

SPIRITUALITY

GOSPEL ACCLAMATION

James 1:18

R/. Alleluia, alleluia.

The Father willed to give us birth by the word of truth that we may be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures.

R/. Alleluia, alleluia.

Gospel Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23; L125B

When the Pharisees with some scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around Jesus, they observed that some of his disciples ate their meals with unclean, that is, unwashed, hands.

—For the Pharisees and, in fact, all Jews,

do not eat without carefully washing their hands,

keeping the tradition of the elders.

And on coming from the marketplace they do not eat without purifying themselves.

And there are many other things that they have traditionally observed, the purification of cups and jugs and kettles and beds.—

So the Pharisees and scribes questioned him,

“Why do your disciples not follow the tradition of the elders

but instead eat a meal with unclean hands?”

He responded,

“Well did Isaiah prophesy about you hypocrites, as it is written:

This people honors me with their lips,

but their hearts are far from me;

in vain do they worship me,

teaching as doctrines human precepts.

You disregard God’s commandment but cling to human tradition.”

Continued in Appendix A, p. 302.

Reflecting on the Gospel

Today we return to the Gospel of Mark after a five-week trip through John 6. In some ways Mark may seem to be familiar territory after the theological digression through the bread of life discourse and its antecedents. There are some explanatory notes in the gospel today that seem intended for a non-Jewish audience. Mark tells us about some Jewish practices of the time that would have been unfamiliar to the readers of his gospel. For this reason among others the audience would have been sizably, if not majority, Gentile. So

quickly (a few decades) after Jesus’ death and resurrection the gospel message moved beyond the Jewish soil where it first took root, and grew among Gentiles. It’s almost like a cultivated ivy that leaped over a natural boundary to take root beyond the garden.

With this gospel reading it is as though we are listening in to one side of a family feud.

We hear the early Christians’ take on their elder sibling’s faith. Not surprisingly, the Christians were critical of Jewish practices, claiming they missed the point. But it would be a misreading to see this only as a history lesson. The practices criticized in this gospel are perilously close to those of any religious person. There is a strong temptation to believe that we, by our actions and good deeds, make our

selves worthy of God. It can be easy to focus on the externals of religious practice and miss the point of religion. It can be easy to focus on ritual washing, or any ritual, and miss the deeper, more meaningful action that the ritual points to.

We can imagine attending a birthday party with the focus on what kind and flavor of cake and ice cream, when the “Happy Birthday” song is sung, how it is sung, who sings it, whether there is a birthday wish, whether the wish was “voiced” thereby nullifying it, or kept to the wisher thereby guaranteeing its fruition, and many other details of the event. All of the focus on the external ritual of the birthday can cause us to forget that this is a celebration of life for the one whose birthday it is. The party with its attendant rituals should not pull us away from the celebration of the individual.

The early Christians (like Isaiah who is quoted) criticized those who would misplace the emphasis on the externals. Their admonition is not for their theological opponents only. It’s also for us.

Living the Paschal Mystery

Why is it so easy to think that if we “do it right” all will be well? In fact we all have had experience with so much time and energy going into presentation, preparation, details, etc. that we are left missing the mark. We have probably seen this happen at holiday gatherings, birthday parties, and more. But it can also happen in one’s day-to-day routine. Things need to be fixed, addressed, or made better. Our attention on these details, important as they may seem, can pull us away from real human beings seeking relationship. Being present, without distraction to those around us is often a more profound gift than any other external.

When a child seeks our attention, a parent calls to check in, or a friend asks how we are doing, each of these is a moment of grace. Being available to an-



other without critique or commentary is a tremendous gift. Rather than focus on externals, this gospel reminds us to take a few moments to examine what really matters. Once we do that, we can place our focus there. This may cause us to reprioritize our thoughts and actions, but that is precisely the point.

Focusing the Gospel

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

Today we return to Mark's gospel with a confrontation that Mark's Christian readers knew all too well. A contentious debate raged in the early church as to whether or not Christians should continue to observe the ritual practices of Judaism. Jesus challenges the scribes' insistence that faithfulness to ceremonial washings and other rituals constitutes complete faithfulness to the will of God. He scandalizes his hearers by proclaiming, "Nothing that enters one from outside can defile that person; / but the things that come out from within are what defile." It is the good that one does, motivated by the spirit of God within a believer's heart, that is important in the eyes of God, not how scrupulously he or she keeps the laws and rituals mandated by tradition.

Focusing the First Reading

Deut 4:1-2, 6-8

Over the course of the centuries, the scribes of Judaism constructed a rigid order of definitions, admonitions, principles, and laws based on the Pentateuch, summarized in Moses' eloquent words to the nation of Israel in today's first reading. As a result, the ethical and moral foundation of the law was often buried under a mountain of rules and taboos. Jesus' teachings (such as today's encounter with the Pharisees over the rituals of washing) refocus the canons of Israel on discerning the word of God in the sanctuary of the human heart and living one's life on that discernment. Jesus' continuing challenges to the accepted order of the law and tradition further widen the gulf between Jesus and the Jewish establishment.

Focusing the Responsorial Psalm

Ps 15:2-3, 3-4, 4-5 (1a)

Psalm 15 was probably sung as an entrance song at temple worship. It begins with a question that is omitted from today's responsorial: "LORD, who may abide in your tent?" (NABRE). The rest of the psalm answers the question. The verses selected for today's responsorial emphasize God's call to justice and kindness as centered in the human heart.

Twenty-Second Sunday in Ordinary Time, September 2, 2018

Gospel (cont.)

Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23; L125B

He summoned the crowd again and said to them,
 "Hear me, all of you, and understand.
 Nothing that enters one from outside can defile that person;
 but the things that come out from within are what defile.
 "From within people, from their hearts,
 come evil thoughts, unchastity, theft, murder,
 adultery, greed, malice, deceit,
 licentiousness, envy, blasphemy, arrogance, folly.
 All these evils come from within and they defile."

PROMPTS FOR HOMILISTS, CATECHISTS, AND RCIA TEAMS

Recall experiences in your life when your "heart" required you to act contrary to your "head."

Why do people become disaffected by religion that has become "institutionalized"? How can a parish community respond to such disaffection?

What practice or ritual of your faith do you find most meaningful to you, that inspires you in living your faith, that makes you most aware and appreciative of God's presence in your life?