

TWENTY-SECOND SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

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

When the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around Jesus, they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them. (For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders; and they do not eat anything from the market unless they wash it; and there are also many other traditions that they observe, the washing of cups, pots, and bronze kettles.)

So these Pharisees and the scribes asked him, "Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?" He said to them, "Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written, 'This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines.' You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition."

Then he called the crowd again and said to them, "Listen to me, all of you, and understand: there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile." For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person."

REFLECTION 1: 'LIP SERVICE'

We're back again this Sunday to the Gospel of St. Mark. Today's Gospel begins with the issue of unclean hands, part of the Jewish ritual of purification. Jesus uses this as a powerful teaching moment, inviting us to look more deeply at what is clean and unclean. Indeed the Pharisees were right about one thing – Jesus and his disciples should have washed their hands before eating! Some years ago a number of cruise ships were alarmed to find that hundreds of passengers were suffering from stomach bug. Doctors urged frequent hand washing to prevent further outbreaks. Today, most shipping lines have hand gel at the entrances to their restaurants. Jesus was right in pointing out that it is what comes out of us, from our hearts that can make us unclean, as no amount of hand washing can cleanse an evil heart.

Before God each of us is worth only what our hearts are worth. From our hearts should come that worship, the acknowledgement that our whole existence, our whole being should be offered to God. In that offering we give expression to this centre of ourselves where the decisions we make as free human beings are taken. Vatican II suppressed a good deal of rules and regulations of the past in order to bring us back to essential integrity of heart. The law without the heart is hypocritical legalism. The law can demand external observance without engaging the core and centre of our faith. On the other hand the heart without the law spells laxity – and we need to hold that balance between what is right and prudent and 'whatever you're having yourself' kind of attitude.

Today's Gospel (Mark 7: 1-8) invites each of us to undergo a 'heart test' – to reflect on the truth of what we are before God and before our neighbour. As Christians we cannot remain true to our faith if we allow our piety to devolve into mere external ritual. Without a daily connection with God and the truth of the word within the community, we are only actors on the stage of life.

Jesus made the point that being a decent Christian (Críostaí fónta) cannot be achieved by external ritual only. Jesus, quoting the Prophet Isaiah, called such attempts 'lip-service' without any heart. True purity of heart and lifestyle grows rather from within, as unfortunately does evil – 'fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, malice, envy, slander', recalled by Jesus. In order for a person to be pure

and holy, the heart must be familiar with the word of God. That word must take root deep within. If God's word is truly heeded, it guides and inspires one's every thought, word and deed.

REFLECTION 2:

SHOW MERCY

The story is told about a rabbi who was in a Roman prison. As time passed he grew weaker and weaker even though he was on a minimal ration of food and water – just enough to survive. The prison doctor diagnosed dehydration as the old man's problem, although his daily ration of drinking water was adequate. The guard was told to keep an eye on the elderly man to see what he was doing with the water. It was discovered that the rabbi was using all the water to perform religious rituals before he ate or said his prayers. I think this story helps us to appreciate better the account in today's Gospel, to understand the shock and dismay Jewish leaders felt when they saw the disciples of Jesus eat without performing ritual washings.

Years before Jesus was born a group, known as the scribes, began to spell out in detail what they called the 'oral law'. It consisted of thousands of external rituals and to observe these was to be righteous before God and any Jew who failed to observe them was classed as a 'sinner'. To illustrate the danger of such rigid conformity a Jew could hate his neighbour, so long as he observed the ritual hand-washings! To be 'squeaky-clean' was all that mattered! Slowly religion began to degenerate into an activity of performing external rituals. Jesus opposed this kind of religion vigorously. We too must guard against identifying religion with performing external acts, especially if we perform them for the wrong reason in an unloving way. What counts is not what we do but the love of God and neighbour that resides in our hearts while we perform them.

Remember the Christening in the film 'The Godfather' as a cover for the brutal murders being carried out at the same time! Today's Gospel invites us to look into our hearts and ask ourselves to what extent do the words in our second reading apply to us? 'Do not deceive yourselves by just listening to God's word....pure and genuine religion is to take care of orphans and widows and to keep oneself from being corrupted'. Or the words of Isaiah 'these people honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me'.

Pope Francis said recently that what God wants is a 'Church of Mercy, a more pastoral church, a field-hospital for the wounded, rather than a tribunal that withholds the sacraments until people conform to the ideal'. Mercy is indeed the great challenge for our times.