

I am intrigued by the first reading we have today, especially that phrase towards the end of that reading: "What great nation is there that has its gods so near? What great nation is there that has laws and customs to match, that I put before you today?"

Moses had just finished a long speech, summarizing how God has led the people of Israel from their slavery in Egypt to the brink of their entry into the Holy Land. Now knowing that he cannot accompany them in the final step of their journey, crossing the Jordan, Moses reminds the people of how God has cared for them and how obedience to God's Law makes them who and what they are. It's a decisive point, for it is on how well they will observe and stay faithful to that Law that their flourishing as a nation will depend.

Moses urges them to make that observance their pride, so that the nations around them will say: "No other people is as wise and prudent as this great nation." And he goes on: "And indeed, what great nation is there that has its gods so near as the Lord our God is to us when we call to Him? And what great nation is there that has laws and customs to match this whole Law that I put before you today?"

"What great nation....?" They are words addressed to all of us, and invite us to think about what makes our nation great, or, better still; what would make our nation even better.

As Australian we often pride ourselves on our mateship, our tolerance, our inventiveness, our Anzac spirit that is still alive in the peace-keeping missions our armed and police forces engage in, and so on. We pride ourselves on how many people are able to own their own home, or the level of education that is available to all citizens, on the security blanket provided by our social services, on the standards of our health care.

But what about the people living on the streets, the youth who are unemployed, the people who can't afford private health cover, the people who fall through the security net because the conditions are too stringent, and they can't cope with them.

Why is that allowed to happen?

Our Gospel asks a question in that regard, when scribes and Pharisees question Jesus about how it is that he is not concerned about his disciples ignoring tradition and eating their food with unclean hands. Jesus draws their attention to the fact that they are more concerned about appearances than about the heart or the essence of things. Using the example of a cup he charges them with cleaning the outside of the cup, while leaving the inside, where the real problem lies, untouched.

He then calls the crowd to come closer and tells them: "Listen to me, all of you, and understand. Nothing that goes into a man from outside can make him unclean; it is the things that come out of a man that makes him unclean. For it is from within, from people's hearts that evil intentions emerge: fornication, theft, murder, greed, malice, deceit, indecency, envy, slander, pride, folly. All these evil things come from within, and these make a person unclean."

We have the answer there! The issues we have no reason to be proud of are the result of any combination of these evil intentions, and Jesus is urging us to look to his teaching to find a better way of doing things, - ways we find in the Beatitudes for example, or many of the other recommendations he makes in the Sermon on the Mount, - like turning the other cheek, or going a second mile with the person who forces him to go one mile with him. He is urging us to look at the parables like the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son, for ways in which we should relate to each other, and to that of the Unforgiving Servant to look at how foolishly stubborn we can be.

If we really want to be proud of our nation we need to look at the way in which we live our relationship with God, and how well we live the one commandment of his own which Jesus gave us: Love one another as I have loved you. That's what would really make our nation great, when love, a Christ-like love, is the wellspring and the driving force behind all that we do, for then selfishness and all its manifestations, which lie at the root of the shortcomings we find in our society, will disappear, and we can really be proud of who and what we are.