

Homily For Tuesday of the 5th Week of Ordinary Time- Year 1

St Peter's 8:30am Mass - February 9, 2021

Genesis 1:20 - 2:4 " God rested on the seventh day ... and he blessed it."

Psalm 8: 3-8 "You have given them dominion over the works of your hands."

Mark 7: 1-13 "This people honours me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. "

To Wash Or Not To Wash

Introduction

Well, here we go again. Even Sacred Scripture is getting into the act. Wash your hands, they tell Jesus. Almost one year ago, we had no idea just how much this situation was going to change our lives. Like most people, my wife and I were trying to keep up with the news of this fast developing situation. Along the way, we realized that we weren't getting much that was really new, so we stopped watching news. Even turning it on every month or so, it was the same message over and over again: wash your hands, wear a mask, keep apart two meters, stay home if you are sick. OK, we figured. We've got that.

Along the way, what *has* changed is that there is more and more hostility expressed towards those who don't comply. In some important ways, that's not so different from the incident that Mark tells us about in today's Gospel passage. So, it's not hard to consider, to look at this incident through the lens of what is going on today. That will likely come to mind easily for us.

What I want to do differently, however, is to suggest that, as Christian people, it's our task to do it the other way around, to look at what is going on today through the lens of Sacred Scripture. What if we were to see the world of nature and of people and society with the creator's vision? What would we see if we did that?

Genesis

All this week, the event of creation is being told in the first reading. Yesterday it was about the beauty of creation, which is a sign of God's love for us. Creation is good. This doesn't mean birds and fish and streams and mountains are moral. It

means they demonstrate the richness and diversity and beauty of what God has brought into being from nothing. Everywhere we look is this goodness.

Today, these events of creation bring further signs of that richness, the creation of man and woman, in God's image, male and female, two complimentary genders. God creates a love story between man and woman, to embody self giving love. After our loss of intimacy with God, this would point forward to God's entry into our existence in Jesus, the Saviour and the redeemer.

Psalm 8 is a hymn of praise for that creation, but also for the way that God has made us, for our place in that creation and in the heart of God. God creates order and beauty and relationship.

Mark

Into this richness and goodness comes the argument over washing of hands. That should sound familiar. We can laugh at the Pharisees for many things. But perhaps today we are on their side against Jesus. Pharisees? Wash hands! Jesus and the disciples? No hand washing! For the Pharisees, it was about ritual purity and for us it is about breaking the chain of illness. Maybe they are closer to what is really important than we are. Regardless, the fanaticism about it is exactly the same. The anger at those who refuse to do it is exactly the same.

When I was growing up, the expression we heard often, especially from my mother, the nurse and the devout Catholic, was that cleanliness is next to godliness. Wash your hands. Wash behind your ears. The Christian person saw the relationship that the Pharisees were enforcing.

How do we clear this up? For the Christian, you know that it's always about Jesus. And what does every event in Jesus' life tell us? To what does every single interaction he has with people point? It is the answer to the question: Where is your heart? What does your behaviour say about where God is in your life? It's never a criticism of the law. It's never a criticism of being rich.

Nowhere in the world outside these doors do we hear a concern for our spiritual health, the eternal health of our souls. We need to bring the questions to light

that Jesus would ask us. Do you love your hand washing more than you love God? Do you love to keep the outside of your hands free of virus germs but neglect the state of your soul and the inside of your heart? Is it clean from hostility, jealousy, envy and sinful pride? Are you truly honouring the sabbath rest by worshipping the God who made you for love?

The Pharisees have fallen into the trap which is to allow their worship of the Lord to become vain and empty, which means to serve no purpose. We know there is a purpose to having clean hands. But we have forgotten, as a culture, that this will not save us for eternity.

Call To Action

My mother made our cleanliness about preventing illness, but also about being a sign of the absolute clean-ness, the holiness, of God, who made us for worship and for relationship and for self giving love. We don't have to change our outward behaviour with respect to hand washing. We do have a responsibility, however, to be a sign to our culture that this outward show of ours needs to point, as a holy sign, to a much greater purpose. Without that, no amount of hand washing will save us. With it, no illness will separate us from the love of God.

Key Passages

Genesis: *God said, "Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures and let the birds fly above the earth ..." God blessed them saying, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth." God said: "Let the earth bring forth living creatures of every kind ... and God saw that it was Good." Then God said: "Let us make human beings in our image, according to our likeness, and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds, and the cattle, and all the wild animals of the earth." So God created human beings male and female. He blessed them and said: "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion. God said: "I have given you every seed and fruit for food." God saw it was very good. And on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done and he rested on the seventh day. So he blessed that day and hallowed it.*

Psalms: *What is man that you are mindful of him? Mortal man that you care for him? You have given them dominion over the works of your hands. You have put all things under their feet.*

Mark: *The Pharisees and the scribes asked Jesus: "Why do your disciples not live according to the traditions but eat with defiled hands (without thoroughly washing them according to the tradition of ritual purity). 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 traditions ... Moses said: Honour your father and mother but you say that if anyone tells father or mother Whatever support you might have had from me is Corban (that is, an offering to God),, then you no longer permit doing anything for a father or mother, thus making void the word of God through your tradition."*