

22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year B

GOSPEL

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The Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered round Jesus, and they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with unclean hands, that is, without washing them. For the Pharisees, and the Jews in general, follow the tradition of the elders and never eat without washing their arms as far as the elbow; and on returning from the market place they never eat without first sprinkling themselves. There are also many other observances which have been handed down to them concerning the washing of cups and pots and bronze dishes. So these Pharisees and scribes asked him, 'Why do your disciples not respect the tradition of the elders but eat their food with unclean hands?' He answered, 'It was of you hypocrites that Isaiah so rightly prophesied in this passage of scripture:

This people honours me only with lip-service, while their hearts are far from me. The worship they offer me is worthless, the doctrines they teach are only human regulations.

You put aside the commandment of God to cling to human traditions.' He called the people to him again and said, '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 make him unclean. For it is from within, from men's hearts, that evil intentions emerge: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, malice, deceit, indecency, envy, slander, pride, folly. All these evil things come from within and make a man unclean.'

(Mark 7: 1-8, 14-15, 21-23)

DID YOU KNOW?

Points of interest and Catholic lore

- Ritual purity had immense importance for the Jewish people. The laws governing washing probably originated in practices to ensure health and hygiene, but physical signs of impurity came to be seen as symbolic of a moral or spiritual imperfection.
- Judaism at the time of Jesus was made up of a number of different groups of adherents like Sadducees, Pharisees and Essenes. These groups sometimes held different beliefs—for example, the Pharisees believed in the resurrection of the dead, while the Sadducees did not. This did not cause undue problems, however, because what held all Jews together was a belief in one God, in the Law, in their election as God's chosen people and in a common worship centered on the temple in Jerusalem. Their unity was a stronger force than their diversity.
- The washing of the hands by the priest at Mass is symbolic of the desire for a pure heart.

EXPLORING THE WORD

This is one of those wonderful examples in Mark's Gospel where he gives an explanation for an audience who may be unfamiliar with the practices of Judaism. (It is widely held that the Gospel of Mark was written in Rome.) He explains the idea of ritual cleanliness as practised by Jews. The Pharisees were a group of especially observant Jews. They took ritual observance very seriously and criticise Jesus' disciples for their lack of observance. In this gospel text, Jesus makes two very important points. First, he observes that the Pharisees are presenting human observances as God's law, binding them to external practices. In doing this they are missing the point of what God truly wants from his people. Becoming obsessed with external practices and rituals is not what God asks of us. The prophet Micah (6:8) famously put it this way:

This is what Yahweh asks of you:
only this, to act justly, to love tenderly
and to walk humbly with your God.

- Look at today's second reading from the Letter of James. What does that say true religion is really about?

The second point that Jesus makes is that it is not what goes into people from the outside that makes them unclean but what is harboured in their hearts and minds. It is the thoughts, words and actions that come from within that truly show what a person is like. Mark is no doubt addressing these comments to his own community, where there may have been a similar tendency to concentrate on the externals of religious practice rather than on what God really asks of his people.

- What might Jesus affirm in your own heart and how might he challenge you to grow further?

MAKING CONNECTIONS

Opportunities for group discussion and personal prayer

- What 'human regulations' in today's world do you find difficult to conform to? Why?
- What rituals and traditions have been handed down in your family? In our Church?
- Can you think of occasions in our society when the 'letter of the law' may be different from the 'spirit of the law'? What do those terms mean? Have you ever acted in the spirit rather than the letter of the law? Why? Share your reflections together.
- What assists you to become more 'pure of heart' and to strengthen your commitment to Christ? For some it may be daily prayer, reciting the rosary, daily Scripture reading, meditation, volunteering at a community-service program, attending Mass or a visit to the church. Think about what helps you grow in faith and commitment, and keeps you focused on following Jesus. Practise this daily this week.
- Use today's entrance antiphon for your prayer this week:

*Have mercy on me, O Lord,
for I call to you all the day long.*

