

Scripture Study

Twenty-Second Sunday in Ordinary Time—Cycle B



Opening prayer

Deuteronomy 4:1-2,6-8 (Ps 15:2-5) James 1:17-18,21b-22,27 **Mark 7:1-8,14-15,21-23**

Overview of the Gospel:

- The cycle of readings return to the Gospel of Mark after a four week detour through John 6. Jesus is now in the town of Gennesaret on the west shore of the Sea of Galilee where he has been conducting a healing ministry (Mark 6:53-56).
- He is approached by some Pharisees (a religious/political party) who are joined by scribes (religious legal experts) from Jerusalem, the religious center of Israel.
- Jesus' entire ministry is marked by conflict with certain Pharisees of his time (Matthew 23 and following, for example). Respected by the people as engaging in religious purity as a form of resistance against the pagan Roman occupiers of Israel, their approach, nonetheless, often tended toward external ritualism, legalism, and self-righteousness (Luke 18:9-14 Matthew 6:1-6). It is for this attitude that Jesus criticizes them in today's Gospel.
- The issue at hand is that of being ritually "clean" or "unclean"—what should be the basis of our holiness in our worship and everyday conduct? Jesus' teaching in this area (verses 14-23) is reflects the biblical concept of "the heart" as being the center of the person and source of every decision that results in action (Matthew 5:28).

Questions:

- According to the first and second readings, is God's Law a good thing or a bad thing? When can the observance of God's laws turn negative rather than positive? Is the problem with God's Law—or does it lie somewhere else?
- How will the Church later struggle with this issue of dietary laws, i.e., clean/unclean foods (see Acts 10:9-16; Acts 15; Romans 14:13-23; Galatians 2:11-16; CCC 582)?
- Why does Jesus place the source of defilement within the heart of a person rather than, say, the imagination? What things come out of a defiled heart (verses 21-22; Galatians 5:19-21; Romans 1:29-31; 1 Peter 4:3)?
- Where does Jesus place the responsibility for being clean—on the circumstance or on you? What events in your life might illustrate how things that come out of you can make you clean or unclean? What are some ways we can purify our hearts?
- How do you cope with distraction at the liturgy (the Mass)? What do you bring to the liturgy so as to draw your heart nearer to God? Can you say that your participation at the liturgy amounts to more than "lip service?" How can you enter more deeply into worship?

Catechism of the Catholic Church: §§ 577—582, 2517

Closing prayer

This is an answer to those who consider that evil thoughts are simply injected by the devil and that they do not spring from our own will. He can add strength to our bad thoughts and inflame them, but he cannot originate them. —St. Bede the Venerable (ca. A.D. 725)

Remember to read and meditate on the daily Mass readings found in the bulletin!

"Out of the heart come evil thoughts"

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

Meditation: What makes a person unclean or unfit to offer God acceptable worship? The Jews went to great pains to ensure that their worship would conform to the instructions which God gave to Moses on Mount Sinai. God's call to his people was a call to holiness: "be holy, for I am holy" (Leviticus 11:44; 19:2). In their zeal for holiness many elders developed elaborate traditions which became a burden for the people to carry out in their everyday lives. The Scribes and Pharisees were upset with Jesus because he allowed his disciples to break with their ritual traditions by eating with unclean hands. They sent a delegation all the way from Jerusalem to Galilee to bring their accusation in a face-to-face confrontation with Jesus. Jesus dealt with their accusation by going to the heart of the matter – by looking at God's intention and purpose for the commandments.

Jesus explains that they void God's command because they allow their hearts and minds to be clouded by their own notions of what is true religion. Jesus accuses them specifically of two things. First, of hypocrisy. Like actors, who put on a show, they appear to obey God's word in their external practices while they inwardly harbor evil desires and intentions. Secondly, he accuses them of abandoning God's word by substituting their own arguments and ingenious interpretations for what God requires. They devised clever arguments based on their own thoughts rather than on God's word. Jesus refers them to the prophecy of Isaiah (29:31) where the prophet accuses the people of his day for honoring God with their lips while their hearts were far away from



choosing and doing what God asked of them. God's word has power to set us free from ignorance, pride, and selfish desires. His word both enlightens our mind and purifies our heart so that we can truly understand his ways and intentions and walk in his love. The Lord invites us to draw near to him and to feast at his banquet table. Do you draw near with a clean heart and mind? Ask the Lord to cleanse you fully with the purifying fire of his Holy Spirit.

Where does evil spring from and what's the solution for eliminating it from our lives? Jesus deals with this issue in response to the religious leaders' concern with ritual defilement – making one unfit to offer acceptable sacrifice and worship to God. The religious leaders were concerned with avoiding ritual defilement, some no doubt out of fear of God, and others out of fear of pleasing other people. Jesus points his listeners to the source of true defilement – evil desires which come from inside a person's innermost being. Sin does not happen. It first springs from the innermost recesses of our thoughts and intentions, from the secret desires which only the individual soul can conceive. God in his mercy sent his only Son Jesus to save us from our sins. But to receive his mercy, we must admit our faults. "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:8-9). Only God can change our hearts and make them clean and whole through the power of the Holy Spirit. Like a physician who probes the wound before treating it, God through his Word and Spirit first brings it to light that we may recognize it for what it is and call upon his mercy and grace for pardon and healing. The Spirit of truth is the Consoler. The Spirit gives us a true conscience and the assurance that Christ our redeemer forgives all of our sins when we turn to the Lord Jesus and ask for his help and mercy.

How can we live in holiness free from slavery to sin and hurtful desires? When Cain was jealous of his brother, Abel, God warned him to guard his heart: "Sin is couching at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it" (Genesis 4:7). Do you allow any sinful desires to couch at the door of your heart? We do not need to entertain or give into sinful desires and hurtful thoughts, but instead, through the grace of God, we can choose to put them to death rather than allow them mastery over us. The Lord is every ready to change and purify our hearts through his Holy Spirit who dwells within us. His power and grace enables us to choose what is good and to reject what is evil. Do you believe in the power of God's love to change and transform your heart?

"Lord Jesus, fill me with your Holy Spirit and make my heart like yours – on fire with love and holiness. Strengthen my will that I may always choose to love what is good and to reject what is evil."

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