and your slave,” but not the foreigner. What’s the foreigner? **The foreigner is someone who lives by another god.** There are two different kinds of foreigners. The foreigners who live in the great city states that war against Israel, like Egypt, Babylon, Assyria, sometimes Persia—these states were organized in such a way that more or less the king was god. In Egypt they actually said that: “Pharaoh is god. Pharaoh was divine.” Rome said it too. The emperor was declared divine by the senate. But in these other countries they actually believed it. Rome I don’t think they ever believed it; that was just a way of talking. But these other countries, city states, really believed somehow that the gods, whoever the gods were, made it possible for this particular ruler and his friends to be in charge. And so religion was worship of the state for all intents and purposes. That was one kind of a foreigner.

The other was the kind we find in Canaan itself—**the worship of god in high places, which amounted to the worship of money**, because a golden calf is an example, is really a symbol, of money. Calf is fertility. Gold is gold. So the worship of a golden calf is the worship of prosperity, the worship of money. And this was prevalent in Canaan and called “Baalism.” *Baal* means “lord” in Ugaritic. And many of Hebrews who wanted to go over to that way said to the prophets, “Well, listen, *Baal* is just a different word for *Adonai*.” And the prophets said, “Oh, no, it isn’t.” Well it was in one way but not in another. There’s a different connotation. *Baal*, the word, does not point to Yahweh, the God of the covenant. It’s pointing to something else. So we don’t want to get involved in that, but it is part of the issue of how the people of God at that time were drawn into false gods. They had false gods before “the God,” and they worshiped in this false way. That is not simply an interesting fact from the past; that is always possible. **God’s people can be drawn into idolatry.**

Now the foreigners, for the most part, the foreign foreigners—not the Ugaritic foreigners, the Canaanites—basically accepted unilateral power, that is, the power of the ruling aristocracy, military, oligarchy, whatever you want to call it, that constituted life in Babylon, Assyria, Egypt. They were not concerned with righteousness or with justice or with the law of God. And they were not concerned with the serf class, which is the biggest class, the vast majority of people. The serfs in those societies were nothing but pawns on a board.

But the very idea of covenant eliminated the idea of the pawn. There were no pawns in the covenant community. **Everyone was a subject of divine interest and divine purpose and divine law.** It was really a very different way of looking at human dignity. You can see that **Christ is always raising people’s dignity.** He is always moving people up the ladder. In many different ways he **touches people’s sense of who they are.** This sometimes gets him in trouble, of course.

Now I want to read for a moment from Deuteronomy 16:19-20. “You shall not pervert justice.” This becomes fundamental. “You shall not pervert justice. You shall not show partiality. You shall not take a bribe; for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and subverts the cause of righteousness.” You know, I was at a shocking talk recently with a lawyer.

He was talking to me about why so many people settle lawsuits, even though there is absolutely no grounds. The reason is that law in our country has become so subjective that if you just get the wrong judge or you get the wrong jury, you can suffer terrible injustices. So people, knowing this, are settling, even though there is no real cause for the lawsuit against them. So this is what the word of God says about that. “You shall not pervert justice. You shall not show partiality. You shall not take a bribe, for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and subverts the cause of the righteous. Justice and only justice you shall follow that you may live and inherit the land which the Lord, your God, gives you.” So **justice is fundamental to the ability to inherit the land and to be what God called them to be.**

Now the **king**, when they finally got one—Saul was the first, then David and then Solomon and then there was a split: Rehoboam, Jeroboam and then the whole line of kings from Judah and Israel—but they were **only representatives of God**. They were not really king in the true sense of the word, in the old sense of the word, in the pagan sense of the word, although they tried to be. The prophets rose against them and said: You have no business acting this way. In other words, they acted like everything was for their benefit. Remember Ahab and the garden and Jezebel. You see **they acted like the kingdom was for them.**

Well, we can see that **today in business and in politics**. People act as if whatever they can get, is due them, **they’re entitled**. In fact, that was the defense of a famous person in Tyco, I think, yes. His defense was he thought he was entitled to everything he took. Well, so was Bonnie and Clyde entitled, so they thought. That’s basically the ethic involved. With people now it’s called “kleptocracy.” Kleptocracy—it’s a rule by stealth. According to the covenant, **Yahweh was really still in charge, and the king had no business acting arbitrarily.**

Economically—Israel was structured as a commonwealth. “Cities you did not build you shall inhabit. Vineyards you did not plant you shall enjoy. Cisterns you did not dig you shall have”. In other words, everything is a gift. And God kept reminding them: Don’t forget, you were once aliens yourselves. You were once slaves yourselves. Don’t forget, take care of one another. **God championed the oppressed because of his commitment to justice.**

God expected the people to keep their redemptive history in mind whenever they celebrated. It was part of worship. **Worship was remembering**. Remember what God did. Remember what God does, and **keep it in mind when you make decisions about your political or economical situation**. Never forget. “**There will be no one in need among you**”—this is a quote from Deuteronomy—“because the Lord is sure to bless you in the land that the Lord God is giving you as a possession to occupy if only you will obey the Lord, your God, by diligently observing this entire commandment that I command you today.” This is Deuteronomy 15.

Now in order to do that, they innovated a very interesting thing called the “sabbath,” not the seventh day of rest but the **seventh year of rest**. This was very interesting. Every



seven years everyone was able to tear up their credit cards. **All debts were cancelled every seven years.** All slaves were turned loose every seven years. Sometimes people say, “Look, there’s slaves in the Bible.” Yes, but only for seven years. Then it was your option to either be freed or to return to the service of your master if you preferred to, since some people did. Some masters were kind, so people preferred perhaps to be employed in a kind house than to be on their own.

Now everyone had their own little piece of land according to the covenant distribution. That’s all in the Bible. **Each tribe had their own tribal area.** But in time, of course, some people lost out. They sold their property or they lost their property through incompetence, laziness, or whatever. Or maybe they had a gambling problem. But every seven years they got it back. This then determined how much it was worth. So in other words, ownership was set; but you could, as it were, rent or lease land for six years and a few months, but never more. **You couldn’t take ownership of land that wasn’t yours by heredity.**

Also they had this idea of the **land had to lie fallow.** That was because—now actually that was a good idea—it wasn’t for the reason we allow land to rest. They thought that it had to lie fallow because they had to **acknowledge God is the source of true fertility.** So we have to acknowledge that. And so they were obliged to spend a certain amount of time saving grains and so on for that one year where they wouldn’t disturb the land.

**Loans could not bear interest.** This was the era before capitalism. People didn’t borrow money for business purposes. They borrowed money because they were in need. Therefore the law was you could not charge interest because that was **taking a profit from another person’s need**—not, mind you, that they really followed this, but it was the law. It was the idea of Deuteronomy.

Tithes, very interesting. Tithing—they were expected to give thirty percent of all their income. **Ten percent went to the Levites** because the Levites got no share in the land, so it was only fair to give them something. They couldn’t produce anything on their own. **Ten percent was given to the king to run the court system**—that was like tax. **Ten percent was given to the poor**, indirectly and in a festive banquet setting. So there was no government, and there was no St. Vincent De Paul Society; there was no middleman. It was the **responsibility of people to give their money directly to the poor in a celebration**, in a banquet setting, where you might say the goodness of God was being celebrated.

What’s the constant reminder? Don’t forget you are Hebrews; **you were once poor and powerless. Don’t forget who you are. And when you worship always remember the Lord.**

So this **idea of Deuteronomy**—I presented this not because I think we can actually copy it. **We cannot copy it.** They couldn’t copy it. They couldn’t keep this going. Two hundred years was the max. After two hundred years it fell apart. They had to have Saul come in. Well, why? Partly it was because of the Philistine invasion. They couldn’t

sustain it, but the fact is that these ideas are **ideas about justice**. These ideas are **ideas about balance**, and **we need to think about them**.

**I do not come as a pastor with a blueprint.** In fact, if anyone came with a blueprint, you should run—far, fast! There aren't any blueprints. But **we do have the word of God, and we do have the teachings of Christ, who is the light.** And there is a lot we can do, but **we do have to converse with people.** We have to think about: **What are we doing with our time. What do we do with our money? What do we do? How do we reach out to other people? Are we in touch with our leaders?** Mike Connelly—is he here tonight? Well, he's a member of our county board. It's wonderful that he is a member of our county board, but then he told me he's not going to run anymore because he wants to run for the state house. Well, that's good too. I'm not against that. It's just that it's wonderful to have someone involved. **We have to be involved in the life of our communities.**

And as a parish: **How is the parish going to manifest itself?** Now I know that there are more wonderful things going on here at St. Margaret Mary. You give money away in charitable giving, and it's well researched, well vetted, so you are not giving away money foolishly. And you have wonderful projects, and I am not saying there's anything wrong with any of them. I am just saying that **we need to constantly think about: What are we doing?** because sometimes the tail can wag the dog. We can get so used to what we are doing, that we don't think about **why we are doing it.** And then maybe we get very tired of doing it, so we quit. Well, we do not do what we do just to entertain ourselves and because we have time on our hands. **We should be doing what we are doing out of a sense of obedience to God, out of a sense that we want to live in the kingdom.** We want the kingdom to come rooted in our lives. Because we believe in covenant, **we want to have a relational community.** We know that when we are sent out on Sundays: "Go to love and serve the Lord," we are being **sent on a mission.** And it goes in all kinds of different directions: to your homes, to your offices, to your factories, wherever it is you work. And what are you taking? **Do you think of some way to bring something? There is no simple answer.**

We believe in Shalom. What is Shalom? **Shalom refers to the state of everything being the way God wants it.** It refers to health: mental, physical, material. It refers to justice in society. It refers to—I hate to say it—victory over your enemies. It's not the absence of war; it's victory over those who oppose the ways of God.

**Now how are we going to bring Shalom into a world today?** That's a great question. We as Christians do not believe in violence. Jesus eschews violence. "Do not resist violence," he said. So **how are we going to bring peace into a violent world?** Those are questions. So **I come to you with questions, and I encourage you to reflect and discuss them.**

Well, thank you all for coming