

## St Mary Abbots, Eucharist

Trinity 13

Deuteronomy 4:6-9

James 1:17-27

Mark 7:1-8,14-15,21-23

How good are you at following rules?

Who always follows rules?

Who here *likes* rules?

Now, a test of how good you are at following rules – just a random rule to judge you all by.

This is only for those of you who use the Tube I'm afraid, so put your hand up if you use the Tube.

Now, think back to the last time you used the Tube.

Can you remember the last time you went on escalator in a Tube station?

Impoverished as we are, High St Ken obviously doesn't have one.

Now, the critical question I have for you, and I'd like you to be totally honest in your answer:

Did you carry a small dog with you on that escalator?

And now, put your hand up if you didn't, be honest now.

Dear, dear. For all you self-professed rule followers, you've been flouting the very clear rule that you see on signs all over the Underground, which say that 'Small dogs must be carried.'

That's the only reason I bought Cuthbert, our dachshund, in the first place, so that I would be able to carry a small dog, and so be allowed on the escalator, rather than have to walk up all the stairs.

And you lot have been using the escalators without all the cost and trouble of having to feed and walk a little dog twice a day. How unfair is that!

Now, if you think I'm mad, and that you are allowed on the escalator on the Tube without a small dog, why do you think that is?

Well, I suppose it's because when we see that sign, we don't all follow it like a robot. We instinctively, without even really consciously thinking it through, think of what the purpose of that rule is, why the rule is there in the first place. In this case, to stop little doggies' paws getting trapped between the escalator steps, because not all dogs have learned how to make that little hop at the end, which I remember finding terrifying when I was a small child.

So, it is only really if you have a small dog that you must carry it; all of the rest of you don't actually have to have a small dog as a kind of passport to travel on the escalator after all.

Rules are therefore there for a greater purpose. We do not just follow them for their own sake. Much as those of us who like rules might sometimes like to think so.

[Mother Emma is probably heartily agreeing with this, because as a lawyer, and a church lawyer at that, I can sometimes be far too much of a stickler for following the rules.]

This does not mean that in each case we can decide individually whether to follow the rules— rules are also there so that there is order; there are commonly agreed ways to behave, which we human beings need in order to have stability in our common life. And that is a good thing.

But in order to use rules, we need to interpret them, and we interpret them by thinking about what they are for.

It would be easy to hear our gospel this morning and to think that we should get rid of all rules, and just look at whether someone is a good person, but it is not so simple.

The Pharisees criticise the disciples for not washing their hands before eating. In Exodus, handwashing is however only required of priests before eating. And so the Pharisees' rule, that all people should also do so, was far stricter. And it is this that Jesus admonishes them for, holding people to a far stricter human tradition.

It is difficult to pin down Jesus's approach to the law. In a part of this passage which was not read this morning, St Mark glosses that Jesus '*thus made all foods clean*', which would certainly not be following the law of the Hebrew Bible, as laid down in Leviticus. And yet elsewhere we hear Jesus say that '*not one jot, not one tittle of the law*', to use the Authorised Translation briefly, '*will pass away.*'

But if a precise answer on how to keep the Jewish law, or how much of it to keep, is difficult to arrive at, what the law is for is clear. It should transform you from the inside.

These practices, whether the Jewish law or human tradition, only have a point if they make you a better person: not following rules for the sake of following rules, but following the rules for the sake of drawing closer to God, through Christ.

James, in His one short epistle, is wonderful frank in this regard. '*[B]e doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves.*'

Not because faith is all about busyness and doing things, but because if you inhabit the faith of Christ, trying to live more and more after the example of Jesus, then who you are in your heart will be transformed.

And he ends his exhortation with a very real example:  
'*Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows.*'

In other words, pure religion is not just about coming to church every week, though that is a good thing, but it is about fully inhabiting the person who Jesus would have

you be. And indeed if we have a discipline of coming to church every week, it is so that we, and indeed the world, might be transformed by it.

If your faith is real, it will move you to action, rather than out of obligation to particular rules.

This week we as a church have been asked for help for those fleeing Afghanistan and arriving at Heathrow.

Many charities are asking for financial contributions, such as the British Red Cross and UNICEF.

Now, when our finances were particularly shaky, a decision was taken to limit our giving to £6,000 per year, and to focus on local causes, something which I think is scandalous, and hope will soon be changed. In the mean time, I very much hope that you will give personally.

We have also been asked for practical things, such as children's shoes and clothes, nappies, baby food, and I would love it if we could show as a church community that this is what our faith is to us: not out of a sense of obligation, in a tokenistic way, but out of free-flowing love for our brothers and sisters, in whom we see the face of Christ, giving freely of our plenty to them in their need.

Let our religion here at St Mary Abbots not be like that of the Pharisees, insisting that simply following our own tried and tested rules for ourselves is enough, or is what our religion amounts to.

What would you spend on your family's weekly shop?

Just imagine if we could all spend the same on those in far greater need from beyond our community, and fill the St Paul's Chapel with the result?

Now that would be St James's religion pure and undefiled.

We will be reading a full list of what those Afghan refugees arriving at Heathrow need at the end of the service, and next week I pray God that we will see, and show to those in need, and to ourselves, quite what kind of community we are.

Amen.