

Keep Your Religion Pure and undefiled Before God

Deut. 4: 1-2, 6-8; Ps. 15; Ja. 1: 17-18, 21-22, 27; Mk. 7: 1-8,14-15, 21-23

In the Gospel for this Sunday, we see yet another instance where the Pharisees are at odds with Jesus and His disciples. This time they ask Him why His disciples are ignoring the Jewish rules with respect to cleanliness. Why do His disciples eat without first washing their hands? Why do they not wash the food that they get from the market? Why do they not wash the cooking utensils and dishes? The rules were established from ancient times and they had served the Jews well over the centuries.

The Pharisees were 'sticklers' for enforcing the laws and rules of their elders. And who could blame them. They recalled the words of Moses as the Israelites were about to cross the Jordan River into the Promised Land. As we read in the First Reading, the laws had been laid down and Moses told the people sternly: 'You must neither add anything to what I command you nor take anything away anything from it, but keep the commandments of the Lord your God with which I am charging you. You must observe them diligently.'

Moses ordered the people to follow the commandments scrupulously, not taking any liberties or shortcuts. He knew that, after they crossed the Jordan River, they would be among people who did not worship the God of the Israelites and who did not observe the Jewish laws and that they may begin to stray away from the strict observance of the laws.

Centuries later, the Pharisees see that Jesus and His disciples appear to have strayed from the strict observance of the ancient rules. But Jesus calls them hypocrites and dismisses them. He agrees that they know the rules and observe them religiously, but that they have not realized that many of the rules that they are following are of human construct and did not come from God. Moses came down the mountain with Ten Commandments that he had received from God. After that, the Jewish leaders had developed over six hundred rules that governed every aspect of Jewish life. These included the rules regarding cleanliness.

If there is nothing else we have learned during this time of pandemic, cleanliness such as the washing of hands, cleaning of food, and washing of cooking and eating utensils is important to our health and safety. So, of course, we need to follow these rules. But Jesus goes beyond this superficial application of the rules and says that cleanliness of the heart is more important. It is more important to clean the inside of the vessel than the outside.

In the Letter of James, we are instructed to be 'doers of the Word and not merely hearers, who deceive themselves'. He goes on to say: 'Religion that is pure and undefiled before God is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.' Once again, we read Jesus' commandment to love God and love our neighbour repeated in a slightly different way.

We would do well to avoid the pitfalls of the Pharisees and to keep our 'religion pure and undefiled before God'. Let us not attend Mass every Sunday simply out of obligation, following the rules without undergoing a transformation of our hearts lest we be considered hypocrites. Let us allow God's grace to be 'implanted' in the deepest part of our hearts so that they may be transformed to reflect the loving heart of Jesus.