

Contexts

Mark's Gospel

- Composed between 65-70 CE
- Generally accepted as the first Gospel written.
- Authorship is unclear but possibly written by John Mark, the companion of Peter in Rome.
- Begins with the ministry of John the Baptist in the wilderness, then the Baptism of Jesus, then Jesus battling the forces of evil in the wilderness.
- First action of Jesus is to establish a community to establish the kingdom of God.
- Major work of this community is the work of healing and restoring God's right order, as opposed to the order of Rome, or the order established by the scribes and Pharisees, or religious and cultural norms of the time.
- Cleansing & healing stories restore people to their proper (rightful) place in the Kingdom and in human society (no longer outcasts, despised, unclean, etc).
- The right order of God's kingdom shatters and goes beyond the human and religious limitations placed on some of God's beloved sons and daughters.
- There is a characteristic starkness in Mark's Gospel – it is the shortest of the 4 canonical Gospels.
- Often the story is told by contrast – who is truly blind: the blind beggar or the seeing disciples, etc.

Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23 – things to notice

- This Sunday we resume reading from Mark's Gospel, but not from where we left off. Our readings from John have covered some of the same ground as we read in Mark, but the issue of food is once again to the fore.
- Jesus is once again in conflict with scribes and Pharisees. In this episode these have come from Jerusalem (presumably Jesus is in Galilee) so they are regarded as important people. Are they checking up on Jesus? They seem to have been sent to see and hear for themselves, and presumably to take a report back to Jerusalem.
- The Pharisees and scribes notice that Jesus' disciples don't observe the traditional Jewish laws about washing their hands. Note that the emphasis here is on *ritual purity* not good hygiene. In the time of Jesus, Pharisees wanted to extend the laws about ritual purity which only applied to the priests, to all the people.
- The theological point here is about the difference between *external ritual purity* and *internal purity of heart*. Who is really acting in accordance with God's vision – those who observe ritual purity or those who practice purity of heart?
- Jesus accuses the Pharisees and scribes of being hypocrites, and quoting from Isaiah, of false religion (honouring God only with their lips), promoting human doctrines, rather than God's doctrine, of ignoring the commandment (notice the singular) of God and holding fast to (mere) human traditions.
- The dialogue up to now seems to have taken place only between the Pharisees and scribes (as possibly the apostles). Now Mark shifts the scene to the 'people' or the 'crowd' so that the teaching of Jesus comes in the form of a public statement.
- Jesus uses the example of ritually pure food to illustrate his point: It is not what goes in from the outside which will make you unclean. Unclean things come from within.
- This is a radical departure from and sharp break with Jewish tradition. Large parts of the Pentateuch (first 5 books of OT, sometimes called Torah or the Books of Moses) were devoted to what food was considered ritually pure and could/could not be eaten.

- Jesus, according to Mark, seems to be saying that ritual impurity and Jewish food laws can be ignored.
- The 'heart' was the seat of learning and feeling in Jewish thinking. Unclean food, because it does not enter the heart, cannot defile the inner core of a person.
- Notice the clever use of the contrasting inside/outside language of these verses.
- Jesus shifts the earlier debate away from ritual practise to conversion of heart. Real religion is not in the ritual observance but in inner conversion resulting in proper action.
- Notice that every one of the 'evil intentions' impacts negatively on other human beings. Notice the absence of language about God.
- The implication: if you want to be at rights with God, live the right way with one another! Forget the old ritual purity laws and think about how pure your heart is in your dealing with one another. You defile your hearts by acting badly in relation to one another. Real defilement come not from what is outside, but from what is inside.
- Real religion, according to the Jesus tradition, is not about ritual practise but about how we treat each other.
- What brings real integrity to Christian life is the way we treat each other.

The Liturgical Context

The First Reading comes from the Book of Deuteronomy. Moses urges the people to obey the laws and customs he is teaching them. Doing so will not only bring a blessing upon the people but also make them a witness to the other nations ('A light to the nations' in other places in the OT).

The reading contains a warning not to add to or subtract from the Lord's commandments which are the path to Israel's flourishing. The gospel shows us what happens when human laws assume a 'divine' status or replace the commands of God.

Reflection

This weekend we resume reading from St Mark's Gospel. This Sunday's episode is about ritual purity verses purity of heart. The Pharisees were a group of especially observant Jews. They took ritual observance very seriously. These observant Pharisees and some scribes criticise the disciples for 'not following the tradition of the elders' by not washing their hands before eating.

This passage is not about good hygiene but about a ritual practice. By the time of Jesus the Pharisees wanted to extend the laws of ritual purity, which applied only to priests, to all the people. Jesus accuses them of substituting the law of God with mere human regulations.

The second point that Jesus makes is that it is not what goes into a person from outside which makes them unclean, but what they harbour in their hearts and minds.

We, too, can fall into the trap of thinking that our ritual practices (going to Mass, saying the Rosary, etc) are all that is necessary to be good followers of Jesus.

Some Christians seem to think that ritual practice is about being at rights with God; almost like 'paying God off'. That having been done, they are free to do what they like in their actions towards other human beings.

The teaching of Jesus in the Gospel today challenges both those views.

It is the reform of our hearts, not our ritual practices, which needs attention and is most important in living out the vocation God has given us. If the goodness of God is not seen through us, where can it be seen?

Jesus reminds his listeners that evil does not come from the outside, but from within. According to Jesus, being at rights with God is not achieved through ritual practice but through inner conversion to the mind and heart of God.

Real religion, according to the Jesus tradition, is not about ritual practise but about how we treat each other.

It's our hearts, not our hands, which need washing.