

22nd Sunday of the Year B

First Reading Deuteronomy 4:1-2.6-8

Moses said to the people: "Now, Israel, take notice of the laws and customs that I teach you today, and observe them, that you may have life and may enter and take possession of the land that the Lord the God of your fathers is giving you. You must add nothing to what I command you, and take nothing from it, but keep the commandments of the Lord your God just as I lay them down for you. Keep them, observe them, and they will demonstrate to the peoples your wisdom and understanding. When they come to know of all these laws they will exclaim, 'No other people is as wise and prudent as this great nation.' And indeed, what great nation is there that has its gods so near as the Lord our God is to us whenever we call to him? And what great nation is there that has laws and customs to match this whole Law that I put before you today?"

Second Reading James 1:17-18.21-22.27

It is all that is good, everything that is perfect, which is given us from above; it comes down from the Father of all light; with him there is no such thing as alteration, no shadow of a change.

By his own choice he made us his children by the message of the truth so that we should be a sort of first-fruits of all that he had created. Accept and submit to the word which has been planted in you and can save your souls. But you must do what the word tells you, and not just listen to it and deceive yourselves. Pure, unspoilt religion, in the eyes of God our Father is this: coming to the help of orphans and widows when they need it, and keeping oneself uncontaminated by the world.

Gospel Mark 7:1-8.14-15.21-23

The Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered round Jesus, and they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with unclean hands, that is, without washing them. For the Pharisees, and the Jews in general, follow the tradition of the elders and never eat without washing their arms as far as the elbow; and on returning from the market place they never eat without first sprinkling themselves. There are also many other observances which have been handed down to them concerning the washing of cups and pots and bronze dishes.

So these Pharisees and scribes asked him, "Why do your disciples not respect the tradition of the elders but eat their food with unclean hands?" He answered, "It was of you hypocrites that Isaiah so rightly prophesied in this passage of scripture: This people honours me only with lip-service, while their hearts are far from me. The worship they offer me is worthless, the doctrines they teach are only human regulations. You put aside the commandment of God to cling to human traditions."

He called the people to him again and said, "Listen to me, all of you, and understand. Nothing that goes into a man from outside can make him unclean; it is the things that come out of a man that make him unclean. For it is from within, from men's hearts, that evil intentions emerge: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, malice, deceit, indecency, envy, slander, pride, folly.

All these evil things come from within and make a man unclean."

Meditation

"Why do your disciples not follow the tradition of our ancestors, but instead take food without purifying their hands?" Though the primitive Church resolved the difficulty of table fellowship among Jewish and Gentile Christians, this problem is not foreign to our concerns.

The scribes and Pharisees appealed to the body of prescriptions and customs which clarified and interpreted the Law of Moses. This process of interpretation was the attempt to apply the law in every situation of daily life. Jesus does not reject this praiseworthy intention. The practices of the law, however, must never mask what is essential: the state of our hearts, the loyal commitment of our freedom before God. Is the heart not the source of the worship we render him by our entire lives? Our religious behaviour must express this centre of ourselves. The gospel takes a stand between legalism and license. Law without the heart is hypocritical legalism which seeks the assurance of external observances without the commitment of faith. But the heart without law is license which fails to recognize the need to govern the difficult coexistence of the old and the new humanity within us.