

“YOU LEAVE THE COMMANDMENTS OF GOD, AND HOLD FAST THE TRADITION OF MEN” - Biblical Commentary by Father Alberto Maggi OSM

Mark 7,1-23

Now when the Pharisees gathered together to him, with some of the scribes, who had come from Jerusalem, they saw that some of his disciples ate with hands defiled, that is, unwashed. (For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they wash their hands, observing the tradition of the elders; and when they come from the market place, they do not eat unless they purify themselves; and there are many other traditions which they observe, the washing of cups and pots and vessels of bronze.) And the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, “Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with hands defiled?” And he said to them, “Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written, ‘This people honours me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the precepts of men.’ You leave the commandment of God, and hold fast the tradition of men.”

And he said to them, “You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God, in order to keep your tradition! For Moses said, ‘Honour your father and your mother’; and, ‘He who speaks evil of father or mother, let him surely die’; but you say, ‘If a man tells his father or his mother, What you would have gained from me is Corban’ (that is, given to God)—then you no longer permit him to do anything for his father or mother, thus making void the word of God through your tradition which you hand on. And many such things you do.”

And he called the people to him again, and said to them, “Hear me, all of you, and understand: there is nothing outside a man which by going into him can defile him; but the things which come out of a man are what defile him.” And when he had entered the house, and left the people, his disciples asked him about the parable. And he said to them, “Then are you also without understanding? Do you not see that whatever goes into a man from outside cannot defile him, since it enters, not his heart but his stomach, and so passes on?” (Thus he declared all foods clean.) And he said, “What comes out of a man is what defiles a man. For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, fornication, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a man.”

Whenever Jesus communicates life, the enemies of life always appear; they are the religious authorities; this is what the evangelist Mark writes to us in the chapter 7 of his gospel. He writes “.. the Pharisees gathered together to him, with some of the scribes,..” for the word ‘gathered’ the evangelist uses the word ‘synago’, from which comes synagogue to allow people to understand that what follows is the result of the teaching done in the synagogue. They gather around him “the” Pharisees, indicating “all Pharisees” meaning “the separated ones”; they are lay people who observe all the 613 precepts extrapolated from the law of Moses and for this reason yes they separated from the rest of the population, and “some of the scribes”, that is, the official theologians, who even came nothing less than from Jerusalem, the important city. And what will be the seriousness of the fact? “..they saw that some of his disciples ate with hands defiled, that is, unwashed.” It is not a question of hygiene, but a ritual, a religious one: the Talmud foresees how to wash hands, the amount of water, the method, etc. and the accusation they make against

Jesus is *“Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with hands defiled?”* For the Jews, Moses on Sinai had received the law and in written form, the first five books of the Bible, and in the oral, commented form, which later ended up in the Talmud, that is, in the teaching, this is the tradition of the ancients, *“but do they take food with pure hands?”*. Jesus’ reply initially seems like a compliment, Jesus says *“Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites,..”* so a compliment, and then here is the surprise *“hypocrites”*. The term *“hypocrite”* did not, at that time, have the moral connotation that it later took on, but it indicated the mask of a theatre actor. So it should be translated as *“Actors, you are gods comedians, all your fiction of religion is just a theatre”*. The accusation is taken from the prophet Isaiah, is that *“This people honours me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; ..”* the heart in the Jewish culture is the mind *“.. in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the precepts of men.”* So it doesn't come from God, they have passed off as divine authority what is human and, while the accusations they have made for not observing the ancient traditions, for Jesus they are only precepts of men.

Then Jesus continues *“You leave the commandment of God,..”* God's commandment is that of love for him and for one's neighbour *“.. and hold fast the tradition of men.”* They demanded that human traditions proceeded from God for their power, to dominate, to impose their religiosity to men.

Then here is a passage that unfortunately the liturgical version has cut, it is not easily understood because; it is the passage from the offering to God, which in that case prevented or did not allow one to help his own family members, that is, God was honoured by dishonouring men. This was intolerable for Jesus and he adds *“You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God, in order to keep your tradition..”* Their desire for power comes before the interests of God and men.

Jesus continues *“.. he called the people to him again, and said to them, “Hear me, all of you, and understand: there is nothing outside a man which by going into him can defile him;..”* What Jesus says is very serious, why? There is the book of Leviticus which has a chapter, the eleventh chapter, entirely dedicated to those foods, those animals that they cannot be eaten because they are impure and make man impure, so Jesus is passing from oral law to written law. So much so, here too there is the other passage which unfortunately the liturgical version inexplicably and incomprehensibly omitted, then the disciples asked him about the parable. They accepted the teaching to break up with the oral law, but the written one is the word of God, that must not be touched, and therefore they think that Jesus spoke with a parable, but Jesus did not say it is a parable. And here is Jesus’ comment that there is only in Mark’ gospel *“Do you not see that whatever goes into a man from outside cannot defile him, since it enters, not his heart but his stomach, and so passes on?”* (Thus he declared all foods clean.) If Jesus makes all food pure it means that what is written in the book of Leviticus, at least in chapter 11, is wrong, or rather it does not reflect the divine will, and this is very serious because, if you begin to distinguish, you do not know where you are going to end up.

And then here is Jesus giving the teaching: what makes man impure or not, Jesus had said *“Do you not see that whatever goes into a man from outside cannot defile him, since it enters, not his heart but his stomach, and so passes on?”* What makes man impure is not a food, but what comes out of man. Here Jesus lists twelve attitudes, none of which concerns worship or religion, twelve attitudes that make man impure, that is, they prevent, hinder communion with God, and they are: evil thoughts, fornication, theft, murder, adultery, greed, wickedness, deceit, debauchery, envy,

slander, pride and the last is foolishness; foolishness is hoarding for oneself rather than sharing with others. And Jesus states *“All these evil things come from within, and they defile a man.”* Therefore for Jesus the distinction between pure and impure does not proceed from God, impurity arises from a bad relationship with other men.