

September 1, 2024 – Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost

“At the Table with Jesus” by Pastor Julio Romero

Gospel: Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

This Gospel reminds me of my visit to the town of Magdala located at the shores of the Lake of Galilee, not far from the town of Capernaum where Jesus stayed with Peter and his family during his ministry.

At the time we were in Israel, they were excavating the town’s synagogue, most likely the same synagogue where Jesus preached and liberated Mary Magdalene from seven demons. In that place, they had recently unearthed a beautiful mosaic at the front of the Synagogue, and right next to it there was an inground tank that was used for the purpose of purification before people entered the synagogue as they did at the temple in Jerusalem. Worshipers had to walk into the tank and wash themselves to worship the Lord.

This practice was all part of the traditions concerning ritual purity that included the washing of hands before meals.

Let’s not forget that the Pharisees and Scribes were very disciplined observing all these traditions and rules and they expected everyone else to do the same.

In today’s Gospel you can tell how disappointed and perhaps frustrated the Pharisees and the Scribes were with Jesus for letting His disciples eat without washing their hands first.

They expected Jesus, a Rabbi, a teacher like themselves, to live by the same traditions that had been passed down from generation to generation. Perhaps they saw Jesus as one of them.

There is no doubt that the Pharisees tried hard to create the conditions of purity required in the Temple everywhere else in Israel. Let’s not forget that it is critical to realize that the Pharisees were a popular and powerful group in the first century among the common people. They and the Scribes were the teachers and interpreters of the Torah, the Law of God for many of the common people.

And along comes Jesus, and you wonder what is Jesus doing here? Is He intentionally ignoring the tradition of the elders because it is not written anywhere

in the Torah, and it is all part of an oral tradition that had been around for centuries and centuries?

What I have learned about religion and traditions is that we give authority to sayings that are not biblically based, phrases like “God will never give you more than you can handle,” “God helps those who help themselves,” and “Money is the root of all evil.” There are so many other sayings and beliefs that we are sure Jesus said or that are written in the Bible but in reality they are all part of a long oral teaching tradition passed on from generation to generation.

What I see Jesus doing here is letting people be who they are, and not trying to change them from the outside but from the inside, which is what really matters in the Kingdom of God. In Spanish we have a saying about this. It says, “It is not the robe that makes the Monk”. The change has to come from the inside.

Jesus doesn't forget that He is eating with the people known as “sinners”, people with defiled hands and impure hearts, who, for whatever reason, didn't love God with all their hearts, souls and strength and didn't love their neighbour as themselves. So, if Jesus is going to make those people love God with all their hearts, souls and strength, and their neighbours as themselves, do you think that to come down on them with the burden of so many external purity laws would do the job? I don't think so.

What we know of the Lord is that He is patient and kind with those who are trying to turn their hearts to God, to those who want to change their ways, to those who feel real contrition and desire to amend their ways and to come close to Him. But not so with those who are arrogant, who place themselves above everyone else and this Gospel is one example of that.

He calls the Pharisees and Scribes “hypocrites”.

On another occasion, Jesus advised all his followers and disciples not to be quick to see the splinter in our brother's eye but to see the log in our own eyes. And this is exactly what the Pharisees and Scribes were doing, but the Lord Jesus didn't stay quiet about it. He reminded them of that by quoting the words from the Prophet Isaiah:

*‘This people honours me with their lips,
but their hearts are far from me;*

*⁷in vain do they worship me,
teaching human precepts as doctrines.'*

⁸You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition."

By quoting these words from the Prophet Isaiah, we can tell how disappointed the Lord Jesus was with the Pharisees or anyone else who put their faith in man-made traditions and rules. But with those who wanted to come to him, who welcomed not only Him but His message as well, the Lord Jesus rejoiced. Even though they ate with dirty hands and had missed the mark of a faithful child of God, He showed them love, kindness and patience. He kept no records of wrong from those people. He did not feel anger toward them.

Those people got to know the true love from God, the love that the Apostle Paul talks about in his First Letter to the Corinthians: *"Love is patient, love is kind. It keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres."*

What this Gospel teaches me is that we don't have to worry about not being good enough to sit at the table with Jesus, to invite Him into our midst. Sometimes we won't follow the rules and traditions that the world requires of us and sometimes we will. It doesn't matter. We can come to Him as we are, with dirty hands, with broken and weary souls and with guilty consciences. As long as we welcome Him into our hearts, into our lives and try our best to stay close to Him and truly honour and worship Him, the Lord Jesus will be happy having us at his table.

Let's not be too fixated on what others think of us because what truly matters as people of faith, as disciples and followers of our Lord Jesus Christ, is what He thinks and feels toward us. *Amen.*