



# The Holy Spirit Province NEWSLETTER



24 August 2020

## **BEING CLEAN AND PURE: 22<sup>ND</sup> SUNDAY YEAR B**

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

‘... the things that come from within,’ says Jesus, ‘are what defile’ (Mk 7:15)

There are three kinds of cleanliness, three ways of being clean. There is bodily cleanliness, i.e., hygienic cleanliness, as when we take a bath or shower or use a hand sanitizer to ward off germs. There is ritual cleanliness, as when our priest at Mass washes his hands. And there is ethical cleanliness, i.e., moral cleanliness, i.e., doing what is right and good. Today Jesus our teacher has been emphasizing ethical cleanliness as the kind that matters most.

The opponents of Jesus blame him because his followers are not observing Jewish rules of ritual cleanliness. They are not washing their hands before and during meals. In reply, Jesus calls them ‘hypocrites.’ They are hypocrites because, as he points out: ‘You put aside the commandment of God to cling to human traditions.’

The word ‘hypocrite’ has an interesting history. It begins by meaning simply someone who answers. It goes on to mean someone who answers in a set dialogue and conversation, i.e., an actor. Finally, it comes to mean someone whose whole life is a piece of acting, without any sincerity at all. Jesus tells his opponents they fit that category. ‘You are hypocrites,’ he says to them, ‘you are great pretenders.’

What Jesus was up against was the belief of his enemies that the human rules and regulations which they stressed, were the heart and soul of religion. For them, to keep those rules was to please God, to break those rules was to sin.

What was true when Jesus was walking around Palestine is still true. Anyone for whom religion is just a set of human rules, anyone for whom religion means conforming only on the outside to human rules and regulations, anyone for whom religion is only the exact compliance with a list of taboos, is a hypocrite.

Take the case of legalistic Jews at the time of Jesus. Just like some public figures still, Pharisees might fiercely hate fellow human beings, even colleagues. They might be full of envy and jealousy. They might conceal bitterness and pride. But so long as they carried out the prescribed hand washings correctly, the acute suffering and misery of the poor and needy around them, e.g., did not bother them or challenge them to respond with kindness, compassion and care.

So, Jesus takes them on. He begins by quoting the Word of God as expressed in the prophet Isaiah: 'This people honours me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.' He insists that what most defiles a human being is the evil behaviour that comes from within - from the thoughts and desires of the heart. He strings together a powerful set of examples, things we read about in our newspapers every day: - malicious intentions; sexual irresponsibility; theft; murder; adultery; greed; hurting and injuring others; trickery and deceit; selfindulgence; jealousy; slander; contempt; and acting the fool in ways that hurt and harm others. For Jesus, then, being good on the inside leads to being good on the outside too. Having a good heart, then, is where becoming a good person must start. So much so, that Jesus taught: "Blessed are the pure in heart; for they will see God" (Mt 5:8).

One of the excuses we often hear from people who stay away from church is that those who go are 'hypocrites'. I don't believe that is true. Yet what they allege does point to the danger of identifying religion with outward observance - with such religious practices as just going to Mass, fasting, reading the bible, saying morning and evening prayers, and putting money on the plate. These are good and worthwhile things to do, but only if our hearts, disposition, motives and attitudes towards God and our fellow human beings, are right. If our hearts are not in what we do, or worse still, if in our hearts there lurk enmity, bitterness, grudges, hatred and contempt for others, our outward practices will show us up for what we really are – hypocrites!

So, let's be sure to pray to Jesus our Saviour in our contact with him today, both for ourselves and one another, to keep saving us from any and every kind of hypocrisy, and to keep helping us live and act with clean, committed, pure, sincere, constant and consistent hearts – in short, with loving, caring, hearts!

"May the passion of Jesus Christ, and his everlasting love, be always within our minds and hearts!"

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