

9. February 2021

“Hypocrisy and cooling of the heart”

Mk 7:1-13

The Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered round him, and they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with unclean hands, that is, without washing them. For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, keep the tradition of the elders and never eat without washing their arms as far as the elbow; and on returning from the market place they never eat without first sprinkling themselves. There are also many other observances which have been handed down to them to keep, concerning the washing of cups and pots and bronze dishes. So the Pharisees and scribes asked him, 'Why do your disciples not respect the tradition of the elders but eat their food with unclean hands?' He answered, 'How rightly Isaiah prophesied about you hypocrites in the passage of scripture: This people honours me only with lip-service, while their hearts are far from me. Their reverence of me is worthless; the lessons they teach are nothing but human commandments. You put aside the commandment of God to observe human traditions.' And he said to them, 'How ingeniously you get round the commandment of God in order to preserve your own tradition! For Moses said: Honour your father and your mother, and, Anyone who curses father or mother must be put to death. But you say, 'If a man says to his father or mother: Anything I have that I might have used to help you is Korban (that is, dedicated to God),' then he is forbidden from that moment to do anything for his father or mother. In this way you make God's word ineffective for the sake of your tradition which you have handed down. And you do many other things like this.'

Hypocrisy! This is a serious accusation that the Lord is making to the questioning Pharisees.

Hypocrisy is pretending to say something outwardly which makes one appear sincere before men, which appears pious, but nevertheless carries another hidden intention.

This is indeed a bad state, which the Lord rightly condemns, especially when it is connected with religion. It is particularly bad because a very sensitive area of man is deceived here, his delicate relationship with God!

How does this come about? The Lord himself gives an answer to this: *“This people honours me only with lip-service, while their hearts are far from me. Their reverence of me is worthless; the lessons they teach are nothing but human commandments.”*

One can indeed become cold in the heart even in the religious realm, outwardly performing things, celebrating the rite, but not being there with the heart. In the meantime, the heart turns to other things and so it happens that - as described here in the text - things are stripped of their actual meaning and transformed for one's own interests! The Lord warns against such processes in not a few places in the New Testament.

When, for example, Pharisees seek honour with men instead of with God, they take advantage of their privileged position in Israel in order to then think themselves great in this reputation. This is a subtle process that may not always be fully conscious, but nevertheless takes effect and so makes the heart grow cold when love is directed towards oneself instead of God! If this process happens again and again in various ways, then it can degenerate into hypocrisy, in that religiosity becomes almost a kind of mask behind which other intentions are hidden!

In the case Jesus is referring to, a form of greed may have been the reason for violating God's commandment in order to achieve one's own interests.

Since we are human beings and must not feel exalted that such things can only happen to others, it is important to recognise ourselves in God. All these things that can lead to hypocrisy - may God save us all from it - live in our hearts.

There can be many precursors that lead up to such wrong attitudes, and it is wise to recognise these things early in oneself. When Jesus teaches us in the above case that the heart is far from God and that these excesses can occur, he immediately gives us a hint how we can counteract such developments, because our heart should belong to God. It is not for nothing that the first commandment says: *You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind.*

Even if we have been following the Lord for a long time, it can happen to us that our heart seems cold and uninvolved, that it lacks a glow of love! We must then carefully perceive why this is so: have we been watchful over ourselves, have we also used the time reserved especially for God in prayer to talk to God, to open our hearts to Him, to seek intimacy with Him? Have we given ourselves over to

thoughts and feelings that have separated us from God, cultivated vanities, sought many distractions, etc.? Have we been delicate in our dealings with people and sought to serve them?

In short, a sincere examination of conscience is good to determine whether a perceptible coldness in the heart may be of our own making. If it is, then we should immediately restore all things that have separated us from God back to God in right order and call upon the Lord to clear out everything that stands in the way! When our will is weak or seems paralysed, we ask the Lord to strengthen it.

The importance of such watchfulness over us, which must not, however, degenerate into scrupulousness, becomes clear when we realise that the turning away of the heart from God does not necessarily come very quickly, as when, for example, we commit a mortal sin and consciously persist in it. It can also come slowly, become habitual: the heart then darkens more and more and in the end it can come to the excesses of hypocrisy, to a hardening of the heart which then hardly shows any readiness to repent!

But it can also happen that in our examination of conscience we realise that, according to our knowledge, we have withheld nothing essential from God and have turned to other things. The coldness of our heart may have other causes. Then it is simply a matter of entrusting this cold heart to God's love and continuing to serve God with our will and the corresponding deeds. God is greater than our feelings (*1 Jn 3:20*)!

A constant plea to God for humility is a good way to work permanently so that our heart does not turn away from God. A humble heart cannot go astray in the way the text tells us today.

The intercession of Mary, Mother of God, and our request to her to always assist us to love God with all our heart, will help us to walk the path of following Christ sincerely!