

May the Words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts, be always acceptable in your sight,
O Lord our Strength and our Redeemer: In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy
Spirit. *Amen*

Gospel

Today's reading is from the first Gospel to be put down in writing, the Gospel of Mark. It was written down around 40 years after the death and Resurrection of Jesus. It was written for those Greek speakers gathered in homes or house churches to hear the Jesus story.

Many scholars think that at this time in the Church's history, the followers of Jesus mostly thought of themselves as a Jewish Sect. And as a Jewish sect they had issues with the Pharisees and scribes who claimed to have the final authority over all Jews.

In Judaism then and today, it was believed that the arrival of the Messiah would signal the imposition of law and order with overwhelming force. The Messiah would put the whole world right.

But as we see in Mark and the other Gospels this was and is not the Messiahship of Jesus. And the Pharisees and others could not reconcile this loving, caring and compassionate Jesus with their view of what a Messiah should be like.

I remember in Seminary one of the professors described the Gospel of Mark as a Passion narrative with an extended prologue. And it is the only gospel to proclaim itself as a gospel.

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The presenting issue in today's Gospel reading centers around the washing of hands. Something most of us do before we eat or handle food. But the washing of hands or lack thereof, as found in today's Gospel reading, had little to do with hygiene. It was a religious ritual cleansing performed by Jews as a way to purify


themselves, their utensils and their food to avoid being made unclean by outside, that is Gentile contamination.

It was originally meant to be done only by the priests when they went into the temple to perform sacrifices. But by Jesus' time, ritual washing had spread to the lay folks ^{around} ~~before~~ eating meals. The pharisees as a whole generally were sticklers about the rules. And this rule was deemed important enough that it became a turning point for the pharisees in their relationship with Jesus. If they were not sure that Jesus needed to be stopped before, this seemingly insignificant lapse in ritual cleanliness made it ^{abundantly} clear that this Jesus needed to be stopped, ^{the sooner the better.}

^{ultimately} This isn't about hand washing. It never was. It was about following the rules come hell or high water.

~~and obeying the pharisees.~~

Now we should not be too quick to condemn the pharisees. Many of them were honorable and holy men, seeking to serve God the best way they could, in the difficult times of the Roman occupation.

^{Pharisees}
They and the group of followers of Jesus, both wanted spiritual renewal for their communities. The author of Mark's gospel like many of his fellow Christians in the very early Church, did not like the pharisees and their ilk. And so it is probably around this time that followers of Jesus began seeing themselves not as they always had, a Jewish sect but as a different religious group outside of Judaism. 

Many religious faiths have rituals that started well enough, but many of these same rituals ended up being more important than they were originally intended to be.

For example: A priest in the Diocese of Washington told me this story about a new Rector in a parish. When distributing communion, the old rector always touched the Aumbry which was near the beginning of the altar rail. He did this every time when he came again to the beginning of the Altar rail. The new guy in town never did that and upset many people in the congregation to no end. They thought he was being irreverent or not serious when administering the Sacrament. Touching the Aumbry had become for them an important ritual for the priest as he distributed Holy Communion. It had always been done that way.

After speaking with the former Rector, what the new rector found out was the reason the old Rector touched the Aumbry each time he came to the beginning of the Altar rail was to discharge static electricity so he would not shock the first person who received communion.

Something that began for a good reason, ended up becoming something idolized.

Washing of hands started out as a good thing but by Jesus day it had become for many, especially the pharisees, an important thing in and of itself. Resulting in Jesus calling out the Pharisees as hypocrites which some of them werel

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~~The message of the readings for today can be summed up in~~ this verse from the Epistle of James:

Be doers of the word and not merely hearers. Be doers of the word and not merely hearers.

I have many friends who though having grown up in the Church, have little or nothing to do with it as adults. When asked why their response is: most 'Church People' are nothing but hypocrites. The problem is that there are

*Provides an insight
antidote to
religious hypocrisy*

and use it to
point attention to
themselves.

many people who talk a great deal about their own faith,
but [↑] seem often ^{do to} to not act out ^{the} that very faith that they
proclaim. Like those pharisees who talked a great deal
about washing of hands, but at the same time ^{often} treated other
folks with contempt or worse. Certainly not God like.
Contrary to their words, hypocritical.

these
same
people

The Church as a whole does have its share of
hypocrites, I am sorry to say. But thankfully, it also has
people who believe and act out their faith in their every
day lives. St. Augustine of Hippo once said, "Love God
and do as you please." When one's life is truly converted
by God, acting and loving as God would have us do
becomes second nature to us. If we are truly filled with
the Love of God, then what will please us will surely
please God as well.

When we do love God, then the love of God will
certainly come from within us and touch the lives of all

those we encounter. Remember that life is short. We do not have much time to gladden the hearts of those who travel the way with us. Simply, very simply: Let us be swift to love and make haste to be kind.

And by doing so, hypocrisy will have no part of our lives. And maybe, just maybe, our love of God might bring some folks back to God's Church where love is to be found.

In Nomine.....