

Many people today call themselves atheists, without really understanding the word, or rather what the 'theism' is that moves them to and put an 'a' in front of it. Theism suggests a rather narrow and superstitious understanding of God, a superbeing somewhere 'up there' in the universe, with or without a long white beard. That 'God' is something akin to the Greek mythological Zeus, a god to be feared, a god who inflicts suffering, and also a god that cannot be relied upon. Hopefully most of us dismissed such a notion of 'god' long ago. The real God that we worship and serve can only be understood as ultimate source and reality, the creator who is beyond existence but intimately connected with it, and for whom all matter, all existence, depends on simply to exist.

That is really for another sermon, but such people often say that everything that is bad in the world is caused by religion. They are right to a certain extent because there is such a thing as bad religion. It is bad religion which causes prejudice, hatred, conflict, violence, and the separation of people from one another. It is bad religion that inspires religiously fanatical terrorist groups. Most, if not all of the apparently religious motivated conflicts of the world have nothing at all to do with authentic religion and certainly nothing to do with God.

Jesus encountered a lot of bad religion. Most of it was from people like the Pharisees. The Pharisees were not necessarily all bad people. When we meet them in the Gospels, we need to understand that awkward and pedantic as they often appeared to be, they were trying to preserve something very precious. Their obsession with ritual purity which we find in today's Gospel and their obsession with the Sabbath is part of their effort to protect and promote Jewish identity as they saw it while living as a conquered people under a pagan regime.

There is no doubt that Jesus respected the Pharisees and loved what was best in their values. But he took issue with them for their inadequate, selective, and often distorted observance of the Jewish law. They were absolutizing practices, customs, rituals, and practically turning them into God. Jesus saw this as hypocrisy and quoted from the prophet Isaiah to rebuke them, 'This people honours me only with lip-service, while their hearts are far from me.' Jesus also said, 'you put aside the commandment of God to cling to human

traditions.' The Pharisees were guilty of interpreting the law, the commandments, or some of them, in such a way that the original intention, spirit, and meaning were obscured or even ignored.

Jesus taught that all religious observance must be motivated by love, a strong, active compassion for people, particularly for those in need. This is good religion. It does not judge others, and it knows what harm can be done to a person who grows up in a household ruled by bad religion. My own father grew up in such a household, though not as bad as some I know of. But whatever faith he gained was stifled before he reached adulthood. His parents were religious people, Christians; and they were good people. But their religion was characterised by restrictions, too many 'thou shalt nots.'

Such religion is discouraging and damaging, at worst, destructive. It is, or was, often a response of fear, or a sense of inadequacy or insecurity that could only be addressed by a strict following of what were thought to be the rules, rules which were usually historical or cultural rather than gospel.

Jesus came that we may have life and have it abundantly. The religion that he taught and demonstrated encourages us to be humble, self-giving, generous, and to respect and engage with those we have often considered 'different' from us. This may sound similar to what is often called secular humanism or philanthropy. But Jesus lived and offered it in union with God, and in response to the reality that God is, a God who loves us, who wants to be one with us, and for us to be one with God. The whole of our life is about growing in our true identity as children of God, of more and more coming to reflect our heavenly Father's likeness, coming to feel and reveal God's love and compassion for this world, for people, for the creation itself, after the example of Jesus.

This is good religion, if religion is ever the right word. It is better to call Christianity a way of life, a way that sets people free, a way that seeks union, connection with God and with everyone and everything that God has created. This is the way of Jesus. The first Christians were called the people of the Way. Properly embraced and taught the faith that has evolved from the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ has never harmed anyone. On the contrary, it is life affirming and life enhancing. It is so sad that within the community of

the followers of Jesus, it ever got contaminated with influences that God would never own. May our faith tradition, our way, be only good. If we follow the genuine Way of Jesus Christ, it surely will be.