

Clean Hands - Clean Heart
22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time (B)
(Dt 4:1-8; Mk 7)

Jesus is critical of the Pharisees from Jerusalem for the way they were corrupting the Law of Moses. Jewish life is governed by many rules and traditions, such what food you can and cannot eat, carefully washing hands before eating, as well as washing the dishes and bed linens. But holiness is more than clean hands.

The Law of Moses contained many precepts and rules, the purpose of which was to foster a dignity of life, founded on reverence for God, which cultivated holiness, but which itself is not holiness. While preparing for this holiness through external actions and behavior, holiness is found interiorly in the heart; in the soul, intellect, and will. Jesus, a true Rabbi explaining the Law, teaches that it is not the food going into the body which makes someone holy, or defiles someone; nor the washing of hands. Rather, it is what comes out of the heart that makes someone holy or not (Mk 7:18-21). What God is really concerned about is whether someone has in their heart charity, patience, mercy, modesty; and not evil thoughts, unchastity, theft, greed, malice, and arrogance.

This doesn't mean we shouldn't wash our hands before eating, or keep a clean house, or avoid unclean foods; but don't think that because you do all those things well, it automatically makes you holy. You can keep all the precepts of the Law of Moses perfectly in an external way, and still be a very unkind and hypocritical person—this is what Jesus saw in the Pharisees.

This is an important Gospel for Catholics. We are no longer under the strictures of the Law of Moses with all its rules and precepts; we belong to the New Law of Christ which fulfills and supplants the Old Testament. The Church now has its own set of precepts and rules suited to the new “catholic” covenant that embraces all mankind – “new wineskins for new wine” (Lk 5:37) – which we also have to understand in their proper place.

For instance, we don't have to keep the Jewish Sabbath anymore, but we do have to observe Sunday as a day of rest and avoid working on the Lord's Day. We don't have to circumcise our babies anymore like the Jews, but we do need to ensure that our children are baptized. We don't keep the annual Passover and other Jewish festivals anymore, but we do observe the new Passover of Easter, and observe other Holy Days of obligation such as Christmas and the Assumption of Mary. We no longer observe the Jewish distinction between clean and unclean foods, but we still practice fasting and abstinence on Fridays and during Lent.

Nevertheless, the wisdom of the old Law of Moses still pertains. If Christians are permitted to eat pork,¹ forbidden to the Jews by a precept of the Law (Lv 11:7, Dt 14:8), the Church does not deny the wisdom behind that precept, which is that pork is a comparatively unhealthy meat if not cooked very carefully. The purpose of that Jewish precept is not “holiness” per se, but rather the good of man. God wanted His children to be safe, healthy, and living according to a high standard of personal dignity: “*The Sabbath (and precepts regarding diet and purifications) was made for man; not man for the Sabbath*” (Mk 2:27).

The rules provide a framework in which to live good and holy lives. They encourage holiness, they are stepping stones and guides for doing good, and they help us formulate correct values and priorities. If there were no rules or “traditions of men,” and everyone basically did what they felt or wanted to, you would not end up with very holy people, or a holy society, or a very healthy society. You would end up with chaos, and people living in garbage dumps, both spiritually and materially. The precepts of the law embody a wisdom, and in the case of the Law of Moses or the Laws of the Church, they embody the wisdom of God.

In the Book of Deuteronomy, Moses tells the people, “*observe the laws carefully, for thus will you give evidence of your wisdom and intelligence to the nations, who will hear of all these statutes and say, ‘This great nation is truly a wise and intelligent people.’*”

Jews were renowned for their wisdom and dignity. The Queen of Sheba was profoundly impressed by Jerusalem in the days of king Solomon (1K 10:1-13). Unlike the pagan nations, Jewish cities were clean, with no evidence of trash or human waste in the streets. They experienced fewer epidemics. Jewish food didn’t make you sick. And from there, it was also observed that the moral standards were higher and different than other nations. There were strict rules with regard to “dating” and the interaction of men and women, i.e. sexual morality. Family life founded upon the covenant of marriage was central to the structure and strength of the society. The slave/servant class, the poor, and foreigners had rights and could not be abused. Even in economic affairs, the marketplace was governed by strict rules regarding accurate weights and just contracts. Binding it all together was the direct and immediate presence of God in their midst, and the obligation to center all of life upon the Temple and the Sabbath obligation to worship God.

The *holiness of God*, and the holiness of the people who belong to God as His children, is therefore the key to understanding and interpreting the Law. Holiness is not found in the laws pertaining to the body (diet, purification, etc.); nor is holiness even found in the external observance of the moral commandments

¹ For Christians, Jesus pronounces that “all foods are clean” (Mk 7:19).

establishing a just society (you shall not kill, commit adultery, steal, lie); holiness is found through the presence of God dwelling with man, to which all the rules and moral precepts are ordered.

Thus it is that the Rabbi Jesus emphasizes the interior dimension of the law, that which is proclaimed in the final two commandments of the Decalogue (you shall not covet your neighbor's wife/goods). True holiness is found within, in a pure heart. Washing your hands is important because of your human dignity, and it disposes you to living according to your spiritual sonship of God; but it is that relationship of grace with the Father – a worthy heart – that makes one holy, not the cleanness of the hands.

The Pharisees may have clean hands, clean clothes, and observe all the commandments carefully, *on the outside*. But what do their hearts look like? While it is easy for man to see the outside, only God can see the heart, and Jesus could see the heart (Jn 2:25), because he is also the One through whom the Law was promulgated in the first place; he is the divine lawgiver himself. And what Jesus saw was shocking: “*you cleanse the outside of the cup and dish, but inside you are full of corruption and rot*” (cf. Mt 23:25-28).

The precepts of the Law which Moses received from God are filled with wisdom, and provide an excellent framework for the society that made the Chosen People superior to all the nations of the world, and which have served as a basis for western Christian societies as well. It is why western civilization is (still) superior to all pagan cultures. Deuteronomy was correct: “*Observe these laws carefully, for thus will you give evidence of your wisdom and intelligence to the nations, who will hear of all these statutes and say, ‘This great nation is truly a wise and intelligent people’*” (Dt 4:6).

But Jesus is highlighting the next part of the statement, without which the laws have no value for holiness: “*For what great nation is there that has gods so close to it as the Lord, our God, is to us*” (Dt 4:7). Only when the heart is right with God, cleansed of evil, filled with God's grace, can any other rule or law be part of holiness. Mere external observance of the law is insufficient. And this is where the Pharisees are wrong.

The requirement to wash one's hands or avoid pork, while a fitting part of the holiness of life required by God for His people, can never in itself be an absolute demand. Only that which specifically and directly corrupts the heart can be an absolute moral prohibition, because “*only that which comes from within people, from their hearts, are what defile*” (Mk 7:20-21).