

**Rituals and Meanings**    Second Week in Ordinary Time    Monday, January 18, 2016  
8:15 AM    **1 Sm 15:16-23; Mk 2:18-22**    (We need a new garment. We need fresh skins. We need wholly something new. And that's what Jesus is presented to us.)

**“Obedience is better than sacrifice.”**

This is from the Book of Samuel. We really don't know all about the details of the historical events lying behind the stories, but **the stories themselves in the Old Testament contain nuggets of wisdom.** In a way, **the story of Samuel and the story in the Gospel of Mark are parallel. They both contain issues concerning long standing rituals. In the case of Samuel, it was sacrifice; in the case of Jesus' day it was fasting.** Fasting and sacrifice are part of many or most religions, probably all ancient ones. But the point of both of these is **neither are good in themselves. God doesn't delight in sacrifice for its own sake or fasting for its own sake.**

So in the case of the Israelites, the idea of **sacrifice** was: okay you are now a shepherd and your ewes are giving birth to new little lambs; well now some of those, maybe a certain percentage, should be offered to the Lord in gratitude, and probably also with this idea that you're priming the pump and if you give to the Lord, you will get more back. There was that idea. And by the way, those lambs roasted will become a wonderful, great celebration, festivity. So the idea is born of sacrificial offerings, festivals, and celebrations in honor of the Lord, but also keeping the blessings coming. Okay, so now, that's established. Now what does it require? It requires, what the word sacrifice implies in English, **giving up something, surrendering something.**

Now we have a story of these Israelites who decide that they're going to sacrifice someone else's sheep and oxen. And Samuel says, “What do you think you are doing?” Well, we took the best sheep and the best oxen we could find from the Amalekites and we sacrificed them to the Lord; the Lord must be pleased with that. Samuel says, “Are you kidding? Do you think he wants sacrifice?” That's not the point. That wasn't yours. You're not offering him anything. You stole it. It's tainted. It's not that the Lord needs your sheep. **The Lord needs your gratitude and your willingness to give up what you have honoring his bounty and blessings, expressing gratitude and petition.** And you're not doing it. You're counterfeiting the sacrifice.

**So this has to do with the meaning of rituals.** And Jesus talks about new skins. The problem is people just go through actions and do things and they don't even know what the meaning is. So is it really pleasing God? Well, of course not, not in itself. **Rituals are only**

**pleasing to God when they are informed by the proper intention.** This is very different from the idea of validity. A sacrament is valid in itself when performed by the right minister in the right circumstances according to the ritual the Church has assigned. That doesn't mean it does anyone any good. **Holy Communion only does us good when we come with the right intention, with the right disposition, with the right openness, with gratitude in our hearts, and willingness to open ourselves to God's will and Spirit.** If we don't come with that, do you really think just receiving it in itself is going to give value to yourself? Do you think God will be pleased? Quite the opposite. Paul makes it very clear **God is never pleased when we come with the wrong disposition.** So we have to think about how we do what we do, not just that we do it. **God is not pleased by mechanical rituals.**

In the case of the gospel, now it's **fasting.** Well, these people are acting like fasting is good in itself, that God is just pleased when people don't eat, when they give up food. Well, Jesus' point is, well, **what's the context?** There is a time for fasting, but it's not now. It's not just any time. It has to mean something. **It has to derive from something: a true spiritual reason and intention.** If we fast in order to free ourselves from compulsive eating or from simply our desire to sustain our own life, acknowledging a greater need to be sustained by a power greater than ourselves, well then, that is a right intention. But if we simply fast because we think that by fasting we are doing something good and we are going to get something for it, well, that's pointless.

**So Jesus says we really need new skins. That means we need new categories, new ways of thinking.** We can't just take the gospel of Jesus Christ and add it to the way we were brought up, as if that was really so Christian. Well, it might have had some Christian influences, but maybe it wasn't that Christian. **How many people have very well formed views and values that aren't that Christian?** Where did they get them? Well, from their families or from their society or from somewhere else, even from what they used to say "the nuns," but maybe they didn't take it right; maybe they misunderstood it in the beginning. **"You can't sew a new patch on an old garment." You need a new garment.** Jesus is coming bringing a new garment, **a new way of relating to God, and a new way of thinking about God, a new way of relating to others.** And a lot of the old ways of our society, of our culture, of our nation, yes, of everything we call civilization, a lot of that has to go. A lot of it isn't good enough. We need a new garment. We need fresh skins. We need wholly something new. And that's what Jesus is presented to us.