

In the name of the One who gives us every good thing that we may prosper:  
Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

I would imagine that just about everyone in this Church today has, on more than one occasion, been on the receiving end of unsolicited (though hopefully well-intentioned) advice.

Make sure you take your raincoat, wash your hands before every meal, don't forget so and so's birthday, whatever. But for all its abundance, probably nothing in this world is quite as unwelcome as unsolicited advice.

For one thing, it can certainly seem to impinge on our freedom. Most of us would generally prefer to make our own decisions about how we spend our time and live our lives. Another reason solicited advice is so unwelcome, it seems to me, is that – unless we're in the military – anything cast in the imperative voice is really distasteful because it sounds like an order. Whether it's 'take out the garbage' or don't forget so-and-so's birthday, we're not anxious either to hear or to heed imperatives. (The two exceptions I can think of to that general rule – two bits of imperative advice we generally are willing to hear and to heed, are 'have fun' and 'question authority'.

Well, if nothing is quite so unwelcome as unsolicited advice, how receptive are we to today's appointed readings, which are nothing if not full of advice. First, from the book of Deuteronomy, Moses tells the people: 'give heed to the statutes that I am teaching you', and watch yourselves closely'. And, from the Letter of James: 'be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to anger'. And in today's Gospel, Jesus tells the disciples: 'listen to me, ... and understand'.

That's a boat-load of advice, and piled on top of that, Moses not only handed out a laundry list of advice, but also had the nerve to suggest that everyone in the world was going to envy them for having all those rules. Maybe people were more gullible back then, but it sounds like a real stretch to me.

I do much better with the attitude that Jesus seems to take: rules, schmules. Clearly, from the story we heard, Jesus let his disciples break the wash-your-hands-before-meals rule. In fact, he seems to have selected as disciples a bunch of people who either didn't know the rules in the first place, or who weren't noticeably observant of them.

But you know, though it is true that Jesus probably set the Kosher industry back a few paces with his disregard of the dietary laws, he wasn't really in the business either of breaking rules randomly, or ignoring rules if they didn't particularly suit him. Jesus didn't come to put the laws of his ancestors in the garbage pile; he came instead to bring new and deeper meaning to those rules. And in the process, he did expose silly nit-picking, and he also exposed abuse of the Law.

Jesus was perfectly willing to 'question authority', because what Jesus urged was a life lived in the spirit of the rules, not their letter, and that bit of 'advice' is as appropriate now as it was back then. Questioning authority is still a perfectly good idea. It's O.K. to peel away what's nit-picky and abusive to find what the spirit is behind the rule and what it intends.

What Jesus also pointed out, however, is that when we get into the business of questioning authority, then we have to take responsibility for what we do. Besides, as Jesus said, 'there is nothing outside a person that ... can defile ... all ... evil things come from within'. So it's not really legitimate to disclaim responsibility by laying blame at the feet of outside forces.

I had a teacher in high school who told us never to make excuses, because it doesn't change the bottom line, and we looked like whiners in the process. I expect that Jesus would think that's really good advice. I expect that Jesus would have precious little sympathy with: 'the dog ate my homework' or 'my computer died'. Jesus took away our normal litany of excuses when he said that nothing outside us can defile us, and that all evil things come from within. But that doesn't mean that the world 'out there' is pristine and harmless. We know better than that; there are powers 'out there' to contend with. But at the same time as Jesus took away our litany of excuses, he also gave us all the equipment we need not to be defiled by those forces of evil.

Moses predicted that the world would envy the people of God for having a lot of rules to obey. What Moses anticipated, I am convinced, was that the

world would be jealous that they had a God who cared enough about how they live and what happened to them. ‘What other .... nation’, Moses said, ‘has a God ... as the Lord our God?’

What other God would have provided all that we need to resist the forces of evil and to thrive, even though it came at the expense of the beloved Son. Jesus came to offer that equipment – and not just by handing out unsolicited advice. Jesus offered – on a Cross atop a hill – to be that equipment, for you and for me. Thanks be to God, who cares that much.

Amen.