

REFLECTION ON THE SCRIPTURE READINGS  
22<sup>ND</sup> SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME, CYCLE B  
AUGUST 28-29, 2021

Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-8

The end of chapter 3 of Deuteronomy recounts God's prohibition of Moses from entering the promised land, and commissioning of Joshua to lead the people into it. In this week's first reading, Moses begins giving final instructions to the people about to enter the promised land. The people are urged to hear the statutes and ordinances Moses is about to give, as if nothing is known of the Law given at Sinai. This is because Deuteronomy (which literally means "second law") is a separate set of Israelite laws developed at a different time, but stamped with the name of Moses to give it authority. Reception of the law Moses is about to give is tantamount to entering into and taking possession of the land. The law defines the relationship between the people and the God who delivered them and brought them to the land of promise. In particular, idolatry is to be avoided. Moses here reminds the people of an incident during their desert journey (Numbers 25:1-5) during which they engaged probably in some kind of fertility ritual and accepted an invitation from the local people to offer sacrifices to the local god, Baal of Peor. Such behavior will be quite unacceptable once they are settled in the promised land. The people's possession of God's will, expressed in the law, will win them the esteem of other nearby peoples, because they do not possess a law so just and so clearly articulated. Rather, in general, Ancient Near Eastern peoples perceived themselves to be subjected to the fate of their gods' wills, which were unknown to them.

James 1:17-18, 21b-22, 27

The topics "James" entertains in this letter relate to issues in the Church of the late first century. Much of the letter deals with proper Christian behavior. For some reason, the editors of the Lectionary skipped some verses in the passage from James they chose for this Sunday, verses which should be considered for a better understanding of the author's purpose here.

In James 1:13-14, the author points out that the origin of temptation is not with God, for even as God is not subjected to temptation, neither does God tempt humans. James traces temptation to evil desires in a person's heart. As this week's second reading begins we hear that, far from being a tempter of humans, God, rather, is a giver of good gifts. One of the good gifts God gives is "the word of truth" which brought believers to life and made them "a kind of firstfruits of his creatures." The firstfruits were choice portions of the harvest or new birth from the sheep herd which were offered to God in thanksgiving. Those who have embraced God's word constitute a precious offering to God from the mass of human beings. If believers are truly the "cream of the crop," then they must manifest that status in their lives by, for example, governing their speech.

In addition, it is insufficient to receive God's word in one's heart and not manifest it in daily living. In the final verse of the reading the author gives a specific example of putting the word into practice: "to care for orphans and widows in their affliction and to keep oneself unstained by the world." James may

be echoing Exodus 22:21, "You shall not wrong any widow or orphan." Widows and orphans were among the most vulnerable in Israelite society and even in the Greco-Roman world of James' day. But in reality James apprises his community members of the moral duty to help anyone who is afflicted.

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

Mark's detailed explanation of the ritual purification customs of Jews is one indication that the readers for whom he is writing are predominantly *Gentile*. Jewish readers would not need the explanations. The ritual purification practice which generates the controversy is that of purifying one's hands before eating. For first century Jews this practice was not only for hygienic purposes, but because meals were considered a sacred time. God was praised as the ultimate source of the food they were about to eat, food which would sustain their lives. Exodus 30:17-20 states that priests are to wash their hands and feet before offering sacrifice or entering the tabernacle. Apparently, this practice was transferred to everyday people when eating; it is documented in the teaching of prominent rabbis after the time of Jesus. The reason for the purification of hands before meals was that people may have come into contact with something unclean during their work or daily activities, and there was a need for purification before engaging in the sacred mealtime.

Some Pharisees and scribes from Jerusalem challenge Jesus regarding the disciples' neglect of the practice of handwashing before eating. No reason is given why the disciples disregard the practice. In response to the religious leaders, Jesus takes the opportunity to teach a lesson about true ritual defilement. The more serious kind of defilement, which the religious leaders have neglected to teach the people about, is rooted in evil designs within the heart. Jesus gives explicit examples in a list of vices. Jesus associates the Pharisees' and scribes' teaching deficiency with Isaiah 29:13 (ancient Greek version). They have taught as divine moral doctrine human precepts, which are not as important as divine law. Jesus' point is that the Pharisees and scribes who challenge him on this issue continue to focus on minor details of the law, and neglect the more important issue of moral conversion. This is a lesson for Mark's *Gentile* audience, who understand themselves to be converts to Judaism who hail Jesus as the Messiah, that ritual practices such as purification are not significant for them, but rooting out the true defilement in one's heart is.