

Tuesday's Gospel: Wash Your Hands Before Eating

Gospel for Tuesday in the 5th
Week of Ordinary Time, and
commentary.

Gospel (*Mk* 7:1-13)

Now when the Pharisees gathered together to Jesus, 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 honors 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, ‘Honor 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.”

Commentary

All of us may remember our mothers or grandmothers insisting on the importance of washing our hands before eating. Often we will have

done this reluctantly, without giving much importance to hygiene or the possibility of contracting a disease. We liked to play, and therefore to get dirty. We liked to eat, and therefore anything that interfered was something we avoided.

But we obeyed. Whether it was to avoid being punished or reprimanded, or simply to eat as soon as possible. Also because deep down we sensed that the words of our mother or grandmother came wrapped in a wisdom that had to be respected. But then we grew up, and we continued washing our hands, even though no one was there to remind us. We knew washing our hands was important. It had a meaning; our health was at stake.

In today's Gospel passage, those who criticized Jesus carried on the tradition of their elders, but they did so out of fear of punishment. They

never understood that God's commandments were not a whim, but rather a guide prescribed for the health of their souls.

Hence they failed to observe the commandment to honor their father and mother. Saint Josemaría called the fourth commandment the “most sweet precept.” They failed to understand that behind that commandment there is a spirit. The same spirit that underlies each of the ten commandments: God's desire for us to have a clean heart, above all in order to be able to contemplate Him (cf. *Mt* 5:8).