

PURITY OF HEART

Deuteronomy 4. 1-2, 6-9

James 1. 17-27

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

I speak to you in the name of ✠ the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

It is customary, in some cultures, to give a brief thanksgiving before meals. In many traditions, including ours, we thank God for the gifts he has given us, both those that are in front of us and for all the others. These prayers of thanksgiving do not have to be ornate or complicated; they are simply an acknowledgment of the one who is the source of all things, and a way of recognising God's presence in the gifts.

When I think of giving thanks before meals, I am reminded of the prayers that my own father used to say before Sunday lunch. I am sure that his intentions were always honourable; but my overriding memory about his prayers is that they were rather trying. On the one hand, they were very long; and on the other hand, they always ended with a general confession, which concluded with the words, 'And forgive us our *many, many* sins'. The emphasis was not on mercy, but on the word 'many'.

Whatever form my father's prayers took, or our own prayers of grace take, they are a way of sanctifying the ordinary; of acknowledging that the food (and the time before us) is holy. This is one of our motivations for saying a blessing before a meal.

This is the same motivation that the Pharisees had in today's reading from the gospel of St Mark. Their desire to show their love for God by acknowledging the sanctity of the common and the everyday was at the root of their practices of maintaining ritual cleanliness; it was, if you like, another way of saying their prayers before they

tucked into their food. They did this out of a sincere love for God, intending to follow God's commandments as closely as possible.

But somewhere along the way, something had happened. The Pharisees were honouring God with their following of ritual actions, but not with their hearts. And for this our Lord criticised them for their hypocrisy. They said one thing, but did another.

St Mark gives a fair bit of descriptive detail in the writing up this episode, and for good reason. He was dealing with some very serious business going on in his community, which was made up of both Jews and Gentiles; and one of the things that they were trying to figure out was what the role of the Jewish law should be. This was a matter of some contention: throughout the New Testament, we hear that this issue was dividing communities. So again and again in today's reading Mark hits the issue: the Pharisees wash food from the market, cups, pots and bronze kettles (four times he says 'wash' or 'washing'); and they are obsessed with the observance of tradition (Mark mentions 'tradition' four times as well). St Mark wants to de-emphasise these things, because they were distracting the community from what was more important. He is making it clear: Jesus did not come to get people to engage in more rituals; and Jesus did not come to encourage the empty repetition of pious religious language.

On the contrary, Christ rejects all of this in a radical way, and makes it very clear what actually defiles a person: it is what *goes out*, not what *comes in*. In verse 19 (which is not part of our lectionary reading) Mark inserts a sort of parenthetical comment. He says tersely (and I quote) 'thus (our Lord) declared all foods clean'. So in case we didn't get the implicit point before, Mark inserts it explicitly; and in these six little words, centuries of Jewish dietary restrictions are overturned so that Mark's

community (both Jews and Gentiles) can get together, have supper, and eat whatever they like without getting into arguments about it.

Mark is narrating here one of the most consequential episodes in Jesus's ministry, which allows for the full inclusion of the Gentiles into salvation history, the inclusion of all of us who are not native children of Israel. The Jewish food laws had been initially established during the exile to maintain the boundaries around the community. These boundaries fulfilled the essential task of preserving the continuity of the Jewish tradition when it was very much under threat; and this is the tradition that nurtured and formed Christ himself. With our Lord's ministry, however, these boundaries were being greatly expanded, expanded so that they could encompass the whole world.

Whilst the boundaries of law and tradition were being expanded, the expectations that were applied to the people of God (Jews and Gentiles alike) were not exactly being relaxed. In our text, Jesus says that what is more important than this Pharisaic desire to make holy the most common things of life (cups and pots and kettles) is the avoidance of evil intentions. If Jews and Gentiles are going to be members of this new and greatly expanded community, Christ gives a long list of what is important: the avoidance of the intentions that result in fornication, theft, murder and so forth; twelve prohibitions in all. (Perhaps one aimed at each disciple?)

So it is clear that our Lord was not calling for a rejection of the Jewish law altogether. Rather, he was calling for another kind of Hebrew purity: a purity of the heart. The difference, however, is that Jesus makes this purity of the heart standard an absolute. He relaxes one set of demands (by declaring all foods clean), but greatly intensifies another. We might say that Christ did not so much abolish the purity advocated by the Torah, but rather brought it to completion in an all-embracing sense, a sense that

reaches down to the deepest depths of the human being. This is a purity code of the *heart*, a purity code that embraces the entire existence of a person.

That's not a small thing, is it? Let's be honest: we can take care of the purity of our hands fairly easily; purity of the heart, on the other hand, is quite a different matter. How in the world can we accomplish that? How do we get to a place where, instead of wickedness and envy and pride, our hearts are full of faith, hope, and charity? For some people it seems so easy; and yet for some of us, it seems so hard.

I'm not an expert on pure hearts, I'm sorry to say, so I can't make any claims based on personal experience. We have seen, however, throughout our history, men and women whom the Church has recognised as saints; people whose lives—whose hearts—became so aligned with God that they allow us a glimpse of what a holy life looks like. These saints were not perfect people, but they remain examples for us.

And if we are going to try to follow their examples—if we are going to try to fill our hearts with love—we should consider doing what so many of them have done: immerse ourselves in ritual actions, and in the observance of the gifts of our tradition. Like them, we can train our hearts through the disciplines of prayer; of scripture reading; and of worship. We can practice recognising the sanctity of the ordinary. We can sing the praises of God; we can confess our sins (despite what I said about the prayers of my father). We can let the rhythm of the liturgy—yes, the 'tradition of the elders'—encourage our hearts to follow the commandments of God.

It is no wonder that the great spiritual leaders of our history are people who have followed the daily cycle of worship and ritual worship: people like Teresa of Avila and Saint Francis from centuries ago, or Mother Teresa and Desmond Tutu in more contemporary times. For them, there was no discontinuity between ritual and the commandment of love; one helped facilitate the other.

They knew that we do not engage in ritual for God's sake. That is one of the things that the Pharisees got wrong. We engage in ritual for *our sake*. We do it to help ourselves; to etch love onto our hearts. We do it not for God, but for us. We want our hearts to be pure; yet while the spirit is so willing, the flesh is so weak. And so we say our prayers again, and we listen to the words of the Lord again, and we receive the Eucharist again. And we pray: Lord, cleanse the thoughts of our hearts. Assist us with your grace. And have mercy upon us; Lord, have mercy upon us.

Amen.