

If you have to make a choice, which is more important – going to Mass and saying your prayers or feeding the hungry and working for justice in our world? How should I spend my time? Making the church and the liturgy beautiful and writing the perfect homily or getting out into the parish and the school and visiting people? Is Christianity fundamentally about entering into the mystery of God or is it more a matter of trying to be a good person?

For Moses, it was about following the laws and customs, *'You must add nothing to what I command you, and take nothing from it, but keep the commandments of the Lord your God just as I lay them down for you.'* These laws and customs would appear to fulfil both sides of the religious equation – the ritual worship of the Lord on the one hand and how we should behave in society on the other. But there is a suggestion in that reading from Deuteronomy that there is more to keeping the law than simply obeying the external rules and regulations. To really keep the Law, means to have that Law in the depths of your heart. No other nation has a God who is as near to us as the Lord our God – our God is within us. As St Paul puts it: *'The word of God has been planted in the depths of our souls. We must listen to that word and act upon it.'*

Jesus has some very stringent words for people who are good at keeping outward forms of religion, good at washing their hands up to the elbows, good at washing the cups and pots of divine worship but who seem to have missed the central message. *'This people honours me only with lip service, while their hearts are far from me.'*

And St Paul in our second reading, *'Pure unspoilt religion, in the eyes of God our Father is this: coming to the help of orphans and widows.'*

So, does that mean we can give up going to church and Mass and just concentrate on helping people? Isn't that what Jesus is saying here?

Jesus then calls the people to him again and says something quite extraordinary – it's not things on the outside that make us unclean but things on the inside – *'It is from within, from men's hearts, that evil intentions emerge.'* Not just Hitler and Stalin but every human being has an enormous capacity for evil, and that capacity is deeply imbedded. True religion for Jesus means dealing with evil or the potential for evil in our own hearts. Only then will our religion be real. Only then will we be in a position to help other people.

Beautiful liturgy, or visiting the sick? Going to Mass or helping people? It's not a choice but two sides of the same coin, but underpinning them both must be the personal quest for integrity and holiness.

*Lord, who shall dwell on your holy mountain?
He who walks without fault,
he who acts with justice
and speaks the truth from his heart.*

Fr Michael