

Twenty Second Sunday in Ordinary Time B/2015

The readings of this Sunday talk about the importance of true religion. They contrast the true religion with mere tradition and its observances. They invite us to the inner observance of God's law and not its simple external display.

The first reading recalls the invitation of Moses to the people of Israel so that they keep faithfully the commandments of the Lord. It shows the reward that internally they will receive if they do so. It equally shows the type of witness they will give to the nations if they also do so.

What is behind this text is the idea that the observance of the Law is a source of blessing for those who entrust their life to God. Another idea is the truth that, though other nations are worthy of praise for their undertaking, their knowledge cannot be compared to the wisdom and the intelligence that come out of God's Law.

This text allows us to understand what is at stake in today's Gospel as Jesus is confronted by the Pharisees and the Scribes about the traditions of the elders. First of all, the Gospel says that when the Pharisees and the Scribes realized that some of the disciples of Jesus were eating without washing their hands, they confronted Jesus.

The Gospel shows also that Pharisees and the Scribes have a lot of prescriptions and traditions they observe besides God's Law. After that, the Gospel shows the response of Jesus who criticizes the Pharisees' hypocrisy and external observance of the Law. It equally shows Jesus' criticism of their obsession with the human traditions.

The Gospel ends up with Jesus making a distinction between the outside and the inside of a person by showing how it is from within that people come to be defiled and not vice versa.

What do we learn from today's Gospel? Today, I want to talk about the meaning of tradition. In fact, we all have traditions; we like them and we celebrate them. For instance, there are birthday traditions, wedding traditions, funeral traditions, New Year's traditions, Christmas traditions, Fourth of July traditions, Thanksgivings traditions, Irish traditions, Italian traditions, etc.

Traditions recall peoples, cultures and events they celebrate. In other words, behind each tradition, there is an event at the origin of which it has been instituted or created. That is why traditions remind peoples of their identity, origin and important events that have happened in the history of their lives as individuals or a nation. Traditions cannot be neutral; they bear a meaning; they point to a founding event that has led to their creation.

When a tradition cannot play that role of a reminder or of awakening of conscience in leading someone to his deep root, origin and identity, it becomes meaningless. Of course it can be celebrated, but it is just for the mere form like a folklore or entertainment. For instance, in our Church, we have the tradition of signing ourselves with the Holy Water when we enter a Church. That signing reminds us of our promises of baptism by which we pledged to renounce Satan and to believe in God. We might forget that meaning, but that is the reason why we do it.

With all this in mind, let us now come to the Gospel. In fact, Jesus has a hard time with some of the Pharisees and Scribes because his disciples do not wash hands before a meal. This discussion is very important, because it is not about a simple hygiene, but rather the essence of religion.

Apparently, the Pharisees and the scribes seem to be right, because the washing of the hands was required by the regulation of the Law of Moses. If, then, the disciples do not wash their hands, it means literally that they do not respect the Law of Moses. But, it is precisely here that there is a problem?

What was the reason why there was the washing of the hands? In fact, the washing of the hands was a symbolic gesture and an outward sign of the purification of the person before entering the presence of God. In other words, the washing of the hands was a sign of holiness and sanctity. But, instead of looking at this original meaning, Pharisees and Scribes had made it a pure external display of religiosity.

That is why Jesus quotes Isaiah who says, “This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are from me”. What is the point Jesus wants to make? Is he against traditions? No; Jesus is not against the respect of religious traditions. What he wants is that the respect of religious traditions should be the expression of what is in the heart, meaning a sign of the purity and the sincerity of a heart, which overflows from inside to outside.

Moreover, Jesus wants that the worship of God does not come from the tendency of mere display, of being content with the appearances and this habit of feeling good because people have seen me doing things for God. He wants that those who worship God may come to the relationship of “one on one” with their God, without mask and without guile.

And it is precisely here that Pharisees and Scribes fail the test, because everything for them is external, simple display in order to be seen by people and be praised. That is why Jesus defends his disciples because he knows them very well how they look for perfection and holiness in what they do, without hypocrisy.

In that sense, Jesus wants to tell us that true religion is not that of appearance, but of a heart that is turned to God. True religion is not through the outward observance of the regulations, but through our conversion of heart. The external appearance is certainly beautiful, but it does not determine the holiness of a person. But, conversion does. Then, we understand why Jesus says that nothing that enters someone from outside can defile that person, but the things that come out from within are what defile.

Let us ask the Lord to help us regulate our hearts to his so that what we do externally might be preceded by the conversion of our hearts. May God bless you all!

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



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