

As I was listening to the first reading there was a sentence that struck me. It was Moses' question to the people, "What great nation is there that has its gods so near as the Lord our God is to us whenever we call to him?" In the world of that time, when every nation had its own gods, Moses was reminding the people that their God was unlike the gods of other nations, because their God was always close to them. In asking the question, he was reminding them that the gods of the other nations were false gods.

Moses goes on to tell the people that the sign of God's closeness to them was that God had given them the Law. We can easily misunderstand what this means, if we think of it simply as a list of laws that they had to obey. The Law was a way of life that followed from the many actions of God on behalf of the people. But it was also very concrete and was lived out by following many laws and customs. And we know that over time the number of laws and customs kept multiplying.

This can all seem very remote from us. It was a long time ago, probably even two millennia before Jesus. Christians are not bound by the Jewish Law and all its customs and individual laws. So, why do we hear that reading today? I think the answer is that the God Moses spoke about, who was closer to the people than the gods of the other nations, is still close to us. Jesus is the guarantee of God's closeness. We sometimes refer to Jesus as the Word made flesh and the Word of God. If we listen to Jesus, we will be following the way of life that God desires for us. As Moses told the people, if we follow God's word, we will be wise and prudent.

This was also the message of St James in the second reading. He told those who would receive his letter to submit to the word which had been planted in them and it would save them. He reminded them that this was about more than simply listening to the word; it was also about putting the word into practice.

That was the point that Jesus was making when he was speaking to the religious leaders of his day. They had challenged Jesus because his disciples seemed not to be keeping all the laws and customs that had been handed down. Some of these laws and customs went into minute detail about how to wash pots and pans or even how to wash your hands before a meal. Jesus didn't have any problem with these customs, but he did have a problem with the hypocrisy of the

religious leaders who were more focused on following the laws and customs than on hearing the word of God and submitting to it. He was telling them that they missed the point of Moses' command. The Law was so that they might know God and learn wisdom and understanding. Jesus was pointing out their foolishness, because they honoured God only with lip-service, but their hearts were far from him. They had more or less made the customs into a false god.

Of course, we don't live with all those laws and customs that the religious leaders at the time of Jesus were so focused on. But there is still a message here for us. The basic thing Jesus was saying was that if we are not careful, we might stop listening to the word of God, and worse than that, we might even be unaware that this is what is happening to us. There are two aspects to this. One is that we don't hear the word; the other is that we don't put the word into action. The second follows from the first.

I guess the first question we all need to ask ourselves is, if it is not a whole raft of laws and customs, what are the things today that drown out the word of God. One characteristic modern life is that we are all very busy. We might not have the time to listen to the word of God, or when we do, our listening might be partial. In this case, we could find ourselves hearing what we want to hear, and not necessarily what God wants us to hear. Another characteristic of modern life is that we are always surrounded by noise. In fact, some people get uncomfortable if there is silence. Yet, all that noise can stop us hearing the word of God. A further characteristic of modern life is that society very easily divides things into the sacred and the secular and won't allow the two to overlap. The problem with this is that it becomes difficult to hear the word of God speaking through the events that happen around us. That can stop us growing in wisdom and understanding and can stop us putting the word of God into action.

Let's hear these readings today as words of encouragement. The encouragement we can take is that God pours into our heart his love and mercy. Hearing this, we live our life in praise of God and in so doing, we show that same love and mercy to others.