

7. February 2023

## 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 reproach that the Lord raises against the Pharisees. To be hypocritical means that outwardly one acts in such a way that one appears pious and sincere to others, but at the same time one carries within oneself another hidden intention.

This is indeed a serious attitude, which the Lord rightly denounces, especially when it is related to the religious sphere. It is particularly serious here, because man deceives himself in such a sensitive area as his relationship with God.

How does this attitude come about? Jesus Himself gives us an answer, quoting the Prophet Isaiah: *"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."*

Indeed, our hearts can grow cold, even in the religious realm. We may worship outwardly, participate in rituals and prayers, but the heart is far away, occupied with other things. So what happens is what is described in these words of the Prophet: we strip things of their deeper meaning and change them according to our own self-interest. In many parts of the New Testament the Lord warns us of this danger.

For example, when the Pharisees seek to be honoured by the people, rather than by God, they are abusing their privileged position among the people of Israel, in order to feel great in this prestige. It is a subtle process, which may not always be consciously done, but which nevertheless cools the heart, because the love that is due to God is diverted towards oneself. If this process is repeated frequently and in various forms, then it can degenerate into hypocrisy, using religion as a mask behind which other intentions are hidden.

In the case reproached by Jesus in today's Gospel, we can find a certain greed, which led the Pharisees to violate the Lord's commands in order to replace them with others that corresponded to their own interests.

Since we are human, we should never feel superior, believing that only others can fall into this kind of attitude. For this it is important to know ourselves in the light of God, for such attitudes can also dwell in our hearts. May God deliver us from hypocrisy!

There can be many stages leading up to such an attitude, and it is good to detect these tendencies in ourselves early on. If in today's Gospel Jesus tells us that these aberrations are caused by having a heart far from God, he is at the same time giving us a clue to combat them, namely that our heart belongs entirely to him. It is not for nothing that the first commandment tells us: *"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength"* (Mk 12:30).

For those of us who have been following the Lord for a long time, it can also happen that our hearts seem cold and indifferent, and that the fire of love is lacking. Then we should carefully examine why we have reached such a state: have we been vigilant, have we really taken advantage of our times of prayer to dialogue with God, to open our hearts to him, to seek his nearness, have we perhaps let ourselves be carried away by thoughts and feelings that have distanced us from God, have we cultivated vanities or sought distractions to excess, have we been gentle in our dealings with our fellow human beings and have we tried to serve them?

In short: it is good to make a sincere examination of conscience to see whether the coldness we perceive in our hearts might have been caused by our own negligence. If so, we should immediately set in order before God all the things that have turned us away from Him, and ask Him to set aside all obstacles. If our will is weakened or seems to us to be paralysed, then let us ask the Lord to strengthen it.

It will become clear to us how important vigilance over ourselves is - which, by the way, must not degenerate into scrupulosity either - when we consider that turning away from God does not necessarily happen in an instant, but can happen very slowly and gradually become habitual, just as it does with sin. Then the heart becomes darker and darker, and in the end it can even reach the excesses of hypocrisy and hardness of heart. At that point, there is hardly any disposition left for conversion.

But it can also happen that, after having made an examination of conscience, we cannot discover anything essential that we have denied God or that we have neglected. Then the coldness we feel in our hearts may have other causes. In this case, we should simply surrender this cold heart to God and continue to serve Him with our will and corresponding works. For *"even if our own feelings condemn us, that God is greater than our feelings and knows all things"* (1 Jn 3:20).

A good remedy to prevent our heart from turning away from God is constant and fervent prayer for humility. A humble heart cannot stray to the extent described in today's Gospel.

The intercession of the Virgin Mary and our supplication that she will always assist us to love God with all our heart will help us to walk with sincerity the path of following Christ.

NOTE: Since today is the 7th day of the month, which we always dedicate in a special way to our Heavenly Father, we want to invite you to listen to the "3 minutes for Abba", which is a small impulse that we publish daily in order to deepen the relationship of trust with God the Father. You can find them in the following links:

-Telegram: <https://t.me/threeminutesforAbba>

-Webpage: <http://en.elijamission.net/category/3-minutes-for-god-father/>