

Sunday Homily

22ND SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

29 AUGUST 2021

YEAR B

DIVINE OFFICE WEEK II

“Such a man will stand firm for ever.”

Illustration

The musical *Fiddler on the Roof* opens with a striking scene: a lone man balances precariously on the top of a roof, playing his violin. This is a symbol of the life of the Jewish people living in Tsarist Russia – with all its dangers, hardships and problems. Tevye, the main character, equates their life with being a “fiddler on the roof” – they are trying to scratch out a cheery little tune without falling and breaking their neck.

“How do we keep our balance?” he asks. “That I can tell you in one word: Tradition! Every one of us knows who he is and what God expects him to do.” There is a tradition for every activity, from what to wear to how to sleep. Following tradition is what enables the people to keep their balance – to survive and even have joy in their difficult lives. Tevye knows: “Without our traditions, our lives would be as shaky as a fiddler on the roof!”

Gospel Teaching

The Jewish people of Jesus’ day were also living in perilous times. And they too clung to their religious tradition to help them survive. That tradition was, after all, given to them by God through Moses, as our first reading clearly indicates. And yet often, in the Gospels, Jesus was accused of rejecting that God-given tradition. But for Jesus it was the religious leaders who had got the balance wrong. They were focusing so much on the minute rules (the “human traditions”), which had gradually been added over the centuries to explain the Law of God, that they had lost sight of what the Law was for.

The Law had become an end in itself. People had lost sight of its original purpose: to help the people to live as God intended them to live. In that beautiful phrase, Moses said: “Observe [the laws]... that you may have life.” That is what God wants – that we should have life, and have it to the full. The laws are given to help people to live fully, to live humanly, so that we can reach our full potential. They aim to prevent us settling for less, to stop us being less than human, less than God’s children, in the way we conduct our lives.

Jesus didn’t reject tradition. In fact, he was steeped in the Jewish tradition, as we see when he quotes the prophet Isaiah: “This people honours me only with lip-service, while their hearts are far from me.” The kind of tradition that Jesus says