

The Catholic Parish of Petworth & Midhurst West Sussex

Fr Peter's Homily for The Twenty-Second Sunday of Ordinary Time
(Year B)
Sunday August 29th 2021

At first sight the Gospel reading seems to offer us a very dispiriting look at religion, just the sort of thing that really turns people off. Jesus is criticising the Pharisees for all the messing about with rituals and washings and rules about cleanliness, and all sorts of external actions, and this seems to chime with what a lot of critics might say about religious faith: people get obsessed with actions and rules and prohibitions, and they seem to lose touch with their humanity, with the things that really matter to peoples lives. I think the big question nowadays for us as Christians is how do we help people discover the transforming power of faith? People look at us and say: 'why should I bother?', and fiddling around with externals and seemingly meaningless rituals just reinforces that.

But I am not sure this is quite what Jesus is saying. After all, in the first reading Moses tells the people to stick fast to all the laws and the customs that he has taught them, to add nothing and remove nothing. Moses tells them that if they live like this it will be life-enhancing and enriching, and the nations around will, look at them and see how wise they are.

The truth is that human beings have an inner life, and an outer life. The outer life is the one that people see and hear: they see what we do and judge whether it is good or not. The inner life is what goes on in our minds and our hearts, our thoughts and intentions but also much more than that, the whole range of our inner struggles to resist temptation, to overcome powerful urges to dominate and acquire, the silent inner chamber where we rest in the presence of God. The point that Jesus is trying to make in this reading is that those two lives must mesh together, must reflect each other, must be in harmony. If our external life is all about fulfilling ritual observances, doing all sorts of holy-looking things, being at all the right sort of events, speaking the right sort of holy language, but our hearts are selfish and greedy, then we just project very clearly a sort of trivial hypocrisy. But, and this is just as important, if we have the purest, most righteous and well-controlled internal life, carefully controlled and full of goodness, but nothing happens to express this, to put it into practice, to open it up so that it bears fruit in improving the lives of other people, then it is sterile and dead.

Part of the quest for holiness and goodness, for being the sort of person that other people want to have around them, is to narrow more and more the gap between what people see and what they get. If someone puts their arm around you and says 'it is good to see you', we can tell if they mean it or not, if there is a gap between their actions and what is going on within them. There is nothing wrong, in itself, with the Pharisees insisting on washing in a ritual way before they eat, and when they return from the market place. But, if their hearts remain acquisitive, and superior, and self-righteous, and self-serving; if they think that they are better than other people because of those actions, or holier, or more clever, then there really is a problem. If, however, their ritual washing makes them more aware of their own moral fragility, their own vices and temptations; if it makes them more aware of their own need for help, need for improvement, need for conversion; if it makes them more aware of the

wideness of God's mercy, of how open he is to reforming even a sinner such as themselves, then it performs its purpose. It is then a washing not just of the hands, but also of the hearts, and so it is good.

I love all the external observances of our faith. I love to be able to genuflect in the presence of the Most Holy, and to mark my body with the sign of the cross, the sign of our salvation; I love to be able to stand, to sit, to kneel, to bow and to kiss the holiest of places, the altar where the fight for salvation is worked out day after day. I know that sometimes I do these things without really thinking. I know that they can become a habit. But if I am overcome with the majesty of what stands before me just one time in ten that I genuflect to the Most Holy, then it is much, much better than never giving it a moment's thought. These external observances of our faith – just like the ritual washing of the Pharisees are not an alternative to conversion of heart, they are an aid to it, and an expression of it. If we ever think that they are enough just on their own to prove our goodness, then we are way off the mark.

'It is from within, from men's hearts, that evil intentions emerge' Jesus says in today's Gospel. That is where the real change needs to take place. If beating my breast helps me to realise and take to heart the occasional depth of my foolishness, then it both helps me to change and also expresses my wish and intention to do so.

How did Moses tell Israel to demonstrate their greatness to the nations around them? It wasn't with their size, or their strength, or their wealth, it was with their wisdom, with the richness of their internal life. If our actions, both ritual ones and the activity of daily life, do not make real that wisdom of a rich internal life, then either the actions we do are meaningless, or the life within is lacking.