

22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time – August 29th 2021
A Reflection by Fr Sylvester O’Flynn OFM Cap., Rochestown, Cork

Cleanliness of mind and heart

“The Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered round Jesus.” Thus begins the Gospel for this Sunday (Mark 7: 1-8. 14-15. 21-23).

Who were these scribes and Pharisees? The scribes were more than copyists. They had become the experts in the interpretation of the written scriptures, especially in identifying the sins of people. When we were students before ordination, we were blessed that our professor of moral theology had years of pastoral experience to complement his academic scholarship. All our textbooks were in Latin and when we came to the chapter about the virtue of chastity, *De Castitate*, he pointed out that there was half a page about the virtue of chastity and some thirty pages about sins against chastity. Over many years hearing confessions, I often felt it would be great if there might be a year of special indulgence when the very act of coming to confession would be enough to receive pardon for all sexual sins, so that we could then look at our multiple sins of omission.

Pharisees, Separate Ones

The Pharisees? Their name means the separate ones. They came to prominence about two hundred years before Jesus when the Greeks took over the land and imposed Grecian culture on all people, including a cult of the body which the Jews could not accept. The Pharisees set out to separate themselves from any foreign contamination. The areas of contamination multiplied so much that the joy of religion was squeezed out. The Sabbath became a day of possible sins rather than a celebration of God. Going back to our moral theology books. There was a debate between so-called experts about the number of mortal sins a priest could commit while celebrating Mass. How many of the saints’ names would have to be omitted before it became a mortal sin? Some experts said two names would make it mortal. I’m not coddling you. Those who want to go back to the days before Vatican Council II have no idea of what it was really like.

The Pharisees and scribes who travelled from Jerusalem to Galilee to see Jesus did not come to be instructed by him but to find fault with him. Eventually it would be these religious leaders who plotted to have Jesus killed. When they challenged Jesus about unpurified hands he answered “It was of you hypocrites that Isaiah so rightly prophesied: this people honours me only with lip-service, while their hearts are far from me. The worship they offer me is worthless, the doctrines they teach are only human regulations. You put aside the commandment of God to cling to human traditions.”

Where do we stand today?

What has all this stuff about the Pharisees to do with us? It is a challenge to ask ourselves if we have settled for mediocrity, being lip-service Christians while our hearts are far from God. During the lockdown of the past year and a half many of our regular routines have changed. Many people who regularly went to Confession with the same sins to confess each time have broken their routine. Now they have the opportunity to see life with fresh eyes. Their routine way of confessing was based on what they learnt at the age of seven or eight. This childish routine now has the opportunity to look at sin from an adult perspective. While the Pharisees concentrated on regulations about washing and cooking, Jesus said that what makes a person unclean is what comes out of the heart. It is from within us that real evil emerges.

Jesus summed up of all commandments and regulations as a means to two ideals: to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul and mind; and to love our neighbour as ourself.

Examining conscience

A good way of examining conscience is to see oneself in the light of a favourite prayer or passage of scripture. A good mirror on life would be the Peace Prayer attributed to Saint Francis, *Lord, make me an instrument of your peace*. Am I an instrument of peace, forgiveness, caring, helpfulness, joy and hope to other people? How we treat other people is how we treat God.

How do we see ourselves in the light of the Beatitudes? Indeed, one might take any part of the Sermon on the Mount. I knew one man who examined his life in the light of the Our Father. Perhaps the best-known examination text is Saint Paul's description of Christian love.

“Love is patient and kind; it is not jealous or conceited or proud; love is not ill-mannered or selfish or irritable; love does not keep a record of wrongs; love is not happy with evil, but is happy with the truth. Love never gives up; and its faith, hope and patience will never fail” (1 Cor. 13: 4-7). Breaking the routine of childish confession is an opportunity to grow in a more mature Christianity. It is what is in the mind and heart that makes a person unclean. Blessed are the pure of heart for they shall see God.

Prayer

Guided by the teaching of Jesus in word and example, we pray.

May the Church be free of any sort of legalism or bureaucracy that would get in the way of compassion and human understanding.

We pray for people who resist any kind of change. Enable them to see the difference between the unchangeable law of God and the human traditions, which meant a lot in the past, but are no longer helpful.

We ask God for the grace of deep prayer: that we might grow in a heart-to-heart relationship with God.

(Add prayers for any local, personal or topical intention)

God, our Father, graciously hear the prayers we offer in the name of Jesus Christ, your Son, our Lord. Amen.

(Extract from Silvester O Flynn: *Gospel Hints and Prayers*, Columba Books).