

SUNDAY 22 (B) (2021)

A) WASH YOUR HANDS!

- From the very beginning of the pandemic, we have been encouraged to wash our hands frequently with soap and hot water
- whenever we enter the church, or shops or restaurants, we are given the opportunity to use hand gel
- and the washing of hands frequently is part of the discipline of hygiene which still prevails in hospitals and care homes
- in the ordinary way, we don't hesitate to wash our hands before a meal, especially if we have been doing a grimy job
- in all these cases we are observing good hygiene, so that we don't spread germs
- in today's Gospel, the scribes and Pharisees complain to Jesus because some of his disciples had not washed their hands before eating
- but here, it was not a matter of hygiene; it was to do with ritual washing
- and it was also to do with a tradition

B) LAW AND TRADITION

- according to the written Law, the Law of Moses, ceremonial washing was required only of priests before they entered the sanctuary of the Temple
- by the time of Jesus, the ritual of handwashing was observed before every meal; and not just by the priests;
- it had been extended to include all pious Jews
- this was the unwritten tradition, the legal interpretation
- the Pharisees regarded it to be just as important, just as binding as the written Law
- Jesus and his disciples were not observing it
- so they ask him, "Why do your disciples not respect the tradition of the elders but eat their food with unclean hands?"

C) HYPOCRITES!

- his response must have come as some surprise to them because he calls them hypocrites, people who are living a pretence
- and he quotes an Old Testament text which would have made them feel very uncomfortable
- *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.*
- Here Jesus points out the radical difference between the Law and the traditions
- The Law was God-given, the traditions were man-made;
- More important still, the Law from God was an expression of his love and care for his people, and an expression too of the people's loving response to him

- in today's First Reading, Moses tells the people that when their neighbours come to know all of these laws, they will exclaim: No other people is as wise and prudent as this great nation.
- So the Law was something they treasured, because it was a source of life and wisdom and holiness
- They did not regard it as a burden but a wonderful gift
- But the Pharisees, with their emphasis on external rules and regulations, are condemned because their religion is lifeless, and loveless
- Their hearts are far from God

D) A REVOLUTIONARY DOCTRINE

- Jesus goes on to teach the crowds something completely new, a revolutionary doctrine which puts him at odds even with the Law of Moses:
- From earliest times, the Jews have never eaten pig's flesh
- the Old Testament has stories of pious Jews facing martyrdom rather than eat it
- yet Jesus is saying that that does not matter any more
- Nothing a man eats can defile him, but rather what comes from his own heart
- It is not external things that make us unclean, but our intentions and the deep-seated attitudes of our heart
- It's where our heart is that really does matter
- So when Jesus began his preaching, he invited everyone to set their hearts first on the Kingdom of God, and then everything else would follow
- we too are invited to centre our hearts not on things, not on rules, not on ourselves, but on God, the Father of mercies
- and if we do, we will be responding in love to the unchanging and unconditional love he has for us
- we will be free from the constraints of mere regulations
- and we will be seeking to have a heart always for Jesus and for the values of his Gospel.

---ooo0ooo---