

Twenty Second Sunday of Ordinary Time – August 30, 2015

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

The chief issues of our age are religious. They are about ultimate goal of life and to find true meaning of life and our final destiny. For many people who are engaged in such a search religion remains a self-search. Sometimes it leads to God and at others makes the person self-righteous. Every religion calls to a growth which is human and personal. It is strengthened in the loyalty of the person to the ultimate and is manifested in the service of our neighbors. Religion ultimately must find meaning to our life. The theme of today's readings is the nature of true religion. Generally in a human society the laws are a necessary component. They are necessary for an ordered living and manifesting the best of relationships in society. In the first reading we have Moses exhorts his people to obey God's statutes and ordinances. Their obedience will gain those many blessings from the Lord their God. In the second reading James reminds the early converts that God is the source of all good. He challenges the community to be the doers and not merely hearers of the word of God. They are to use the gifts God has given them for the benefit of others. Mark in today's Gospel shows what happens when the letter of the law is slavishly followed. The scribes and Pharisees criticize the disciples for their failure to observe the laws about washing of their hands. Jesus confronts the Scribes and Pharisees over what constitutes authentic piety and true obedience to the commandments of God. Jesus reminds us that important things are not the norms and rules but what is inside a person's heart.

In the first Reading Moses draws the attention of the Israelites to all the good things God does for them. One such thing is the Law itself. It is not surely a burden but a gift from God offering them every advantage to remain in right relationship with God. The land was also a gift of God. From years in the desert they had learnt that the Promised Land could not be gained by mere human initiative. They were unable to get the land by conventional human means. God showed his fidelity to the covenant with them and gave them the land. They were told that if they failed in their fidelity to the Lord, they could lose the land altogether. The Israelites were told to pay attention to the statutes and ordinances so they may live, enter and occupy the Promised Land. As commanded by God, they were not to add or subtract anything from the commandments of God. This was mainly to ensure that the commandments would remain untouched from generation to generation. They were told that the rest of the nations would look at them in admiration. First of all they will be stuck by their wisdom, since they respect the Laws that are entirely just, the Laws that are clearly beneficial to them. Secondly the nations will be stuck by the close relationship Israel has with God. Moses explained to the Israelites that they have to be the example for others to show how concerned and caring their God is. Those who obey the commandments of the Lord would be blessed throughout their lives.

In today's Second Reading James tells the Christian community that every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above. He tells them that they are to be indebted to God for all the good things of mind and body they have received. All that is good, everything that is perfect is coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. God is totally dependable. Light is an image for the best gifts God could give. In fulfillment of his own purpose he gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures. All good actions that we perform, we do so by the grace of

God through the power of the Holy Spirit who dwells within us. God's word of truth is a special gift inviting us to believe and put all our trust in him. God's laws have not changed since the day of creation. As his creations, we are called to obey Him and serve him in all humility and all righteousness. Jesus, as the Word of God, is the bearer of all this goodness and perfection. God's Word summons us to put our faith into practice. We are to care for orphans and widows, the persons in need, and keep ourselves unstained by the world. The author insists on the primacy of God in the lives of people.

Almost from the beginning of Christ's public preaching in Galilee, the Scribes and Pharisees were in opposition to him, while the multitudes of ordinary Jews followed him day in and day out. The Leaders accused him of blasphemy when he forgave the sins of the Paralytic. When the disciples ate the ears of corn from the field on Sabbath day they accused him of breaking the laws. They called him friend of tax collectors when he went to eat with Mathew the Tax Collector. In today's Gospel the same Scribes and Pharisees accuse Jesus of breaking the custom and failing in religious duties as he permitted his disciples to eat without washing their hands. The episode began with what seems to be a deliberate violation of the purity of customs and the tradition of the elders regarding the washing of hands not observed by the disciples. Here the disciples became the center of the conflict and the opponents found it easy to attack Jesus through the action of the disciples in the context of religious practice. The problem had arisen by Jesus' time that the law was no longer a guideline helping people on their way to loving and serving God. Observing the law had become an end in itself. The emphasis was not on building a relationship with God and one's fellow human beings, but on checking out one's own external behavior. Jesus also indicated that many of the Old Testament laws were of human invention. They had little to do with loving God but rather of conforming to social demands. On the one hand, they helped those in authority keep control; on the other, people knew where they stood. If they externally observed the Law, they were "good".

Mark in the Gospel gives an explanation of what the Jewish practice was, based on the tradition of the elders. Many commentators think that the explanation given by Mark may not have been historically accurate. The tradition of the elders perhaps had been the oral tradition. In any case for the Scribes and Pharisees this was a great opportunity to challenge Jesus and the disciples for not observing the customs of ritual purity. This question reminds us often of our family dinner table whether the children have washed their hands and if they are clean enough to eat the meal. It is more a matter of hygiene and etiquette. The question here perhaps reflected the tensions in the early Christian community of Mark where some of the new Christians were Jews and some were Gentiles. The Gentiles did not follow Jewish customs and the Jewish Christians were upset. The purpose then was to put these Jewish customs in proper perspective. Washing hands before eating is a very sensible precaution and not to be a religious sanction. Jesus was not criticizing such precautions. What he is criticizing is the disproportionate importance given to these things to the neglect of what is far more important, the love of God and the care for one's fellow human beings.

Jesus therefore quotes from the prophet Isaiah about the people honoring God with their lips but their hearts remained far from the Divine. Their worship was useless, the doctrines they teach were mere human regulations and they put human traditions before the commandments of God. From here Jesus very assertively responded to the Scribes and Pharisees by saying that they

substituted external rituals for authentic internal piety. They were caught up in their own human traditions that they lost all sight of what might be God's actual commandments. Jesus firmly convinced that the purity laws and their related customs were created to serve human persons and not the other way round. Jesus tells them clearly that he was not opposed to these laws and customs, but he was certainly opposed to the rigid and legalistic ways that they can be imposed. He objected the attitude of the Pharisees. It was not that washing was a bad thing at all. What was bad was the notion that such formal and merely external actions constituted a person's religion, to the exclusion of what was really important as an expression of piety. All these rituals were aimed to get at a deeper reality and that cannot be done when they are approached merely from a rigid legalistic application. Insistence on such an action took away all the heart of a religion. The people had received the commandment of God through Moses and were told to observe them carefully. But it was lot more easy and less demanding for a Jew to wash his hands than it was to love of God with his whole being and to love his neighbor as himself.

Jesus then addresses the larger crowd and reconfirms what he said to the Scribes and Pharisees. Authentic piety resulting in appropriate behavior is not something that can be achieved from the observance of mere externals. Perfect observance of all purity laws does not make one pure. Authentic piety is first and foremost a matter of the heart. True obedience to the commandment of God must be based on one's internal disposition. Jesus realizes that it is possible to be externally clean and look proper in every way but the same person may be internally corrupt. Jesus then speaks of the source of real uncleanness. The source of uncleanness is not any food or drink that comes from outside. Real uncleanness is in the heart. A person does not become "unclean" by eating forbidden meat or by coming in contact with blood, still less by not washing hands before eating but by "evil intentions" that arise in the depths of the heart: lust, stealing, murder, adultery, greed, maliciousness, deceit, jealousy, slanderous talk, arrogance. All these are in direct conflict with a genuinely loving relationship with God and people. Washing hands does nothing to change that. What we need is the positive attitude to think more concretely of God and showing our love and concern to him and to one another. What is in the heart is of great importance before God. If the inner person is defiled then whatever emerges from that inner person will be defiled. If the person has purity of heart then whatever emerges from that person is pure. Thus for us Christians it is important that if we say to the Lord that we believe in him and that we truly love him, then we must testify to our devotion to Christ by faithfully and publicly practicing our religion with a pure heart.

This perfection of the Law consists in harmonizing the body and the soul, outward observances and interior worship. So, even if we Christians no longer observe the ordinances and customs of the old Law, we do not observe the new Law without accompanying our interior worship with outward and material practices, such as, for example, those we carry out periodically in liturgical worship. In particular, and this is something which comes directly from Jewish Tradition, we break the bread during each Eucharistic celebration, in order to express with an external sign our spiritual offering, which is united to the unique Sacrifice of Christ. It is important for us to associate interior worship and the outward practices of religion with each other: both are essential for our faith to be in perfect harmony. It is not uncommon, nowadays, to meet people who claim to be Christians and believers, but who do not want to go to church to worship the Lord each Sunday in community. Jesus teaches the crowd and warns it about all kinds of vices and sins. It is useless to appear pure and irreproachable to others if we are full of malice and spite

within our hearts. Even if we convince ourselves that we are pure on the inside, God sees us as we are, with all the ugliness of the evil and sin that is in us. There is no alternative: it is absolutely necessary to harmonize our inside and our outside.

We are called to be holy as our religion is holy. Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father and we must say in favor of Pharisees that they insisted that God's presence must be experienced not only in the Temple but in everyone's everyday life and business. Since God is All-Holy, one needs to be holy to meet everyday presence. Jesus shared this insight saying that he had not come to destroy the law but to fulfill it. For the Pharisees holiness included ritual cleanliness. Their intention was to extend the laws of ritual purity from priests to all Israelites who were considered a priestly people. Their difficulty was that this often had the effect of producing very legalistic type of religion. The washing of hands and other rituals contained all kinds of minute rules including the amount of water to be used. There were even taboos against unclean cups and vessels. This made difficult to arrive at the heart of true religion. Jesus condemned the Pharisees that their definition of true religion depended upon the rules that were made in many places by people rather than by God. True religion must come from listening to and accepting the voice of God. Here Jesus presented the new rule for the Scribes and Pharisees as he prescribes it to us today. He told them that the real defilement comes from within and never from without. Therefore eating or not eating particular food will not destroy religion but it is the inner disposition of the person that makes and breaks religion. He invites us today to be pure of heart in order to experience his presence in our work, duties and prayers. The Eucharist will be the moment for us to express all of our faith in the salvific power of Christ: all together, with one heart, with one soul, let us offer ourselves to the Lord in order to manifest his Glory in all of our life, a life that is holy and pure, in both body and spirit.

A Siberian shaman asked God to show him a man that He loved. The Lord advised him to look for a certain farmer. "What do you do to make the Lord love you so much?" the shaman asked the farmer when he found him. "I say His name in the morning. I work all day and say His name before going to sleep. That's all," the farmer replied. I think I found the wrong man, thought the shaman. Just then the Lord appeared and said, "Fill a bowl with milk, and go to town and then return. You must do this without spilling a single drop." The shaman did so. On his return, the Lord wanted to know how many times he had thought of Him. "How could I? I was worried not to spill the milk!" "A simple bowl made you forget me," said the Lord, "and the farmer, with all his tasks, thinks of me twice a day."

Fr. Eugene Lobo S.J. Bangalore, India