

**The Law of Moses**  
**22<sup>nd</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time (B)**  
**(Dt 4:1-8; Mk 7)**

Jesus has an argument with the Pharisees about “washing your hands before eating.” Actually, it is a pivotal moment that helps to define Christianity as a movement distinct from “traditional” Judaism, and it is because of this argument, that Christians today are able to eat bacon with their eggs!

At issue is the Law of the Moses, that extensive body of rules and precepts which are set forth in the first five books of the Bible, and summarized by Moses in the book of Deuteronomy. Or rather, at issue is the *purpose* of the laws, and their relationship to holiness.

Jesus – and Christianity – does not actually reject the Law of Moses, including those precepts about washing hands and avoiding pork. In my household, we were taught from childhood to “wash your hands” before coming to the dinner table. Likewise, to wash all the dishes afterward (cups, jugs, kettles), to bathe every day, and to regularly launder the bedding (cf. Mk 7:4). We were quite “Jewish” in this regard. Likewise, we followed very careful rules with regard to the preparation, cooking, eating, and storing of meats, aware that pork has more dangers than beef or chicken.

The precepts of the Law of Moses are filled with incredible wisdom which modern science has only confirmed. In the era before electricity and refrigeration, stoves and antibiotics, the rules kept people healthy and strong, and enabled the community to deal swiftly with illnesses and infections. Large sections of the Law of Moses are devoted to personal hygiene and sanitation. Other sections pertain to the organization of society, the economy, the functioning of the political and religious establishment, the rights of slaves, women, immigrants, and the needy; the integration of religion into daily life of people; the proper rules of courtship, marriage, sexual relationship, and childbearing. In short, the Law of Moses is the blueprint and constitution for an entire way of life. Finally, the Law presumes the need for an integrated educational system.

In the first reading from Deuteronomy, Moses enjoins the people to keep and observe all 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). God’s Chosen People have indeed stood out in all of history as a *superior* culture, in all respects. Western civilization continues to be a superior culture because, as is evident in the advances of western science, we are still based on the fundamental wisdom contained in the Torah.

But Catholics, and Christians in general, are not very familiar with all those precepts, and we rarely read through all of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy (a great shame). The one part of the Law we are very familiar with, however, is its preamble, the “Ten Commandments.” This is the part of the Law known as “Moral Law,” morality. This is what determines whether we are “just” before God.

Jesus’ argument with the Pharisees has nothing to do with the value of washing one’s hands before eating. Jesus would agree this is a good and necessary practice. But Jesus criticizes the Pharisees for equating the washing of hands with the Moral Law, with holiness. The various precepts in the Law of Moses serve different purposes, and “being clean” has different senses. Jesus, in effect, establishes Moral Law as the highest kind of law, because its purpose is purity of heart, which is holiness before God. Jesus distinguishes the heart from the hands and the body, and highlights the difference between laws which serve the heart, and laws which serve the body.

He criticizes the *hypocrisy* of the Pharisees. Hypocrisy means pretense, acting a part on the outside which is not the reality inside. The Pharisees have very clean hands, but it is a different story on the inside, which Jesus can see. And this is his point: the ultimate goal of the Law of Moses is the *inside*, the heart. What pertains to the life of the body in the world is susceptible to exigencies of time and circumstance—there will be times on the road when water is not available to wash hands, but one still has to eat. Human tradition, knowledge, and experience will always be necessary to apply and adjust such laws. Moreover, there will come a time when the body passes away and it will no longer matter if it was clean, or nourished by bacon vs. beef.

But the heart/soul of man is spiritual and its reality does not change with time or circumstance, nor when the body passes away. Unchastity, greed, malice, and deceit are spiritual defilements regardless of the era or scientific developments, and they will remain so when the soul comes before God for judgment. In the end, *these* are the only defilements to be concerned about, and on earth these should be the proper priority of religion. The ablutions of the Law can do nothing for the heart, only the waters of Baptism can save from sin.

Thus it behooves a Christian of Gentile origin to study the entire Law of Moses, and apply its wisdom to all aspects of human and social life. We would do a lot better healthwise, socially, and in family life if we were more “Jewish” according to the Law. But the only unchanging and absolute part of that Law is the Moral code of holiness before God, and it is this above all, that we must seek.