

Sunday.22

Our Gospel today seems so clear. Jesus is simply repeating to us what we already know, namely, that it is not what is outside us that determines the moral quality of our actions but rather our motives, our purpose, in performing them.

In the Lord's time many people, in an attempt to lead good lives, observed many different commandments. For example, they paid tithes on herbs because they were told that that was a good thing to do. The money collected went to the support of the temple. And they washed their hands before eating not simply because that was good for their health but as a sign of religious or ritual purity. But Jesus felt that the observance of these external laws had become too important. As a result people were not paying attention to the more important things in their religious lives. We read about that this past week in Matthew 23: 23-25: "You pay tithes on mint and herbs and seeds while neglecting the weightier matters of the law, justice and mercy and good faith. It is these you should have practiced, without neglecting the others." Then he adds: "Blind guides! You strain out the gnat and swallow the camel."

The lesson Jesus is teaching in today's Gospel is related to this theme but is still a bit different, I believe. Here Jesus is not trying to correct an imbalance, a false set of values, an exaggerated emphasis on the unimportant and a neglect of the important. Rather, he is trying to teach an even simpler lesson, namely, that it is our hearts, our reason for doing things, which give our external actions their moral or immoral value. Dirty hands don't make us morally dirty, but lust and greed and deceit and arrogance, all characteristics first of our hearts, do.

But then there is a second lesson to be learned here. There must be an agreement between our external actions and our motives. Sometime we can appear to be acting justly, but the external action is really not an expression of our minds and hearts. Indeed, there is a conflict between them. Then we have hypocrisy. We seem to be one thing but we are in fact something else.

Hypocrisy is always a danger for religious people because religious practices can become hollow. Our hearts are no longer in them. We are going through the motions, but our minds and hearts, our real lives, are elsewhere. There is a disconnect between our hearts and our actions.

And so we ask for the grace to be sincere in our religious lives. That is, we ask that our external observances may not become empty actions but may really be the expression of what is in our minds and hearts. Then we will become integrated people. There will be a continuity, a unity, between our interior lives and our exterior actions. In fact, we could say that this is quite simply the work of our lives: first, to turn our minds and hearts more and more over to God in faith, hope and love, and then to bring our lifestyle, our actions, great and small, into conformity with the inner dedication of our hearts to the Lord. We cannot do this in a day. It is the work of a lifetime. But at the same time this work will never come to completion unless it is accomplished a little more each day.

To have a true sense of what is really important and what is less important, to realize that it is our hearts that the Lord seeks, and not simply the external action, and to understand that our actions must be in agreement with our good hearts---these are the gifts of wisdom, the teaching, which is given us today by our readings.