



CATHOLIC CONVERSATIONS ON THE SCRIPTURES

Archdiocese of Miami - Ministry of Christian Formation

August 30, 2015

Twenty-second Sunday in Ordinary Time

Gospel reading Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23 [To be read aloud]

When the Pharisees with some scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around Jesus, they observed that some of his disciples ate their meals with unclean, that is, unwashed, hands. —For the Pharisees and, in fact, all Jews, do not eat without carefully washing their hands, keeping the tradition of the elders. And on coming from the marketplace they do not eat without purifying themselves. And there are many other things that they have traditionally observed, the purification of cups and jugs and kettles and beds. —So the Pharisees and scribes questioned him, “Why do your disciples not follow the tradition of the elders but instead eat a meal with unclean hands?” He responded, “Well did Isaiah prophesy about you hypocrites, as it is written: *This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines human precepts.* You disregard God’s commandment but cling to human tradition.” He summoned the crowd again and said to them, “Hear me, all of you, and understand. Nothing that enters one from outside can defile that person; but the things that come out from within are what defile. From within people, from their hearts, come evil thoughts, unchastity, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, licentiousness, envy, blasphemy, arrogance, folly. All these evils come from within and they defile.”

Brief commentary:

Today’s readings speak to us about the characteristics of true religion, whether Jewish or Christian. The Deuteronomist emphasizes the uniqueness of Israelite religion and the profound value of its wisdom and laws. Truly, the teachings of the Torah and of the Israelite prophets are a major breakthrough in human history. The psalmist highlights that the authentic observance of the Jewish faith involves the wholehearted commitment toward righteousness to ‘walk blamelessly and do justice; to think the truth in one’s heart’. Similarly, the New Testament letter attributed to James – perhaps the relative/“brother of Jesus” and steeped in the tradition of Jewish ethics – describes what true religion involves: “Be doers of the word and not hearers only, deluding yourselves. Religion that is pure and undefiled before God and the Father is this: to care for orphans and widows in their affliction and to keep oneself unstained by the world.” By the time of Jesus, Jewish religion offered the people ethical teachings and guidelines, as well as cultic patterns that enabled them to live and thrive in covenant with God. And like all religions, including Christianity, it struggled at times to live its truest ideals. Jews themselves were at times critical of practices that detracted from what is essential. The teachings of the prophets, and Jewish critics contemporaneous with Jesus, called for the ongoing reform and interpretations of the Law that served the people and called them toward authenticity. In today’s gospel reading we find Jesus in prophetic criticism of interpretations of the Torah that tended to over-emphasize ritual purity at the expense of its far more weighty teachings. By the time of Jesus, ritual purity, which included ritual bathing (*mikvaot*) and ritual cleansings of hand and objects, were not too dissimilar from some Christian spiritualities and practices that have tended to over-emphasize ritual over the more significant message of the Gospel. Jesus reminds the teachers of his time of the message of the prophets: that the heart is of far greater importance to God than external rites and ritual purification. These practices ought to serve what is at the heart of religion and not the other way around. The letter of James similarly calls its Christian communities to practice a religion centered on authenticity of heart and genuine practical concern for neighbor. The Church’s social ‘teaching & practice’ is deeply shaped by the message of the prophets, Jesus’ gospel and teachings like that of James’. The Church universal, diocesan, parochial and domestic need ongoing soul-searching, evaluation, examinations of ‘conscience & life’, that lead to ongoing reformation and transformation in the light of the life and teachings of Jesus. More than anything else, the Jewish and Christian religions are centered on the commandments of wholehearted love of God and of neighbor. Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition form the norm, the standard and benchmark by which this evaluation and reformation need to occur. No part of that tradition can be absolutized at the expense of others, particularly the most significant aspects of it. True religion involves, therefore, putting God and people first. True religion serves people as they strive to respond to God’s truth and loving grace in their lives and to carry out the mission God has entrusted to them.

Today’s reading offers significant messages:

- True religion is at the service of people, particularly the most vulnerable. True religion (just like true progress) involves how people treat people.
- Religion can lose its balance if perspectives and attitudes are adopted that make what is secondary into primary and what is primary into secondary. Jesus, like the prophets, was a critic of religious attitudes and practices that emphasized the secondary.
- Christianity, like Judaism, is founded on the great commandment of love: love God and neighbor with all your heart. Spirituality, ritual, laws, etc., must serve this purpose, and in this lies true holiness.

For our shared or personal reflection:

After a brief pause for silent reflection share your answers, ideas or feelings.

- What is the relationship between faith and religion?
- How can I adopt religious attitudes and postures that are grounded in love and concern for others?
- God says, “Be holy, for I the LORD your God, am holy.” What does holiness involve?