

Homily for the 22nd Sunday of Ordinary Time - Year B

5:00,8:00,10:00,12:00 St. Peter's Masses - August 28/29, 2021

Deuteronomy 4:1-8 "What other great nation has statutes and ordinances as just as this entire law?"

Psalms 15:1-5 "O Lord, who may abide in your tent ... who honours the Lord will shall never be moved."

James 1:17-27 "Be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves."

Mark 7:1-23 "It is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come."

To Wash Or Not To Wash

Introduction

Well this is a problem. We are pretty used to being happy to join Jesus in being angry at those Pharisees. But in this passage from Mark's Gospel, they just want the disciples to wash their hands. Maybe it is Jesus who is wrong this time. For 18 months we have been reminded over and over that anyone who promotes not washing hands is inconsiderate and even a fool.

Mark

But, if Jesus is wrong, that's a problem for our entire faith in the God who became human to show us the way to the Father. Yet, he gets mad, really mad, at the Pharisees, who complain that he and his friends don't wash their hands before eating. The expression I heard growing up was that "cleanliness is next to godliness, so go wash up before supper."

At mass, we have a particular kind of washing. I remember being at a number of different parishes with our Bishop, before Covid times. In parishes where the Eucharistic ministers would come to the front before communion, then sanitize their hands, Bishop McGrattan would tell them to be discreet so it doesn't look like we have added to the mass the 'Rite of Purelle'. How things have changed. Now, we want to make sure everyone in the congregation does see those involved in the mass purifying their hands.

But Jesus himself is always the key to unlock our understanding. He opens that door and shines a light on what is true and what is not. So what does Jesus say in response to the complaint of the Pharisees? I'll give you one word: Worship! Give to God first the worship that He is due. It's the first commandment and our first duty always. Worship God alone. Have no false gods before me.

The human heart is made to worship. It lives to give worship. But here is the thing about this worship that the heart is made for. If it does not worship the God who created it, it will create a god to worship. Let me repeat that. If my heart does not worship the God who created it, my heart will make an idol, like a golden calf, something to worship. The heart - yours and mine - is an idol making machine, one person has described it.

We say the human heart is made for love. It's always this symbol (heart). And this is correct, except we forget that the source of all love is God, because God is love and love is God. There is no love outside of God. Even those who don't believe in God, when they truly love, they are, perhaps without knowing it, acknowledging the God who loves.

When we love, we are giving blessing and honour and glory to the God who is love and who made us to love. Taking that one step further, we have to teach our hearts to worship God. Or, to say it another way, we have to let God teach us how to use the heart he gave us for love. If we do not do this, our hearts will make something to love and worship. We call that an idol.

Yesterday was the feast day of St. Augustine. St. Augustine was like us in so many ways. He wanted to love God. He knew his heart was made for goodness and truth, but he just found himself so darned attracted to created things, things made by God, but not God.

I think it's interesting that Mark tells us the Pharisees and some scribes are gathered around Jesus. To gather around a spiritual master is to be his disciples: To learn from him, not just knowledge but a way of living, to become like the master. So, they look like disciples. But Jesus always knows

the heart of people. He knows they are not there to show their admiration for him, and certainly not to learn from him or to worship him.

Mark tells us that the hand washing thing was a very big deal. It certainly is for us today. Human wisdom about health in a pandemic has determined that my mother was right. Hand washing is good and even necessary. Now, maybe they didn't know about germ theory in his days of walking on earth, but surely the divine Son of God couldn't be absolutely wrong about something that we take for granted as true.

It is ok for disciples, then as now, to be confused by Jesus. Last week, the disciples were as dismayed as anyone by Jesus saying, "You must eat my flesh and drink my blood or you have no life in you." Yet we heard Peter say to the Lord: "Where else shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and to know that you are the Holy One of God."

The Pharisees are questioning Jesus, not because they care so much about washing of hands, but so they can exposing him as not really the Messiah. No one from God would ignore all those purity laws.

Remember when Jesus was baptized by John the Jordan River? John said to him, "You should be baptizing me, not me baptizing you." But Jesus said, let's do it anyway. Now we know why. At his baptism, the water did not make Jesus holy. No, Jesus made the water of baptism holy for all time, so that we would receive the grace that it offers.

Now do you remember when Jesus touched the lepers to heal them? Everyone was upset because, to touch a leper made a person ritually unclean and they could not enter the temple of God's presence until they had done a ritual washing. But, instead of Jesus becoming unclean, he made the leper clean.

Now remember at the Last Supper when Jesus said, "This bread is my body which will be broken for you. This is the cup of my blood which will be poured out for the forgiveness of sins." The bread and wine didn't feed

Jesus. Jesus made it food for the world, his body, blood, soul and divinity, for all who would receive it as life and as spiritual nourishment for our souls.

Now we have hand washing before eating. It's not the washing of hands that is the problem. The problem is that the Pharisees have made an idol out of washing hands. They have made it necessary as a step to be holy before God. But Jesus already provides the path to holiness for his disciples who will engage in true worship. They are already clean by their faith and their following his way of life.

Jesus says, quoting Isaiah, "You hypocrites, in vain do you worship." In vain means that their worship has no purpose. It has no direction. It cannot accomplish anything.

We have hand washing that is for health and cleanliness. This is good but not to be worshipped. We have hand washing that is just for show. And we have a certain kind of ritual hand washing, like what a priest does at every mass. His hands are already clean when he comes to the altar. And, these days, by the time mass is over he has sanitized them about six more times. But, at that moment, he is asking God to make his heart clean so that he may worthily celebrate the great mystery of God's presence right here, living with us.

The God of Israel, who had revealed himself to a pagan world, where all kinds of things were being worshipped as gods, and even children were being sacrificed to those gods. But God showed himself as being holy. That word is key. Holy means set apart. God is set apart, even from the things of creation. Creator and created are not the same. Creation is good, created by God, but it is NOT God.

This distinction was made clear to the people. That's why the first commandment was, and is, that God is to have no competitors. Only God is to be worshipped. Not animals, not rocks and wood, even if covered with silver and gold, not the sun and moon, and definitely not the self. But, because God is the God of holiness, he seeks to draw all things to himself,

to make them holy. But the only way to be holy is to worship the one who is already holy.

Washing hands does not make us right with God. That comes from giving our hearts to God. Washing hands does not make us holy. Doing the works of Justice and charity is what does that. What keeps us from a holy life? Well, Jesus gives a list for us to consider: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.

Deuteronomy

In Deuteronomy today, we have Moses words to the people about worshipping God. He says do not add or subtract anything from God's commandments. They are already perfect.

Addition: Dilutes the word of God and suggests that what he commands is not adequate. Both of these make the claim that humans know better than God what we need and what we should do. Only if our activities support and emanate directly from what God has commanded will we avoid idolatry.

Subtraction: The second is to declare that what God commands is not necessary.

Moses is speaking to two great temptations. One is to make the law more rigorous than what God has asked of us. This is what the Pharisees are doing. The second temptation is to relax the law. We don't really need to do that.

James

James was powerful in his proclamation and his witness to the truth. Yet he says to be meek in welcoming the word - that's Jesus. We sometimes use the word 'docility'. Be docile before the spirit. Of course, we don't want to submit to abuse or lies or just really bad ideas. But, we are to welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls. But

be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. Meekness is humility, especially the ability to be taught by the word of God.

Call To Action

Our anxiety is high because our hopes rest in this world. Let not earthly things trouble you except the salvation of your soul and those around you.

Key Passages

Entrance Antiphon: *Have mercy on me, O Lord, for you are good and forgiving, full of mercy to all who call to you.*

Collect: *God of might, giver of every good gift, put into our hearts the love of your name.*

Deuteronomy: *You must neither add anything to what I command you nor take away anything from it, but keep the commandments of the Lord your God. The peoples, when they hear all these statutes, will say, "Surely this great nation is a wise and discerning people! For what other great nation has a god so near to it as the Lord our God is whenever we call to him? And what other great nation has statutes and ordinances as just as this entire law that I am setting before you today?"*

Psalm: *O Lord, who may abide in your tent? Whoever walks blamelessly, and does what is right, and speaks the truth from their heart; whoever does not slander with their tongue; Whoever does no evil to a friend, but who honours those who fear the Lord; Whoever stands by their oath even to their hurt. One who does these things shall never be moved.*

James: *Every generous act of giving is from above. He gave us birth by the word of truth ... Welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls. But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves.*

Mark: *Pharisees and some scribes from Jerusalem gathered around Jesus. They asked him, "Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but at with defiled hands?" Jesus said to them, "Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites. This people honours me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. In vain do they worship me. You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition." Then Jesus called the crowd, "Listen to me, all of you, and understand: There is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile them. 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.*