

LOOKING TO SUNDAY®

Sunday, August 30, 2015

This email, entitled Looking to Sunday®, focuses on the Gospel Reading for the coming Sunday. It prepares readers to hear God's Word at Mass and it offers a point of reflection to consider in the days leading to Sunday. Looking to Sunday is written by Father Tom Iwanowski.

TODAY'S APPROVED RELIGION

Many people in our increasingly secular society would gladly endorse the religious approach of the Pharisees and scribes in this Sunday's Gospel. (Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23) Those Pharisees and scribes had made the careful observance of tradition and ritual the heart of their religion.

They were concerned with ritual washings and purification, in addition to being focused on the strict observance of the law of the Sabbath and the avoidance of all forbidden food.

The religion of the Pharisees and scribes was bound up with rules, rituals, and tradition.

Certainly those in our day who have little regard for religion have no problem with people of faith keeping such rituals and traditions provided they remain private, esoteric matters confined to their homes and worship places.

However, that approach was condemned by Jesus. For Jesus religion was not a matter of scrupulously keeping ritual law but rather a matter of living in a right relationship with God, with others, and with the created world.

We certainly see that in this Sunday's Gospel. There Jesus is asked, "Why do your disciples not follow the tradition of the elders but instead eat a meal with unclean hands?" Jesus replies by accusing his questioners of misplaced priorities, of paying more attention to their rituals than to the commandments of God centered on morality and correct human behavior. "Well did Isaiah prophesy about you hypocrites...You disregard God's commandment but cling to human tradition."

Jesus' concern was not adherence to external religious ritual. Jesus knew that what made a person unclean was not failing to wash one's hands or eating the wrong food, but rather failing to live an upright life.

As he said, "From within people, from their hearts, come evil thoughts, unchastity, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, licentiousness, envy, blasphemy, arrogance, folly. All these evils come from within and they defile."

Saint James in Sunday's Second Reading (James 1:17-16, 21-22, 27) makes that same point. "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God and the Father is this: to care for orphans and widows in their affliction and to keep oneself unstained by the world."

We live in a society that has no problem with people of faith, provided that, like the Pharisees and scribes they make their religion only a matter of rites and rituals.

But when people of faith advocate for what is just and right, when their values contradict the laissez-faire morality of our culture, when they dare to condemn certain actions as evil and defiling of human nature, then people of faith become an unwelcome threat.

We see an example of that in the reaction of some people to the statements of Pope Francis. When he speaks in general terms of doing good and avoiding evil, no one complains. But when Pope Francis gives concrete examples of the evil to be avoided, such as uncontrolled capitalism or excessive profits, and the good that should be done, such as welcoming the immigrant or confronting climate change, then there is no longer universal applause.

A Christianity that is nothing more than ritual and ceremony may be accepted by society, but it is not the religion of Jesus Christ.

Jesus came to challenge us to turn from sin and to live as children of God. He came to open our eyes to a new way of seeing life. He came to teach us values that contradict our culture. Jesus did not come to make sure we properly washed our hands!

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