

**Twenty-Second Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle B**  
**August 30, 2009**

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

**Pure and undefiled Religion**

Many atheists and agnostics argue that the world would be a lot better off if we were to do away with organized religion. They look at history and current events and see much of the hatred and killing and violence as caused by people acting in the name of their particular religion. They cite, for example, Catholics and Protestants fighting in Ireland; Muslims attacking us, the infidels; the Crusades; the conflicts in the Middle East. Religion can be mis-used as an excuse for doing evil things against our fellow men, but this is not a reason for giving up on it. In fact, without religious authority to keep us in check, our society and race would go much farther astray. It would be a much less civilized world. But true religion must have the proper focus and intention.

We heard this morning from St. James: *“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.”* A pure religion must guide its members to look out for those who cannot take care of themselves, the orphans and widows for example, and to keep themselves morally pure and unstained and undefiled by the temptations of this world. In other words, we must love our neighbor and love God by doing the things that are pleasing to Him and not those that are pleasing to ourselves and to society.

But we must be watchful that our religious authorities do not go astray themselves; that they don't get caught up with human traditions and things of this world and lose touch with what is important to God.

In our gospel reading, Jesus chastises the Pharisees who are worried about keeping the tradition of washing hands before eating. They didn't do this for reasons of hygiene; the Jews didn't have pigs so they didn't need to worry about swine flu yet. They performed the hand washing as a religious purification ritual, it was a Jewish custom performed before many different rites. For example, washing hands was also done before offering sacrifices. But many of Jesus' disciples were non-Jews and had been pagans before choosing to follow Jesus, and so they did not know or follow the Jewish customs. Still, they were criticized by the Pharisees. Jesus rebukes the Pharisees because they concentrate on putting on a good show, at looking good on the outside, but are not concerned about their internal purity, with looking good to God on the inside. People can see how we look on the outside, but God knows what we look like on the inside and that is all that is going to really matter in the end. Jesus doesn't care about clean hands; He wants clean souls. And so He questions whether the Pharisees are being good religious leaders. Are they teaching the people to help the orphans and the widows? Are they teaching the people to keep their souls unstained by the world? Are they teaching the good religion that we heard about from James? Or, are they just teaching empty pious practices?

In his time, Moses was recognized as the religious leader of the Israelites, of the Jewish people. He sat in his tent day by day and ruled on all the difficult cases of the

people so that they could know the will of God. It wasn't a democracy ruled by the will of the people; they didn't vote. And religion shouldn't be a democracy or it will quickly go astray; we would choose to do the things that please the people, not the things that please God which are the only important things. In our first reading this morning, we see Moses preparing to end his journey; the people are about to cross into the Promised Land, and he will not be joining them. And so he takes one last opportunity to remind them about the law they have received, about its wisdom, and he encourages them to uphold that law as they move forward; to be witness to the nations about their special relationship with God.

Moses, himself, had a special relationship with God, and without his continued leadership as they moved into the Promised Land, the Jewish people had a lot of ups and downs. For a religion to be a good religion, its leader must have a special relationship with God so that he can lead the people to interpret the law according to God's will, otherwise they will go astray because of our human weaknesses; our ability to rationalize doing what we want to do rather than what we ought to do. When Jesus came on the scene, He saw the people had all gone astray, like sheep without a shepherd. He did not want His Church to go astray when He returned to His Father. And so He put Peter and his successors, the popes, in place to be that one religious leader for us, much like Moses was for the Israelites. It is the job of the pope, in union with the bishops, to interpret the law and apply it to the specific problems and issues of our times, just as Moses did sitting in his tent many, many, years ago.

Through the Church, the pope teaches how to take care of those that cannot take care of themselves; not only the widows and orphans, but the unborn, the elderly, immigrants, and those all around the world trapped in poverty and sickness and oppression without power to change their situation. He teaches us how to keep ourselves unstained by the world by teaching us moral values that often conflict with the values of the world, especially in regard to matters of sexual impurity; things that make us impure on the inside even though we may look nice on the outside. Jesus gives us a list of some of these in the gospel. He says: ***“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.”***

That the Catholic Church has the office of the Holy Father, the pope, gives it the best chance of being a “good religion.” We must embrace the Church's teachings as being God's teachings, and not just some made-up, man-made, rules that we can choose to follow, or not. We must follow God's ways and not the ways of the world. We should not do what we want or what society tells us; we need to do what we know deep in our hearts that we ought to do.

**Deacon Joe Hulway**