

22nd Sunday -Year B - True Religion

A reading from the holy Gospel according to Mark (Mk. 7: 1-8.14-15.21-23)

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.”

The Gospel of the Lord

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- The first reading of this Sunday is taken from the book of Deuteronomy, the last of the five books of Moses. The word “*Deuteronomy*” means “*Second Law*” since the book contains a kind of revision of all that Yahweh had done in favour of his people on their journey through the desert.

Moses recalls it all to his people as they were about to enter into the Promised Land which he would not enter, **urging them to faithfulness to Yahweh** of whose love and forbearance they had ample proof.

Let them bear in mind at all times:

- The **wonders he had worked** in their favour, *his* commandments and recommendations, their repeated unfaithfulness to him,
- Yahweh’s **forbearance and patience** whenever they abandoned him by sin.

- This Sunday’s reading hence contains a warm recommendation of Moses to his people, **to reflect on the love and wisdom Yahweh** had displayed in giving them *his* Law:

- no other tribe could boast of having a god who had spoken to them in such **familiar terms** as Yahweh had done to Israel.
- his laws **were so wise**, that on hearing about them, tribes around would be amazed.
- So let Israel show its wisdom in turn, by observing those laws most carefully; their observance, says Moses, would bring to the people countless blessings.

This is the content of this Sunday's first reading.

Side by side with commandments given by God for all men and for all times, we find in the Scripture many norms that were meant only for the Jews, and meant only till the coming of the Messiah:

- On reading the Old Testament, we come across rules given by God to Israel which we no longer observe. Here you have a few instances:

- Jews married within the clan; we are strictly forbidden to do so.
- A woman giving birth to a child was forbidden to join the community at worship; for forty days if the babe was a boy and for eighty days if it was a girl (Lev. 12: 2-6) (Lk. 2: 22). We do not have such rule.
- Jews were forbidden to eat pork, just as Moslems are forbidden even today; we instead, relish a meal with it (Lev. 11:7; Deut. 14: 8)

There are in Scripture many other similar norms, which the Jews observed scrupulously, but which mean nothing to us.

*We may ask ourselves: **but if it was God who really gave those rules, how can we ignore them?***

- Pay close attention to what I am about to say:

The **Church leads us in religious** matters; it is the Church that issues laws to help us observe God's Commandment and to lead us in our Christian life. But **to rule us in ordinary life, we have the Government**; it is the Government that establishes rules to ensure peace and prosperity in the country.

Things **were not so with the people of Israel**. For many years, the same person led them in civil and religious matters; he was at the same time both, their civil and religious leader.

God chose Moses as the first and most famous leader in Israel to rule the people in all matters in his name; through him, Yahweh gave the people of Israel numerous laws and customs:

- Sacred laws, such as the ten commandments.
- customary laws to guide them in everyday life, such as laws regarding marriage and family, laws concerning inheritance, concerning crimes and their punishment, laws regarding various diseases, and even rules of cleanliness.

That is, among the people of Israel there was hardly a distinction between civil and religious life, or rather, for the Jews, everything was a religious matter, since their true ruler was Yahweh.

- There was a reason for this: God gave rules to his people in so much detail to keep them away from other peoples living nearby. The separation was necessary to avoid idol-worship and the sinful practices of their neighbours. God meant to keep his people holy so as to prepare the way for the coming of the Messiah.

- Therefore among the many laws given by God to Israel, we must distinguish between:

- Sacred rules which, like the ten commandments, were meant for all peoples and for all times.
- Customary rules meant only for the Jews and for a time; these would lose their meaning with the coming of the Messiah.

- The early Church understood this well when she decided that Christians coming from paganism were not bound to observe the Laws of Moses (Acts ch. 15) Inspired by the Spirit, Paul went a step further: neither were the Jews who became Christians bound by the Law of Moses any longer, since Christ's law of love had replaced that of Moses.

Thus we see the same early Church changing the weekly day of rest from Saturday to Sunday for both Jewish and non-Jewish Christians (Acts 1, 10; 20, 7; 1 Cor. 16: 2; Rev. 1: 10)

- It is curious that some recent Christian denominations should come now telling us that we Christians are bound to observe rules mentioned in the Old Testament which Christians gave up centuries ago. Anyone wishing to observe those rules is free to do so, but these preachers should remember that they cannot pick up those rules at random; if they say they are bound to observe Moses' Law they have to observe it in its entirety (Gal. 5: 3).

Like the Jews who gave so much trouble to Paul, these Christian preachers forget the purpose God had in giving the Law to the people of Israel: the Law of Moses was meant to guide Israel only until Jesus would come and establish the Law of love binding everyone and replacing *all* other laws.

True religion does not consist in external observance; it must come from the heart:

- Let us now come to the Gospel reading.

During his life, Jesus was *kind* to everyone, particularly so to children, to the sick, to simple, poor people, and to sinners.

But, as the Gospel of this Sunday makes it clear, there was a group of people that invariably provoked Jesus to anger: the Pharisees, and next to them, the Scribes who systematically opposed him and his teachings.

There were some exceptions however among them, Nicodemus, for instance, who sided with Jesus, (Jn. 3: 1; 7: 50; 19: 39) and Gamaliel (Acts 5: 34) who later became Paul's teacher (Acts 22: 3). Paul himself was a Pharisee and he was not ashamed of saying it (Acts 23: 6).

- The Pharisees were a group of people who had started well. When about a hundred and thirty years before Jesus came into the world, many Jews abandoned their religion on account of persecution, a group of people vowed to remain faithful to God and their religion and to scrupulously observe the Law which so many people violated.

They called themselves *Pharisees*, that is, "separated ones", people who would not break the Law as most people were doing at the time.

- But soon, the Pharisees developed into a group of proud, arrogant people who boasted of their holiness and despised everyone else. They went on adding rules upon rules to the Law of Moses, thus rendering-impossible its observance. For them, simple poor people who could not observe the many prescriptions they, and not Moses, had established, were to be considered "damned people" people good only for hell (Jn. 7: 49).

- We see Jesus in the Gospel upbraiding the scribes and Pharisees time and again for the following reasons:

- they had rendered the Law impossible to observe (Mt. 23: 4; Lk. 11: 46)
- they were proud and thought themselves holy, the only ones with whom God was pleased; nay, they claimed that God was bound to save them, since they scrupulously observed the Law.
- in their heart, they were full of hypocrisy and greed; exteriorly they observed the Law; interiorly however, their heart was as filthy as a tomb which is full of rotteness (Mt. 23: 13-32)
- above all, they refused to enter God's Kingdom by not accepting Jesus' teachings, and did their best to prevent others from following him (Mt. 23: 13)

- In this Sunday's Gospel, we see the Pharisees criticising the apostles for taking their food without first washing their hands. Luke tells us that on another occasion, Jesus did not hesitate to do the same thing himself, to provoke a Pharisee and expose his hypocrisy (Lk. 11: 37-44)

- Jesus gave them a fitting reply and here is the meaning of it:

Washing one's own hands before taking food might be a commendable thing, but it has nothing to do with religion; the most that might happen from eating food with dirty hands is an upset stomach.

Religion is something far deeper: it is one's own interior, mind and heart that everyone should strive to keep clean, lest unclean thoughts and feelings lead us to do what is sinful.

What *matters in religion is to give one's own heart to God*; external rules may help, but they do not make a person truly religious just by themselves.

4. Things being so, in *what does true religion consist?*

- This Sunday and on the next few Sundays, the *second reading is taken from the letter of James.*

James was an extremely practical man, and in his letter, he provides a clear answer to our question. He is a good Christian who:

- *listens attentively to God's Word and acts* accordingly,
- *keeps his heart clean,*
- *helps his brothers in need.*

- *James says that God's Word is like a tree* planted in our heart. It must yield fruit and good fruit. In the hearts of the *Pharisees it yielded fruits of pride, greed and hypocrisy.* In our own, it should yield the fruit of *genuine love for God* and for neighbour, of humility, patience and gentleness (Jam. 1: 21)

God's word acts also as a mirror, says James; it helps us discover *what is wrong within us;* we should be eager to put a speedy remedy to what ever we find sinful in us. What would you say of a person who on looking himself or herself at a mirror discovers that his/her face or clothes are soiled but goes away from the mirror leaving things as they are? (Jam. 1: 23-24). Surely something isn't right with him.

- *He is a truly religious person who tries to keep his mind and heart free from sin.* (Jam. 3: 13-18)

The human heart can be *compared also to a spring;* if the spring be clean, so will be the water flowing from it. If contaminated, so also will the water be. James repeats the lesson taught by Jesus in this Sunday's Gospel: *our actions will be what our heart is; holy if our heart is pure; sinful if it be unclean* (Mk. 7: 21-23)

- *Love must be at the centre of all religion:*

The Pharisees added hundreds of rules to the Ten Commandments. Jesus instead, reduced the Ten Commandments to a single rule: *"Love one another as I have loved you"* (Jn. 13: 34).

In his letter, James repeats Jesus' commandment in another form: *Do not boast of just believing in Christ; your faith is of no use unless you are concerned about the poor* (James 3: 14-16).

- *Love for our neighbour or the lack of it will show what our religion really is, whether we are fake or genuine.*

Let us pray: Father, you sent your Son to teach us to worship you in spirit and in truth; help us to do so, through a genuine concern for our brothers and sisters in need. – Amen