

GOSPEL

Mark 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.’

REFLECTION OF POPE BENEDICT XVI

2 September 2012

The theme of God’s Law, of his commandments, makes its entrance in the Liturgy of the Word this Sunday. It is an essential element of the Jewish and Christian religions, where the complete fulfilment of the law is love (cf. Rom 13:10). God’s Law is his word which guides men and women on the journey through life, brings them out of the slavery of selfishness and leads them into the “land” of true freedom and life. This is why the Law is not perceived as a burden or an oppressive restriction in the Bible. Rather, it is seen as the Lord’s most precious gift, the testimony of his fatherly love, of his desire to be close to his People, to be its Ally and with it write a love story.

This is what the devout Israelite prays: “I will delight in your statutes, / I will not forget your word.... Lead me in the path of your commandments, / for I delight in it” (Ps 119[118]:16, 35). In the Old Testament the person who passes on the Law to the People on God’s behalf is Moses. After the long journey in the wilderness, on the threshold of the promised land, he proclaims: “Now, O Israel, give heed to the statutes and the ordinances which I teach you, and do them; that you may live, and go in and take possession of the land which the Lord, the God of your fathers, gives you” (Deut 4:1). And this is the problem: when the People put down roots in the land and are the depository of the Law, they are tempted to place their security and joy in something that is no longer the Word of God: in possessions, in power, in other ‘gods’ that in reality are useless, they are idols. Of course, the Law of God remains but it is no longer the most important thing, the rule of life; rather, it becomes a camouflage, a cover-up, while life follows other paths, other rules, interests that are often forms of egoism, both individual and collective.

Thus religion loses its authentic meaning, which is to live listening to God in order to do his will — that is the truth of our being — and thus we live well, in true freedom, and it is reduced to practising secondary customs which instead satisfy the human need to feel in God’s place. This is a serious threat to every religion which Jesus encountered in his time and which, unfortunately, is also to be found in Christianity. Jesus’ words against the scribes and Pharisees in today’s Gospel should therefore be food for thought for us as well.

Jesus makes his own the very words of the Prophet Isaiah: “This People honours me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the precepts of men” (Mk 7:6-7; cf. Is 29,13). And he then concludes: “You leave the commandment of God, and hold fast the tradition of men” (Mk 7:8).

The Apostle James too alerts us in his Letter to the danger of false piety. He writes to the Christians: “Be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves” (Jas 1:22). May the Virgin Mary, to whom we now turn in prayer, help us to listen with an open and sincere heart to the word of God so that every day it may guide our thoughts, our decisions and our actions.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

What stood out to you from the Gospel or Reflection/ Homily?



Head: Why do you think there is such a strong temptation to place our security and joy in things that are not God?



Heart: Have you ever felt like your heart was far from [God]? (Mk 7:6-7) Feel free to share your story about this to whatever depth you feel comfortable – what was your experience? Do you feel close to God now?



Hands: How can we be "doers of the word, and not hearers only"?

PRAYER

Spend some time in prayer with one another:

1. Conscious of what has just been shared, members briefly name/ describe their prayer needs.
2. Intentionally call on the Holy Spirit to be present (e.g. "Come Holy Spirit, please be present as we pray")
3. Offer prayers of thanks and praise to God.
4. Pray for each others' prayer needs. Where appropriate, you may like to encourage the group to place a hand on the shoulder of the individual that you are currently praying for.
5. Conclude your prayer time with another prayer of praise, perhaps praying the 'Glory Be'.