

TWENTY-SECOND SUNDAY [B]

Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-8; James 1:17-18, 21b-22, 27; Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

The previous five Sundays we have been working our way through the remarkable 6th Chapter in the Gospel of John. At the center of these Gospel readings we have heard all about food and drink; more specifically, Jesus giving to us His Body (as real food) and His Blood (as real drink).

The Eucharistic miracle makes Jesus present among us. At every Mass we dare to witness bread and wine becoming no less than the Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity of Jesus Christ which He gives to us so that we might live in Him and He in us (cf. John 6:55-56).

Today, we return to the Gospel of Mark and, low and behold, the theme of food and eating continues.

In today's Gospel, the Pharisees and Scribes notice that some of Jesus' disciples do not go through the usual purification before eating, fulfilling Jewish ritual procedures.

Eating the correct food in the proper way was in the ancient world is an important part of Jewish life - and ours as well. Such practices came to the Jewish faith from traditions which are based on the all-important truth that God is found in all the activities of life. Eating itself is a life-sustaining practice and God, Who is no less than the "Lord, the Giver of Life."

Jesus' difficulty with the Pharisees came from their conviction that were clean and thus worthy worshippers of God *because of their external observance of the rituals*. Jesus also has difficulties with their readiness to regard themselves as superior people because of the ritual cleanliness and their readiness to condemn as unclean anyone who did not follow their practices. Quoting the prophet Isaiah, Jesus accuses them of *hypocrisy*:

"This people honors me only with lip service, while their hearts are far from me" (Mark 7:6; Isaiah 29:13).

Properly speaking, who is a *hypocrite*? The word derives from a Greek root (*hypokrisis*) meaning *play-acting* or *pretending*. In its ancient usage, the word hypocrite was not necessarily a bad term but more of a descriptive term.

A hypocrite was used to describe the person who put on the mask and pretended to be someone or something that they would never fulfill in real life. More simply put, a hypocrite was an actor or actress, a person assuming a role in a play.

Jesus' use of the word hypocrite in today's Gospel is an admonishment of those who are *pretenders*.

A hypocrite is a person who does not have an earnest desire to be whatever it is they are portraying themselves to be.

Pretending seems to grow over time. It is more important for a person to be seen as being something rather than truly being someone. At this initial stage the effort of the pretender is to deceive others. Then, the person delves deeper into pretending where they actually come to believe they are the role they are playing. Finally, the person comes to identify with their play acting so much that they even lie to God.

According to Jesus, a *hypocrite* is person who honors God only with their lips, while their hearts are far, far away.

Friends, take heed: it is not enough to do the right thing. We are called by Christ to *do the right things for the right reasons*. Pretending can never make us holy. It is our hearts which matter, our intentions, our earnest desires.

Pray, then, first to desire to do what is right, noble, virtuous and courageous.

Pray first for a deepening desire to honor God. As we grow in holy, heavenly desires so will our actions reflect our hearts, so will we discover a newfound reservoir of strength compelling us to do what is right, noble, virtuous and courageous.